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But Where Are You *Really* From?:
Black and Asian American Women's Experiences of Gendered Racialized Microaggressions

by

Dresden Lackey

Under the Direction of Rosalind Chou, Ph.D

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

Though microaggression research has grown across disciplines in recent years, existing work often centralizes intergroup experiences, disregarding the ways intragroup spaces perpetuate dominant white racial framing. Utilizing thirty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this dissertation addresses that gap, revealing that Black and Asian American women experience gendered racialized microaggressions within co-ethnic spaces, enacted by family and peers who may share a dual identity as both targets and maintainers of a white supremacist patriarchal system. Gendered racialized microaggressions within intraracial spaces centralize specific themes I identify as: Whiteness is the Ultimate Goal, Not Asian/Black Enough, Body Talk, and Racialized Sexualization, each defined within a white racialized dominant framework in the US.

Further, women of color experience distinct gendered racist microaggressions when they occupy white spaces, including those who live with predominantly white families. Women of color living with white families due to adoption, biracialism, and step-parenthood, experience gendered racialized microaggressions from white family members centralizing mixed messages of colorblindness, a pressure to assimilate to white norms, and a tokenization of non-white identities. Black and Asian American women perceive gendered racialized microaggressions that are perpetrated by white women (such as friends, coworkers, or strangers) as especially damaging due to the complexity of the shared subjugation of womanhood. Gendered racialized microaggressions perpetrated by white women typically fall within themes I identify as: Oppression Olympics, White Saviorism, and Rigid Subscription to Controlling Images. In

contrast, white men perpetrate microaggressions centralizing Sexual Exotification to both Asian American and Black women, regardless of my respondents' sexual orientation.

My findings further revealed that Black and Asian American women consider several factors when faced with gendered racialized microaggressions. Their relationship with the perpetrator, the perpetrator's race, and the social environment within which the microaggression occurs are all considered when calculating their responses. Respondents react to microaggressions through either passive or active responses, including walking away, changing their behavior, and confronting the enactor. They also cope and resist through the creation of shared community and counter spaces with other women of color.

INDEX WORDS: Microaggressions, Gendered racism, Intersectional Theory, Critical Race Feminism, Asian American women, Black women.

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August 2021

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Soon Chung Park, Hyun Grant, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yue, the six Asian women who were murdered by a white supremacist in Atlanta, GA on March 16, 2021.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Critical Race Theorist Derrick Bell (1992) describes the concept of *racial realism*: racism is permanent and does not dissipate, rather, it merely changes form to adapt to modern times. The racism of today is not the white hoods and lynchings it once was, nor is it the more recent segregated water fountains and legal denial of voting and interracial marriage. In its place, whites in power create and maintain the power and resources that support racial prejudice institutionally and interpersonally, which evolve as the many forms of modern racism (Feagin & Sikes 1994; Feagin 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Fleras 2016). Many whites¹ and people of color alike have adapted a neoliberal ideology that criticizes and discredits the significance of race, hiding behind a meritocracy platform that alleges all people have equal opportunity to succeed in the “American Dream” (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Thus, it is important for researchers to examine what is gradually being referred to as the modern, colorblind racism, which come in the form of racial microaggressions.

Microaggressions describe subtle remarks and actions directed at marginalized groups that reinforce their oppression (Sue 2007). Microaggressions may be based on race, sexuality, ability, gender, class, or other marginalized identities. They may be so subtle, they often leave the receiver wondering, “did I take that comment the wrong way,” or “was it all in my head?” Unlike overt racist comments and behaviors, microaggressions leave room for interpretation, agonizing the receiver for days or weeks after the fact. As overt racism and sexism are more

¹ I have chosen to capitalize “Black” and not “white” throughout this document to give authority to a marginalized group, and to indicate an identity that is not ubiquitous with whites. See footnote 6 on pg. 1244 of *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* by Kimberlé Crenshaw for more info.

often publicly chastised, racialized microaggressions remain protected under the innocuousness of colorblindness.

In this project, I expand on the existing theories of colorblind racism, gendered, racialized microaggressions, and the white racial frame by examining the intersectional nature of microaggressions and how they manifest for women of color in the US. The purpose of this project is to examine the ways in which women of two racial minority backgrounds, Black² and Asian American, experience racialized, gendered microaggressions. I further examine how families, communities, and other perpetrators contribute to these microaggressive acts on women of color. Research suggests Black and Asian Americans both experience racism, though the unique and varying histories of voluntary and forced migration within the US have influenced quite differing experiences of racism (O'Brien 2010). Theories of intersectionality and multiple oppressions suggest that gendered racism for people of color who are not men will be unique to the identities of the receivers of racism (Essed 1991; Crenshaw 1993).

My primary research questions are:

1. Who are the perpetrators of microaggressions against Asian and Black women and what themes of microaggressions are perpetrators utilizing?
2. How are these microaggressions gendered and sexualized in addition to racialized for women?
3. How are microaggressions tied to meso and macro social structures?
4. How has covert gendered racism changed in the Trump era?

² The term "Black" is used throughout as a racial description to refer to a diverse group of individuals who self-identify as African American, Caribbean American, and Afro-Latinx.

5. In what ways do Black and Asian American women react, resist, and cope with gendered racism?

This project also provides insight into the changing nature of gendered racism since the 2016 presidential election. Since Donald Trump's presidential campaign and time in office, racialized violence against non-whites and non-Christians within the US has increased, even after controlling for alternative explanations; this is especially true in counties that voted for Trump by the widest margins (Edwards and Rushin 2018). Though there are several examples of overt, racially-motivated hate crimes influenced by Trump's policies and tweets to choose from, the effects of Trump's racism are not exclusively evident in the widespread media stories of physical assaults and gun violence that is now commonplace in the US. The son of white supremacist/Klansman Fred Trump, Donald Trump also has a long history of surreptitious racist behavior. His many incidents of microinvalidations and microinsults over the decades include a 1988 speech given at Lehigh University accusing Japanese people of "stripping the United States of economic dignity," along with other anti-Asian sentiments (a nod to the sneaky-Asian controlling image/perpetual foreigner microaggression), a staunch belief in the guilt of the Black and Brown teenagers of the Central Park Five despite DNA evidence absolving them of guilt (the assumption of criminality microaggression), stereotyping a Black reporter as a member of the Congressional Black Caucus (a denial of individualism for non-whites); and telling several congresswomen of color to "go back" to their countries, though they are all US Citizens³ (the assumption that non-whites are foreign in their own land microaggression) (Burton 1988; Ferner 2016; Lopez 2017). In a 1973 incident that is further reflective of Trump's long history of racism, the US Department of Justice sued Trump Management Corporation for violation of the

³ Twitter.com (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1150381394234941448>)

Fair Housing Act, when evidence surfaced that Trump refused rental properties to Black tenants (Dunlap 2015). More recently, Trump's insistence on calling COVID-19 the "Chinese Virus" allowed the spread of increasing anti-Asian rhetoric. Given Trump's constant public presence, exposure to his racist behavior is not limited to those in his immediate circle. His anti-Asian rhetoric was paired with months of increased violence toward Asian Americans, and directly following his tweets about the congresswomen of color, Trump supporters chanted "send her back" at a North Carolina rally (Nicholas 2019). These are just two of countless examples indicative of the trickle-down effect Trump's microaggressive comments have on his supporters' comfort expressing their own racist beliefs.

Trump has faced criticisms for both overtly and covertly racist behaviors and comments, yet many in the US still adamantly support him and his claim that he is "the least racist person there is anywhere in the world" (Rozsa 2019). Though no studies to date have compared racial microaggression rates per se before and after Trump's alleged election, one may assume as research indicates overt hate crimes have increased, everyday racism follows a similar pattern.

This study assesses gendered, racialized microaggressions experienced by Black and Asian American women. Thirty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person, as well as through zoom, FaceTime, or Skype meetings due to regional restrictions and safety restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To examine the gendered and racialized experiences Asian and Black American women, I utilized a theoretical framework of intersectionality (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1993), Feagin's theory of Systemic Racism and the White Racial Frame (2009; 2013), Essed's theory of Everyday Racism (1991), and Bonilla-Silva's theory of Colorblind Racism (2014). I also utilize a critical race feminism perspective.

Microaggression research to date has primarily lived within the fields of psychology, counseling, and education, and thus have focused predominantly on the micro component of microaggressions rather than the structural forces from which microaggressions occur within (Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017). Further, most microaggression research has explored racism, sexism, and heterosexism as unique and distinct prejudices. By focusing my sample on women of color, I addressed the gap in existing sociological research specifically on how microaggressions are never solely raced or solely gendered, but an intertwined, inseparable phenomenon, influenced by the structural white racial frame and white hegemonic patriarchy. Due to the frustrating ambiguousness of microaggressions, I prioritized the realities of the microaggressed by centering their interpretations of such events, rather than focusing on the intention of the transgressor or an absolute definition of racism or sexism itself. Thus, I also utilized Feminist Standpoint Theory in my analysis to center unique lived experiences, and to support the belief that racialized minorities are the decision-makers of what constitutes racism, rather than an absolute definition (Harding 2004). At the time of this writing, few studies have specifically tied gendered racialized microaggressions to sociological theory. Those that do seem to predominantly examine campus experiences of Black college students, and/or utilize focus groups to collect data. By exploring the nature of microaggressions within colorblind racism and systemic racism theoretical lenses, I extend microaggression research within the field of sociology and explore the contextual nature at both micro and macro levels.

This research is imperative because as racism continues to adapt and evolve to best protect white supremacy, examining the many modern and changing forms of racism is constantly needed. Though Bonilla-Silva (2014) does not discuss microaggressions specifically as a tool of new racism in his landmark text, I argue that microaggressions are inseparable from

colorblind ideology. Further, the intersectional reality of women of colors' experiences with racism and sexism is denied when multiple oppressions are studied in discrete or additive ways. Understanding microaggressions as both gendered and racialized, even in unmarked ways, contributes a fuller understanding of the ways in which white supremacist patriarchy operate and deny humanity to Black and Asian American women.

1.1 Theoretical Frameworks

1.1.1 *Colorblind Ideology and the New Racism*

Colorblind racism is an ideology that explains contemporary racism as a result of non-racial dynamics and ostracizes people of color “softly” (Bonilla-Silva 2014:3). In contrast to overt Jim Crow racism, which blamed people of color’s social standing on biological and moral inferiority, today whites claim that “market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” are the reason for non-whites’ inability to reach equality (Bonilla-Silva 2014:2). Colorblind racism relies on four principal frameworks that support racial story lines: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism, which are all cultural tropes that whites use to maintain the existing racial hierarchy through colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Bonilla-Silva (2014) claims abstract liberalism is the most important framework of colorblind ideology. Colorblind racism reflects a nation-wide endorsement of traditional liberalism including work ethic, rewarding merit, equal opportunity, and individualism (Bonilla-Silva 2014). When whites frame the results of inequality as dependent on merit and work ethic rather than relating to race, they are able to maintain a leftist, progressive image while absolving themselves of racism. Naturalization further allows whites to justify unequal outcomes by suggesting they occurred in a race-neutral vacuum rather than as being dependent on social

forces. This allows whites to depend on racial storylines that claim people of color choose to self-segregate in under-resourced housing, education, or relationships because it is a natural incidence, which reinforces a myth of nonracialism, commonly evident in the microinvalidations experienced by Blacks (Bonilla-Silva 2014). The framework of cultural racism relies on blaming an entire culture for stereotypical traits that allegedly contribute to the status of people of color, also largely evident in microinvalidations, as well as microassaults. Controlling images such as *lazy Mexicans* or *Black welfare queens* as well as *smart, rich Asians* nod to abstract liberalism in the endorsement of hard work paying off (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Collins 2000). This portrays unequal outcomes as the result of non-whites' own lack of desire and effort in overcoming racial oppression.

These three frameworks rely on one another to create obstacles for counter-frames and to maintain white supremacy. By adopting these frameworks, whites are able to minimize the true impacts of what Bonilla-Silva (2014:3) refers to as "new racism." Comparing new racism to Jim Crow era and slavery era racisms paints modern inequality as an improvement from racial oppressions of the past. However, colorblind racism's ability to hide behind the guise of racial progress make it just as dangerous in its invisibility and adaptation as historically covert racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014). In this way, racial microaggressions largely depend on the adoption of colorblindness to exist and maintain white supremacy.

1.1.2 Systemic Racism and the White Racial Frame

The theory of systemic racism views racial oppression as a foundational piece of US history, which today continues to function in maintaining the unjust impoverishment and oppression of people of color (Feagin 2009). Feagin (2009) argues that other modern theories of race have suggested racism is an ugly feather in an otherwise beautiful bird; an insignificant side

effect compared to many other healthy and functioning aspects of society (see Omi & Winant 2014). Systemic Racism theory understands that this is a false reality of racism, instead claiming that the US was founded upon racist ideologies and practices alike, and that racial oppression has adapted and remained embedded in everything “American” to date. Though some major changes have occurred in terms of alleged racial progress, at the most basic level racial oppression still exists. Thus, Systemic Racism theory sees racism as hegemonic and inescapable across time and region. Chattel slavery was replaced by segregation, which then adapted to more informal discriminatory acts and behaviors, including but not limited to, the microaggressions of today.

Whites have maintained power through historically unjust enrichment and their skewed collective memories of racial situations, as well as the unjust impoverishment of people of color and a collective forgetting of their oppression (Feagin 2009:167). This is largely due to the fact that whites tend to be the policy and law makers that keep the existing racial hierarchy in place. Systemic racism theory places great emphasis on these undeserved benefits and consequences of whites and people of color. The unjust enrichment of whites, including socioeconomic status and the generational accumulation of wealth, parallels directly with the unjust impoverishment of Black Americans, such as segregated neighborhoods, under-resourced schools, and the lack of access to wealth; they are two sides of the same coin (Feagin 1994; 2000). The economic power that whites had over Blacks during slavery allowed them to continue social dominance well after the abolition of slavery occurred, and to further challenge any acts of resistance from people of color (Feagin 2009). The unjust enrichment of whites and the unjust impoverishment of Black and Brown Americans is critical in understanding how systemic racism has been reproduced over time. All whites gained racial privileges due to the exploitation of Black labor, which generated trillions of dollars (Feagin 2009:18). The impacts of such enrichment and

impoverishment today can be seen in low numbers of Black homeownership, barriers to voting, and other social practices that mimic the inability to accrue wealth and the social isolation that existed during chattel slavery and beyond (Feagin 2009).

For systemic racism to reproduce successfully, whites must be complicit in the system of which they benefit (Feagin 2009). Thus, a major tenet of Systemic Racism theory is the ideological framework that allows white supremacy to perpetuate over time, known as the white racial frame (Feagin 2009; 2013). Those who adopt this dominant framework believe the perpetuation of racial inequality to be justified, through a combination of a white-is-right mentality, controlling images of people of color, and the colorblindness that allows covert racism to go unchallenged (Feagin 2013). The white racial frame paints whites as virtuous, well-intentioned, and deserving of their unearned enrichments, benefitting from symbolic racial capital while discounting race as a significant instrument in their successes. In turn, people of color are painted through controlling images of being invisible, animalistic, uneducated, foreign, or dirty, and thus, deserving of their lower status in the racial hierarchy (Feagin 2013). Though counter-frames do exist, as the dominant group's framework, the white racial frame is so hegemonic that it continues to impact even those who do not subscribe to its ideology (Feagin 2013; Bonilla-Silva 2014).

1.1.3 Colorblind Ideology, Systemic Racism, and Microaggressions

Malcom X once said, "Racism is like a Cadillac: they make a new model every year" (Omi and Winant 2015). While chattel slavery, formal segregation and anti-miscegenation laws may no longer be legal, white supremacy has adapted to fit perfectly into arguably every institution in the US. As car manufacturers design new models that accommodate customers'

changing wants and needs each year, racism has similarly evolved, adapting to the needs of maintaining white supremacy (Bell 1992; Feagin 2009).

Perpetrators of microaggressions continue to uphold the racial caste system by disregarding the influence of systemic racism and by embracing the frameworks of a colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin 2009). An abstract liberalist framework allows people to believe equal opportunities exist for all races, as evident in the model minority microaggression often experienced by Asian Americans. Through the unfortunate practice of *Oppression Olympics*, which further serve to buttress white supremacy, abstract liberalism may also be used as a tool to invalidate Black people. By comparing Black impoverishment to the successes of some Asian Americans, perpetrators use microinvalidations to imply Black people are not successful due to their own choices, but they could be if they were more like the “model minority,” another microinvalidation (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Sue 2010a). Perpetrators use a cultural racism framework to attribute stereotypes to Black and Asian Americans through microinsults and microinvalidations alike, including assumptions about the language, food, and lifestyle of a person of color (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Sue 2010). The minimization of racism framework is perhaps the most essential for microaggressive perpetrators to adopt. Evident through microinvalidations, this tenet of colorblind ideology allows perpetrators to continue making microaggressive comments or behaviors, hidden behind innocuousness. By claiming they do not see color, do not see race as significant, and have several friends of color, perpetrators can comfortably and successfully deny that their microaggression was racially charged at all. Microaggressions rely on both colorblind ideology and systemic racism to exist. Currently, microaggressions live within these frameworks as the new and improved car on the lot: the “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

1.1.4 The Significance of Intersectionality & Critical Race Feminism

Though much of the research to date on microaggressions has largely focused on racialized experiences, the significance of intersectionality cannot be ignored. Racial microaggressions can and do change depending on respondents' gender, sexual orientation, ability, and religion, and are not mutually exclusive (Sue 2010a; Sue 2010b).

In and of itself, marginalized genders are subjected to microaggressions on a daily basis (Capodilupo, et al. 2010). Similar to Sue's (2010a) three type model on racial microaggressions, gender microassaults, such as calling someone a "bitch," represent old-fashioned and blatant sexism, while gender microinvalidations and microinsults still assert sexist messages in more covert ways. Women experience gendered microaggressions such as sexual objectification, being treated like second-class citizens compared to men, the denial of the reality of sexist experiences, assumption of conforming to traditional gender roles, and the use of sexist language (Capodilupo, et al. 2010). Though Capodilupo and colleagues (2010) primarily focused on women as the marginalized gender population, I argue that many of these gender microaggressions are applicable to non-binary respondents as well, specifically being treated like a second-class citizen, and denial of the reality of sexist experiences.

Sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions are also extremely common and harmful. Many sexual orientation and trans microaggressions take form in invisible heterosexism, the assumptions and normalizing of straightness in everyday life (Sue 2010a). Cisgender normativity does the same. Common microaggressions against the LGBTQ community include oversexualization, homophobia, heteronormative language, assumptions of sinfulness, assumptions of abnormality, and the denial of individual heterosexism. All of these contribute to the overarching microaggression of endorsing heteronormative culture and

behaviors, which send the message that cisgender and straightness (referred to as cis-het) is normal, and anything else is deviant (Sue 2010a).

The intersection of gender and race cannot be disentangled (Ferber 2010). Thus, racialized microaggressions against women of color are always specific to the position within the matrix of domination that these women inhabit (Collins 2000; Essed 1991). Gendered racial microaggressions are defined as subtle behaviors, comments, or environmental slights that communicate oppression to the recipient, such as that they are lesser than, othered, or exoticized based on the intersection of their gender and race (Newton 2018; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt 2016). Using a previous example cited above, Asian American women are largely exoticized and fetishized by non-Asian counterparts; however, this phenomenon is specific to women, while Asian American men face entirely different sexualized microaggression messages (Chou 2012). Similarly, Black women face gendered racialized microaggressions that perpetuate the controlling images of the ‘Mammy’, ‘welfare queen’ or family structure statuses, and specific beauty standards that differ from microaggressive messages that portray violent criminality or large penis size for Black men (Collins 2000; Newton 2018; Sue 2010b).

The addition of marginalized genders, sexual orientations, abilities, and religions only further alter the way microaggressions are perceived by both perpetrators and receivers alike. According to Chou (2012), hegemony is able to operate due to the consensus that thoughts, feelings, and values of the oppressor are “common sense.” As a whole, microaggressions of all types are used to portray messages that anything outside of these “common sense” beliefs are wrong, foreign, criminal, and deserving of exile. Hegemonic masculinity works in tandem with white supremacy to impose white, straight, masculine ideals on all marginalized peoples, not solely limited to those of marginalized races. Thus, there is a necessity in acknowledging

discrimination based on multiple marginalized identities. While the tragic murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay white man, received widespread attention in 1998, the murder of Sakia Gunn, a Black American lesbian who was killed as a result of a hate crime just a few years after Shepard, is a lesser-known event (Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus 2010). Some may argue that the national outrage at the murder of six Asian American women on March 16, 2021, brought a spotlight to the interlocking nature of race and gender; however, within a matter of weeks, the momentum gained for the Stop Asian Hate initiative in response to these murders had all but subsided, as mass shootings, anti-Asian hate crimes, and murders by police continued across the US in the weeks that followed. Ignoring the importance of intersecting identities of marginalized groups is a microaggression in and of itself; it is therefore essential to consider the intersection of further marginalized identities such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and nationality, when studying racial microaggressions.

Relatedly, this project utilizes a Critical Race Feminist (CRF) methodology and perspective as well. Critical Race Feminism, extended from Critical Race Theory, posits that racism, sexism, classism, and other systems of oppression are endemic and structural in nature (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Rooted in Intersectional Theory and Critical Race Theory, CRF specifically centralizes the experiences of women of color as the experts on their own marginalization, disrupting essentialism and instead suggesting that identities such as race, gender, sexuality, and class are inextricably linked (Wing 2003). Critical Race Feminism further perceives gendered racism as structural, present in laws, social policies, buildings, and other institutions that shape power and privilege in daily life (Wing 2003).

In their article outlining microaggression research as a tool for Critical Race Theory (CRT), Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015) discuss how everyday racist events

(microaggressions) are mediated by institutionalized racism (structures) and guided by ideologies that reinforce white supremacy. They utilize five tenets of CRT including 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, 2) challenging dominant ideologies, 3) centrality of experiential knowledge, 4) interdisciplinary approaches, and 5) commitment to social justice (Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015). Building from Pierce and Sue's work, they offer a framework that reveals how microaggressions are more than individualized events, but part of a larger system of racism inclusive of ideological and structural factors. Within this framework, the individual act (the microaggression) is encompassed by institutional racism, which is then encompassed by white supremacy (identified as the macroaggression within this model). Their model identifies microaggressions as mere symptoms of an underlying disease (white supremacy). In bringing this work to a CRF lens, the macroaggression must include white supremacist patriarchy and heterosexism as well.

1.1.5 Theoretical Strengths and Limitations

Colorblind racism, systemic racism, critical race feminism, and intersectionality each provide endless contributions to the field of Sociology and beyond. Strengths and limitations are important to consider when utilizing each theory. Considered landmarks in racial theories, systemic racism and colorblind racism theory both do well to explain the systemic nature of racism within the US (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin 2009). Colorblind racism and systemic racism theories both pinpoint white supremacy and to a lesser extent, white fragility, as essential tools in maintaining a racial hierarchy. Colorblind racism gives operational terminology to a phenomenon that has been largely acknowledged though difficult to measure, while further acknowledging that the reality of race in the US is both changing, yet stagnant. However, Bonilla-Silva (2014) simultaneously rescues whites from accountability while also failing to

engage non-white complacency in the use of colorblindness (Bracey 2011), where Feagin's white racial frame would be useful. The theory of colorblind racism includes a tri-racial order, yet with the exception of an acknowledgement of the browning of the US, Bonilla-Silva (2014) largely ignores race outside of a Black-white binary in his theory. The role of the racial middle is crucial; it can reinforce white supremacy or conversely, dismantle it (Matsuda 1996). The tri-racial order itself is not without flaws; it suggests 'some' multi-racial people belong in the *Whites* category while most others belong in the *Honorary Whites* category yet fails to clarify what aspects of multi-raciality promotes group belonging other than as a product of whitening through marriage, and further categorizes non-Black and non-whites into a white-centric hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2014:192). Whiteness is implied throughout his model, yet multi-raciality infers neither whiteness, nor bi-raciality. Though briefly mentioned, the tri-racial model fails to engage visually white-passing individuals, and the complexity of privilege that comes with it. Finally, intersectionality is largely ignored in colorblind racism theory, but is extremely important in an order of such privilege; how do gender, ability, and sexual orientation influence the permeability of these categories for people of color? How does a patriarchal society buttress a white supremacist society, as many argue whiteness is inseparable from gender (Ferber 2010)? The tri-racial model and colorblind racism theory would do well to consider these obvious influences.

Feagin's (2009) theory of systemic racism acknowledges that racism has no geographical boundaries. This theory describes the white racial frame as a dominate framework, regardless of region, and acknowledges the denial of racism as perpetuating white supremacy, similar to colorblind racism theory (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Systemic racism theory acknowledges racism is indeed systemic and institutional, rather than a collection of individual acts, as evident in the

many historical laws and practices Feagin outlines when describing his theory (2009). Systemic racism further focuses on a Black-white binary and the institutionalized nature of racism that stemmed from chattel slavery. Feagin (2009) spends little time on the history and laws that upheld white supremacy for groups that migrated to the US voluntarily, both as Black and non-Black people of color. Finally, systemic racism theory also fails to highlight the importance of intersectionality and the inseparability of powerful whiteness from cis-het maleness.

Feminist standpoint theory and the theory of intersectionality are essential when considering how white supremacy works with heteronormativity and patriarchy. Intersectionality acknowledges that the experiences of some people of color, will not be the experiences of all, based on other identities that are oppressed within a given society. Herein lie the strengths of both theories: by acknowledging different realities and different truths for different people, a one-size-fits-all approach is rejected, giving voice and centralization to the oppressed through a centering of their unique experiences. However, intersectionality has largely shifted from the vision Crenshaw first saw upon its coining (Crenshaw 1993; Hancock 2016). The original theory centered specifically on Black women, yet the rise of multicultural and transnational feminisms have allowed space for non-Black women of color's experiences within the framework. Though many credit intersectionality to the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, intersectional work was occurring long before it was given a name, even further preceding the Combahee River Collective's landmark "A Black Feminist Statement," including pieces by non-Black women of color (Collins and Bilge 2016; Hancock 2016; Carastathis 2016; Tong 2014).

Finally, it must be noted that the term "microaggression" is deserving of critique but must be understood in context to its original theoretical conception. Coined by Black psychiatrist Chester Pierce, the term was used to describe a specific type of racism, "subtle blows

that are delivered incessantly,” and was not meant as a diminutive to minimize the impact of this type of racism (Pierce 1970:265). In his description of microaggressions, it is clear Pierce did not view these behaviors as harmless, and rather recognized microaggressive actions as those that “ignored, tyrannized, terrorized, and minimized” their targets (Pierce 1970:267). His conceptualization of the prefix “micro” reflected an everyday, regular type of racism in contrast to less frequent racist events (his example, lynchings). While critiques of microaggression research suggest that the term minimizes white supremacy, and it has perhaps been coopted in more recent research to support this meaning, the frivolous connotation was not intended by Pierce in the original theoretical conception. He states, “[t]hese problems are only micro in name, since their very number requires a total effort that is incalculable.” (Pierce 1974:520). Thus, in line with Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015), as well as Dumas (2014), I argue that although there are limitations in the terminology, microaggressions reflect powerful, perilous every day gendered racism that is so normalized, it has become minimized. To me, the critique lies within the interpersonal focus of microaggression research and the need to understand microaggressions as byproducts of institutional social forces.

1.1.6 Theoretical Impact of This Project

I strengthen the existing limitations of these theories within this dissertation. By utilizing systemic racism and colorblind racism theory to frame modern day racism as covert and systemic, I reveal how microaggressions experienced Black and Asian American women are always both gendered and racialized. In studying gendered racism of Black and Asian American women, I uncover how different microaggressions function at the gendered and raced intersection for two racial groups with significantly different racial histories within the US. I center Black and Asian American women to understand how their experiences compare, as well

as in an attempt to deny the Black-white binary that is so often utilized in sociological theory and to build solidarity and community across groups. Further, I uncover how white supremacy and patriarchy are woven throughout the experiences of microaggressions identified by Black and Asian American women, not only by white perpetrators, but also by people of color who have been imbued with the dominant white racial framework and who utilize microaggressions to buttress a white supremacist system.

1.2 Review of the Literature

1.2.1 Introduction

Today, blatantly racist behaviors are generally frowned upon in the US, if not illegal entirely. Some violent hate crimes are punishable by law, derogatory racial name-calling is largely recognized as abhorrent, and blackface costumes receive public criticism. Scholars agree that deliberate forms of racist discrimination have decreased since the civil rights era of the 1960's (Wong, et al. 2014). However, less overt racism takes shape in a countless list of behaviors and beliefs that still foster the effects of contemporary racism without attracting as much pushback: the racial microaggression. The term microaggression, first coined in the 1960's, refers to subtle, often automatic and seemingly unconscious put-down insults directed toward people of color (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis 1978). They tend to be brief, commonplace, and not premediated. They communicate derogatory and/or "othering" ideas toward and about people of color, reinforcing the hegemony of whiteness (Sue, et al. 2007b; Fleras 2016). For the perpetrator, the comments are truly microscopic, no different than other behaviors or comments they would make. However, to the target, there is nothing "micro" about it. These verbal and behavioral put-downs are often so pervasive and automatic by the

perpetrator that they tend to be glossed over or dismissed as innocuous; an innocent remark intended with no animosity or ill will (Sue, et al. 2007b).

Bourdieu (1991) would argue the power of language rests not within the neutrality of words and intention, rather the meanings beyond the spoken intention that exist within a social context. Through disguised gendered racism, microaggressive language and behaviors are tools used to uphold a social hierarchy in which white patriarchy continues to reign. Though it is a relatively recent area of research, the concept of the racial microaggression is not unknown to social scientists. Subtle forms of racism have been identified by other names: modern racism, symbolic racism, everyday racism, or aversive racism (Sue, et al. 2007b; Essed 1991; Fleras 2016). The commonality between these terms emphasize that racism today is more likely to be covert and veiled. Thus, as Critical Race scholar Derrick Bell (1992) predicted, racism has evolved from the old fashioned, bigoted, unconcealed form to the more socially acceptable, colorblind, inescapable practice: the microaggression.

1.2.2 The Taxonomy of the Racial Microaggressions

The racial microaggression is complex and appears in multiple forms, both in human and environmental encounters (Sue, et al. 2007b). Sue and colleagues (2007b) identify three types of microaggressions that embody multiple themes: the microassault (an explicit derogation with malicious intent, most, likely expressed in private situations that allow anonymity of the perpetrator), the microinsult (insensitivity that demeans a racial heritage or identity, often unconscious to the perpetrator but insulting to the person of color), and the microinvalidation (exclusion or nullification of the feelings and experiences of the victim, including racially stereotypical beliefs, colorblindness, and alienating in one's own land). The majority of microaggression research conducted to date focuses on microinsult and microinvalidation, both

of which arguably capture the true definition of a racial microaggression (Wong, et al. 2014). In this section, I examine the taxonomy of these racial microaggressions.

Of the three categories determined by Sue (2007; 2010a; 2010b), microassaults are the only type of microaggression that researchers believe to be conscious for the oppressor. Microassaults come from the biased beliefs of people, and manifest both overtly and covertly toward an oppressed group (Sue 2010b), such as racist or sexist statements (for example, a cat-call or racialized nickname) as well as actions (such as forbidding a child from dating or marrying a member of a different race). Microassaults may also be considered more extreme than the other two categories, both on a personal and institutionalized level. Further, research suggests marginalized groups are more emotionally and psychologically prepared to handle microassaults, due to the lack of guesswork involved in the perpetrators' intentions. Despite Sue (2007; Sue 2010a; Sue 2010b) including microassaults as a classification type of the microaggression, the similarities with more overt and blatant racist acts, or "traditional" racism, prevent this particular category to be relevant to the present research study's intention. Instead, I focus more specifically on the following two categories of microaggressions described below.

Unlike microassaults, microinsults more often occur at an unconscious level of the perpetrator, yet can also be interpersonal or environmental in nature (Sue 2010b). These comments, behaviors, or beliefs communicate slights or insensitivity that demean one's race, gender, sexuality, or group identity. Microinsults are often disguised as "backhanded" compliments, or "positive" discrimination, such as, "You speak English so well," to an Asian- or Latinx⁴- American whose first, or perhaps only, spoken language is English, or, "You are a credit to your race," to an African American who is economically or academically successful. While on

⁴ The gender inclusive term "Latinx" is used throughout to define individuals who have cultural ties to, and/or are descendants of, Latin America.

the surface, these comments are seemingly well-intentioned compliments, the meta-message is othering: that most Asian- or Latinx- Americans do not speak English well, or that most African Americans are not capable of being well educated or financially successful. Through these messages, the systemic, institutional barriers for people of color are ignored and invalidated, the oppressor continues to perpetuate racialized stereotypes guilt-free, and the oppressed are left uncertain how to express their distress with an alleged compliment.

Research suggests that microinvalidations represent the most sinister, detrimental, and harmful microaggression of the three, and like microinsults, they also occur at an unconscious awareness of the oppressor (Sue 2010b). Microinvalidations serve to directly deny the reality of the oppressed through invalidating or excluding their experiences, feelings, and beliefs. Microinvalidations occur in a variety of ways that ‘other’ targets, such as attributing a person of color’s admittance to a career or school position due to affirmative action policies, insisting oneself does not notice race or gender, or denying that a marginalized group experienced discrimination. Not surprisingly, colorblind racism lives comfortably in the microinvalidation; the unwillingness to accept that race has been a significant factor in the US’s history of success, poverty, and policy point to a privileged and ignorant standpoint occupied by perpetrators of microinvalidations (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Sue (2010a) notes that “the denial of differences is really a denial of power and privilege. The denial of power and privilege is really a denial of personal benefits that accrue to certain privileged groups by virtue of inequalities.” In line with Feagin’s (2006) claim, the unjust impoverishment of the oppressed is accompanied, maintained, and inseparable from the unjust enrichment of the oppressor.

1.2.3 Racial Differences in Experienced Microaggression Perception

Due to the many different interactions that can be categorized as racial microaggressions, it is important to note the different experiences between and within differing racial groups. In this section, I examine how racial microaggressions are used against Asian American and Black populations.

Research has shown that in predominantly white institutions (PWI), Black undergraduates' campus experiences differ greatly from white undergraduate counterparts (Watkins, Labarrie, and Appio 2010; Newton 2018). While Black students typically find the campus climate (including peers, professors, administration, and the institution as a whole) to be racially hostile and disrespectful, white students tend to insist their PWI campuses offer a friendly and non-racist atmosphere. Black students report experiencing similar types of discrimination from non-Black peers: the assumptions that Black students are unintelligent, loud, and criminal or violent, as well as the assumption that their university admittance was due to affirmative action and that they are experts on racial matters (Watkins, Labarrie, & Appio 2010). When students did not conform to these stereotypes, they were treated as "the exception," or referred to as "Oreo," insinuating these particular "exceptions" were the superior Black people, in contrast to the "failure of Black people as a whole" (Watkins, Labarrie, & Appio 2010:41).

While some microaggressions exist across gender for people of color, there is ample evidence that differences in microaggression experiences between genders exist (Sue 2007; 2010; Newton 2018). The position that Black women occupy within the matrix of domination is further evident through their experiences of gendered racialized microaggressions in predominantly white spaces (Collins 2000). Newton (2018) found patterns of gendered racism toward Black women students on a predominantly white campus (PWI), including comments

from white and Black students alike about Black women's natural hair, the acceptable range of darkness for Black women's skin, and the sexualized exotification of their bodies. The stark contrast in the perception of a hostile versus welcoming campus climate shows differences in experienced racial realities for Black and white undergraduates, which can arguably be extended far beyond the white habitus of PWI campuses to white habitus spaces that dominate the US altogether.

Due to the systemic nature of racism in the US, microaggressions affect Black Americans outside of academic institutions as well. Specifically, assumptions of criminality are common among Black experiences (Sue 2010a). Microaggressions that perpetuate criminality are generally behavioral in nature; a store clerk follows a Black customer around the store, or a pedestrian crosses the street or holds their belongings more securely when a Black walker is moving in his or her direction. While these behaviors may seem coincidental or unconscious in the moment, the message portrayed to the Black person is clear: the perpetrator assumes shoplifting or mugging will occur if they are not careful around the presumed criminal Black person.

Additional common microinsults experienced by Black Americans include themes of second-class citizenship and pathologizing cultural communication and values (Sue 2010a). Pathologizing cultural communication and values indicates that the right way is the *white* way; there is no room for cultural diversity, whether in dialect or principles, in the US. Microinsulting actions against Black Americans in this particular theme tend to include indications that the recipient is "too loud," cannot speak English in a grammatically acceptable nature, or even eats abnormal food (Sue 2010a; Feagin & Sikes 1994). Second-class citizenship microaggressions occur when the perpetrator believes Blacks are not as deserving of equal treatment as whites, or

that Black people are not capable of being as successful as whites, such as assuming a Black person occupies a service role rather than a superior position at a company or seating a Black family at an undesirable table at a restaurant. Perpetrators can easily assert these incidents are “easy mistakes,” not racially charged in nature but instead, simple misunderstandings and happenstance. However, the underlying message construes a historical image of Blacks as servants to whites, or legally segregated public spaces where Blacks are forced to occupy the least desirable seats. Thus, it is important to consider how setting, and in turn, region, may influence the type of microaggressions experienced by Black respondents, whether it be microinvalidations, such as the Oreo nickname, or microinsults, such as the assumption of criminality.

As the treatment of Black Americans is a unique part of US history, the sizeable amount of research on white attitudes toward Black people cannot be aptly equated to white attitudes toward other racial groups (Lin 2010). In contrast to Black experiences, Asian Americans face a distinct set of stereotypes that contribute to their experiences of microaggressions. The popular “model minority” myth imposed on Asian Americans in the US creates a distinctive complexity in that much of the racialized discrimination toward Asian Americans is viewed to outsiders as “positive” discrimination (Chou & Feagin 2008; Sue 2010b). Lin (2010) thus asserts that non-Asians are often unconvinced that Asian Americans experience the maltreatment of racism at all. However, Ong and colleagues (2013) found that 78% of Asian American participants polled perceived that they experienced racial microaggressions at least once within a two-week span. In this study, Asian American college students kept daily dairy records of microaggressive events as they occurred over three weeks. Microinvalidations accounted for a full three quarters of all daily experiences of microaggressions for Asian Americans, including the assumption of being

foreign-born, exotification/sexualization, and the invalidation of interethnic differences.

Researchers further found that more daily experiences of microaggressions predicted increases in somatic symptoms (such as headaches, gastrointestinal symptoms, and other physical ails), and negative affect (such as feelings of anger, sadness, disgust, and hostility) of their participants. Consider, then, how common these subtle forms of racism are displayed in everyday encounters, and the exponential effects they must have on health and wellness over the years of one's life.

Though more overtly negative racist beliefs and actions do exist, Asian Americans tend to experience microaggressions that many perpetrators argue are actually compliments, such as being gifted in math and science, or achieving the "American Dream" by hard work and merit (Sue 2010a). However, the insistence that Asian Americans are model minorities has instead evoked negative consequences (Chou & Feagin 2008; Lin 2010). When people use microaggressions that perpetuate this myth, it eliminates personal agency and ability from individuals, instead implying that Asian Americans' favorable skills are a given, innate result of their race, rather than the hard work or practice involved in acquiring such skills or knowledge. Model minority themed microaggressions also mask the within-group differences between Asian Americans' successes in the US; those who perpetuate the myth's existence fail to recognize and legitimize the fact that, despite having a higher median income than whites, Asian Americans also experience a higher incidence of poverty, higher high school dropout rates, and longer terms of unemployment than white counterparts (Sue 2010a; Cha 2013). Unfortunately, Asian Americans who do not conform to the model minority myth are in turn microaggressed against by becoming invisible both interpersonally and institutionally, resulting in denials of funding for social service programs or government compensatory actions, racism related justice efforts,

affirmative action policies, and educational subsidies for those with low income (Lin 2010). The “positive discrimination” has undeniably negative effects.

In addition to model-minority themed microaggressions, Asian Americans also face seemingly inescapable stereotypes that cannot be argued as positive: that they are perpetually foreign to the US, an invalidation of interethnic differences (i.e. all Asians look alike), a denial of racial reality, pathologizing cultural values or language, and being treated as second-class citizens (Sue 2010a; Sue, et al. 2007a; Lin 2010). When considering the age of the colonized United States, Asian immigration to the U.S. seems relatively recent, the majority arriving to the U.S. after the 1850’s (Chou 2012). Perhaps due to the fact that African American enslavement is so intertwined with US history, research shows that Black Americans are seen as “more American” by the public than Asian and Latinx counterparts, regardless of when ancestors arrived in the US (Sue 2010a; Devos & Banaji 2005). In turn, racist nativism microaggressions that portray ‘forever foreign’ messages to Asian Americans are not uncommon. When people use racist nativism, or forever foreign, microinvalidations, the implication is that the recipient does not truly belong in the US; commenting on how well their spoken English is, asking how to say certain words in an Asian language, or consistently asking where they were born, portrays the message, “you are not really American” (Sue 2010a). Many Asian Americans experience the “Where Are You From? No, Where Are You Really From? Dance,” where perpetrators are so attached to their own preconceptions of foreign-ness that they are unable to accept a non-foreign region for an answer (O’Brien 2008:129). O’Brien’s (2010) research on Asian- and Latinx Americans found that nearly 75% of respondents experienced this particular microaggression. The idea that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners in the US has even resulted in a common derogatory racial nickname: “FOB” (fresh off the boat) implies the recipient recently immigrated

to the US by boat, when in fact they may be second-, third-, or even fifth-year generation in the US, the only place they have ever called home.

As noted, racialized microaggressions can further oppress through specifically gendered comments and behaviors for Asian American women. Thus, forever foreign microaggressions may also come in the form of exotification and fetishism. East Asian women in particular fall victim to these microaggressions, which occur just as often environmentally, in media, websites, and porn, as interpersonally, in relationships for both straight and non-straight groups (Chou 2012). In an analysis of microaggressions experienced specifically by Asian Americans, Sue and colleagues (2007a) found exotification as a common theme exclusive to the women of their sample. Additional research has shown this fetishization of Asian and Asian American women by white men is not exclusive to microaggressive racism (Lackey and Chou 2019). The belief that Asian women are sexually submissive, have small mouths or bodies beneficial for sex, or embody a “Lolita” trope deny individuality for Asian American women, sexually charge their everyday lives, and orientalize their sexual preferences and habits, a not-so-subtle message positing that Asian women have shared sexual qualities that are unlike those of white women.

Asian Americans experience microinvalidations most commonly, though some microinsulting themes are also frequently reported, such as pathologizing communication styles and cultural values (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, and Sue 2013; Sue 2010b; Lin 2010). Microinsulting themes common within Asian American experiences such as these also tend to be shared with Black respondents as well (Sue 2010b). The differences and similarities in type of microaggression experienced by race further demonstrate the importance of additional research examining how the race of the recipient may moderate outcomes.

1.2.4 Impact on Targets

Due to microaggressions' elusive nature, this ambiguous type of racism is difficult to quantify and identify, and thus, it becomes largely difficult to rectify as well (Sue, et al. 2007b). Targets of racial microaggressions are often left bewildered, wondering if the insult actually occurred, or fear accusation of being racially oversensitive (i.e. 'playing the race card') if they address it. Some marginalized groups may also fear that they might counterproductively confirm a racial stereotype if they become upset at the slight (Sue, et al. 2007b; Watkins, Labarrie, & Appio 2010), such as the angry Black woman. In turn, the transgressors often, if not always, see themselves as enlightened and progressive people, immune to acting in biased or discriminatory ways. As such, they tend to insert microaggressions at times when the remark or behavior would not look prejudicial, but when other motivations can be offered as an explanation. Most white Americans believe themselves to be decent human beings who believe in equality, surely incapable of harboring biased attitudes or engaging in discriminatory behaviors (Wong, et al. 2014). Racial microaggressions specifically occur when the perpetrator can insist they do not notice racial differences, justifying that race was not an influence of the insult and employing the colorblindness that ironically in itself, is a microinsult to the person of color. The invisible nature of the microaggression creates a system in which perpetrators are able to deny their own complicity in contributing to the disparities in education, health care, employment, and other areas (Sue, et al. 2007b).

Individually, microaggressions may seem relatively harmless due to their ambiguous nature, but research shows that a cumulative weight of persistently delivered put-downs are emotionally taxing, and contribute to psychological stress, lower self-esteem, and poorer health outcomes, even after controlling for other stressors (Huynh 2012; Sue, et al. 2007b; Wong, et al.

2014). Utsey and colleagues (2008) found that microaggressions were more harmful than other stressful life events, potentially due to the fact that they are continual rather than time-limited, or perhaps due to the uncertainty of their nature. The cognitive and emotional energy spent in appraising the situation may last for weeks or years, haunting people of color who never know if they were truly racially stereotyped (Sue 2010a). The use of small put-downs has such a profound effect, they have even been referred to as “little murders” (Feagin and Sikes 1994). For recipients, microaggressions create a stressful internal struggle where there is inconsistency between covert and overt messages, where the relationship with the perpetrator is questioned or altered, and where the decision of when and where to confront or accommodate oppression needs to be made (Sue 2010a). Targets further experience attributional ambiguity, the uncertainty felt when marginalized people cannot pinpoint if a comment or behavior occurred due to their own behavior or because of a perpetrator’s prejudices (Sue, et al. 2007). By the time these internal conflicts have been assessed and, if lucky, resolved, the slight has come and gone. Having to address this multifaceted internal conflict every time a microaggression occurs eventually does impact one’s relationships, belief systems, self-identity, and self-assurance.

It is no surprise that targets of racial microaggressions are hesitant to confront the perpetrators in the immediate moment, even if they are confident that a slight has taken place. White supremacy and the racial structure in the US guarantees that discriminatory accounts are only credited when backed by whites (Feagin and Sikes 1994). When paired with the denial of racial reality, the victim’s experience is not only invalidated; their credibility is as well. This *blame-the-victim* mentality is so normalized that the phrase “playing the race card” has become commonplace, used to insist a person of color is exploiting their oppression for gains. People of color are no stranger to this accusation by whites, which may be used even more frequently in

regard to potentially ambiguous comments like microaggressions. By accusing a person of color of playing the race card, whites are able to shift blame from themselves to the offended party, insist on their own colorblindness, forfeit responsibility for their harmful actions, and invalidate the lasting impact that their actions have taken on the receiver. However, Feagin and Sikes (1994) found that when a racially insensitive remark or behavior occurs, their respondents are unlikely to make quick accusations of racism. Black middle-class respondents more often make calculated, careful considerations of an ambiguous situation before claiming discrimination or racial prejudice. Rather than claiming every unfortunate event or rude comment was made due to their race, they tended to be overly willing to give whites the benefit of a doubt in most instances (Feagin and Sikes 1994). By staying silent, victims of microaggressions may be protecting themselves from further harm and exploitation by the perpetrators (Sue 2010a).

The minimization of a discriminatory act not only belittles the experiential reality of the oppressed, but also causes long-term detrimental effects for the victim, who is then left wondering after the fact if their experience was actually intended as it originally seemed (Sue 2010b). Yet, whites who uphold the racial ideology in the US insist that the target's perception of a microaggression is irrelevant. Unsurprisingly, the power to define what is and is not, is once again determined by the oppressor, rather than the oppressed. Watkins, Labarrie, and Appio (2010:44) note that "because white people have the social and cultural power to define the reality of a situation, the racial reality of Black students is deemed invalid or untrue." This statement extends far beyond the confines of their research in academia and well into the lives of people of color in all settings navigating a society so attached to a white racial frame ideology.

The damaging effects are clearly alarming, and the need for further research examining microaggressions seems obvious. A recent review of microaggression literature found many gaps

and weaknesses, including consistently low sample sizes, possibilities of recall biases, and lack of longitudinal examination (Wong, et al. 2014). The concept of the racial microaggression proves difficult to measure due to its subconscious and subtle nature; still, the fact that microaggression research has recently grown significantly reflects the meaningful acceptance of its existence, allowing an open dialogue on differences in racial realities that has the power to contribute to minimize racial tensions. However, a disheartening lack of research on the topic exists.

1.2.5 Intersectional Microaggression Research

The work of Philomena Essed (1991) is imperative when examining microaggressions through an intersectional framework. Though she did not use the term “microaggression,” per se, her crucial work in *Understanding Everyday Racism* (1991) tied micro gendered and racialized interactions to macro structures to explain quotidian racism and sexism as a byproduct of institutional white supremacist patriarchy. In her research interviewing Black women, Essed found that respondents would often share incidents of racism they experienced, framed as frivolous injustices rather than major events. To Essed (1990), this reflected her respondents’ desire to minimize their own discomfort when faced with gendered racism, for the convenience of the men who enacted it.

The importance of intersectional theory in microaggression research has gained attention in recent years, especially in consideration of race and gender. In contrast to single social indicator microaggression scales developed in the early 2000s, several scales have been developed that attempt to address the intersectional nature of microaggression experiences, such as the Gendered Racial Microaggression Scale for Black Women (Lewis and Neville 2015), the Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale for Asian American Women (Keum et al. 2018), and

the LGBT People of Color Microaggression Scale (Balsam et al. 2011). However, these scales still prioritize interpersonal experiences and fail to examine the structural institutions within which microaggressions flourish, are most often trialed within college education settings which limits reliability and incorrectly stigmatizes microaggression experiences as higher education phenomena.

1.2.6 Microaggression Research in Sociology

Microaggression research has expanded across fields in recent years, including within the field of sociology. Still, much of microaggression research within the field of sociology focuses on interpersonal interactions rather than meso and macro social forces, echoing the approaches in education, psychology, and psychiatry. In May 2017, *Sociological Inquiry* published a special issue on racial microaggressions that included research on Black, First Nations, and Latinx populations. In the opening article, Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak (2017) outline the field of sociology's contribution to racial microaggression research as essential. They note the lack of attention in psychology research to the structural conditions that allow microaggressions to flourish, and how, as sociologists "understand that social inequality and racial inequality are structured, reproduced, and challenged at all levels – micro, meso, and macro," extending microaggression theory to sociological perspectives will offer a more complete, holistic, and structural understanding of microaggressive behaviors, actions, and slights (Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017:194). In a later article, Domínguez and Embrick (2020:2) propose that studying microaggressions through a sociological framework will create a focus on the (macro) root causes of everyday racism "rather than trying to figure out how to bandage the victims of racial violence," and call for an emphasis on Essed's (1991) pivotal works on everyday racism.

1.3 Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of this project is to examine the experiences of Black and Asian American women with gendered racialized microaggressions within an intersectional, critical race feminist, and systemic racism framework. Throughout this project, I explored how Asian American and Black women experience racialized gendered microaggressions within and outside of their intraracial communities, highlighting the role that a white racial framework plays in the perpetuation and maintenance of microaggressions. I also describe the calculated reactions and coping strategies that Black and Asian American women engage when faced with gendered racialized microaggressions. Understanding microaggressions through an intersectional lens contributes to a more complete understanding of the nuance in how everyday gendered racism is executed against women of color. Further, examining microaggression experiences of Black and Asian American women provides insight on how hegemonic white supremacist patriarchy is maintained both within and outside of communities of color.

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Overview of the Study

In this monograph, I explore my respondents' experience of microaggressions based on the gendered and racialized spaces they occupy. I also untangle the unique themes present in the perpetuation of microaggressions based on the perpetrator's race and relationship with the respondent. Further, I examine the influence of internalized racism on perceptions of microaggressions and connect the interpersonal experiences of my respondents with macro-level social forces including white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Finally, I examine how Black and Asian American women resist, cope with, and react to gendered racialized microaggressions as they occur.

1.4.2 Research Questions

1. Who are the perpetrators of microaggressions against Asian and Black women and what themes of microaggressions are perpetrators utilizing?
2. How are these microaggressions gendered and sexualized in addition to racialized for women?
3. How are microaggressions tied to meso and macro social structures?
4. How has covert gendered racism changed in the Trump era?
5. In what ways do Black and Asian American women react, resist, and cope with gendered racism?

1.4.3 A Qualitative Intersectional Approach

Though Pierce (1978) and Sue (2010a) initially examined microaggressions in terms of race, contemporary research on microaggressions involving gender, ability, sexuality, citizenship, and other marginalized identities is reflective of the fact that intersections do exist in microaggressive behaviors. Microaggression research attempting to capture this intersection is typically assessed quantitatively through scales or qualitatively through focus groups with college students. As multiple identities of difference cannot be separated, the additive nature of quantitative studies do not truly capture the nuance of microaggressions for women of color. Focus groups do allow for opportunities to reduce power dynamics in a researcher-participant interaction and provides space for co-constructing meaning among group participants (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt 2016). However, the nature of focus groups does not allow for adequate time for researchers to unpack the many experiences of microaggressions throughout respondents' lives, from childhood to adulthood, and across multiple settings, for each individual respondent. Thus, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews to better capture the nuance

of each respondent's experience with gendered racial microaggressions. I also conducted interviews with women who were not currently enrolled, or had never been enrolled, in college classes to ensure experiences were not exclusive to college settings or college-educated women.

1.4.4 Procedure

Recruitment for this project was both online and in-person. I recruited Black and Asian Snowball sampling was also utilized, as respondents were able to share information about the study to friends who met study criteria. Flyers were posted around the campus of a large public university, and on social media websites (twitter, Instagram, Facebook) in search of respondents who met study criteria. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted either in-person (on Georgia State University's campus, in my private office), or online (using video conference platforms such as Skype, FaceTime, and Zoom). Interviews lasted from 60-120 minutes each. Each interview was audio-recorded using QuickTime, and then transcribed using Otter.ai and ExpressScribe software by myself or my research assistant, Jasmine Gibbs. Each interview was coded using NVIVO12 software by myself. All work was conducted using a MacBook Pro.

To ensure gendered and racialized microaggressions are centralized within this study, I coded for key words/phrases that highlight participants' microaggression experiences with race and/or gender. I then looked for common and contrasting themes of lived experiences of all participants, based on their position within the Matrix of Domination (Collins 2000).

1.4.5 Respondents

All respondents identified as Asian American or Black women. The final respondent pool was 35 women: 15 Asian American women and 20 Black women. Though some of my respondents were biracial with one white parent (N=4), they primarily identified as Asian American or Black women and considered themselves women of color. This is consistent with

the way they are socially perceived, as “white is the only racial category where any mixing automatically excludes one from the racial group” (Hamad 2020:90). Though US Citizenship was not a requirement, familiarity with US culture was necessary to accurately assess experiences of subtle racism and sexism within a US context. Thus, even non-US citizens included in the study reported living in the US for at least two years (N=6). Ages ranged from 19-45. All of the women in this sample have earned at least a high school diploma. Most respondents were either currently enrolled in college or had completed an advanced degree (graduate, law). Of my respondents, 21 identified as straight, seven identified as bisexual, one identified as pansexual, and six identified as lesbian. One respondent identified as transgender. My respondents came from a variety of US regions, and many were either raised, or at some point resided, in the Eastern US (N=29). A table of respondent demographics is included in Appendix A.

1.4.6 Research Design

This study is qualitative in nature. I primarily utilized the Extended Case Method (Burawoy 1998) to code the data, with aspects borrowed from Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006). After line-by-line coding, I performed higher-level coding on all 35 interviews transcripts, followed by axial coding. Emerging themes within the interviews were analyzed and compared, including microaggression type, the relationship to perpetrator, the participants’ immediate reactions and feelings, and coping strategies. I also coded for meso and macro level microaggressions. These results bridge disciplines of psychology, education and sociology by extending microaggression theory to an intersectional and sociological framework, tying interpersonal interactions to the macro, institutional white supremacist patriarchy that dominates US ideology.

1.5 Overview

In chapter 2, I focus on the gendered racialized microaggression experiences that my respondents had within their intraracial communities. These microaggressions were perpetuated by friends, family members, peers, and strangers of the respondent's own ethnicity. I outline the specific themes of microaggressions that Black and Asian American women received in co-ethnic spaces, and discuss the ways in which internalized racism account for these experiences.

In chapter 3, I shift to gendered racialized microaggressions enacted by white perpetrators onto Black and Asian American women. I begin this chapter with three specific case studies of women who were raised in predominantly white households and outline the unique themes of microaggressions perpetrated in these settings. I then highlight the specific gendered racialized microaggressions enacted by white women perpetrators, whether coworkers, friends, or strangers, and conclude with those perpetrated by white men.

Chapter 4 focuses on the reactions, resistance, and coping strategies of Black and Asian American women after a gendered racialized microaggression is experienced. This chapter examines both the psychological journey that my respondents took in deciding their reactions, as well as the importance of community in processing, healing, and resistance.

In the final chapter, I review the themes of gendered racialized microaggressions that my research revealed, and discuss the importance of intersectional theory and critical race feminist theory in interpreting my findings. I also discuss the limitations of the present study. Finally, I provide suggestions for future directions that additional research may consider when examining microaggression experiences within a sociological framework.

1.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, my dissertation research extends the theories outlined by Feagin (2009), Sue (2007), Essed (1991) and Bonilla-Silva (2014) by importing the existing work of microaggressions that has largely lived in the field of psychology (Sue 2007; Fleras 2016; Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017) into a sociological, intersectional, and critical race framework. By observing how Bonilla-Silva's concept of *new racism* has adapted into the common use of everyday microaggressions, examining the microaggression experiences of women of color will outline how racism is always also gendered, extending microaggression research into intersectional terrain (Collins 2000). This research further supports Feagin's (2009; 2013) argument that racism and the White Racial Frame are so historically embedded within the US, that they are inescapable even within communities of color. Using an intersectional and Critical Race Feminist approach, this dissertation reveals how racialized gendered microaggressions are perpetrated against Black and Asian American women: two groups that, as the literature suggests, have quite unique sexualized and gendered type differences in microaggression experiences. As racism and white supremacy continue to adapt through neoliberal and colorblind ideologies, examining its ever-changing nature allows marginalized groups to resist through the legitimizing of their unique lived experiences and the creation of counter-frames.

2 INTRARACIAL AND COETHNIC MICROAGGRESSIONS

White Racial Framing, the dominant ideology in the U.S., permeates both white and non-white spaces, upholding beliefs and values that maintain inequality (Feagin 2013) in the same ways that androcentrism is adopted and supported in both male and non-male spaces. The intersection of these two dominating frames results in a patriarchal white hegemony that values white men above all women and all people of color. The constant exposure to this intersecting framework of hegemony leads women and men of color alike to internalizing and adopting its message. Consequently, messages in support of white patriarchal hegemonic ideologies are conveyed to Black and Asian American women by their families and co-ethnic peers through the use of gendered racialized microaggressions.

Many of my respondents' earliest experiences of microaggressions came from within their own families and co-ethnic communities. Co-ethnic families and peers utilized gendered racialized microaggressions against Black and Asian American women in several ways, regardless of their own positions within a matrix of domination. Existing microaggression research outlines several microaggressions specific to Black and Asian American women, including sexualization, being treated as second-class citizens, being perceived as perpetually foreign, and a pathologizing of cultural values and language (Sue 2010). While a common assumption is that racialized microaggressions occur from perpetrators outside of one's own racial group, and gendered microaggressions are perpetuated by those outside of one's own gender, respondents repeatedly shared stories of gendered racialized microaggressions enacted by their own families and co-ethnic communities, including other Black and Asian women. My findings suggest that Asian American and Black women are the recipients of microaggressions perpetuated from within their own racial groups, throughout both childhood and adulthood.

Emerging themes of familial gendered racialized microaggression experiences between Asian and Black women include whiteness as the ultimate goal, the message that they are not Asian or Black “enough,” and the pathologizing of their bodies.

2.1 Whiteness as the Ultimate Goal

A familial pressure to assimilate to whiteness was found within both Asian American and Black women’s experiences. However, the ways in which this pressure manifested varied between the two racial groups. Asian American families tended to encourage striving toward whiteness by prioritizing white romantic partners for their Asian American daughters, as well as communicating that assimilating to white cultural norms was superior to their own cultural norms. Black families’ pressure to assimilate or strive toward whiteness was also manifested through pathologizing various Black cultural norms, as well as the message that typically white facial features, such as hair and skin tone, were superior. Sue (2010) includes *pathologizing cultural values/communication styles* in his taxonomy of racial microaggressions. However, I argue that the pathologization of cultural values is contingent on the reinforcement of white supremacy and white ideology, as well as subsequent anti-Black ideologies. Further, I found the ways in which whiteness is pushed from within families and intraracial communities are distinct for women of color. Thus, I have identified *whiteness as the ultimate goal* as a gendered racialized microaggression.

Systemic racism in the U.S. creates alienation between and within groups along racial lines. This alienation manifests through four social relations: 1) between whites and all people of color; 2) between separate races, such as Asian and Black Americans; 3) within a single race; and 4) within the self (internalized racism, discussed at length in chapter 4) (Chou & Feagin 2008). Within a white racial framework, assimilating to whiteness affords people of color

certain privileges of whiteness, without the risk of obtaining the structural power that whites possess. This strengthens the appeal for non-white families and non-white peers to pressure non-white women to subscribe or aim for whiteness, whether that is by adopting white friends, romantic partners, ways of speaking, or activities. When co-ethnic families and peers communicate to Asian American and Black women that assimilating or subscribing to white norms is preferable, white supremacy is further advanced within non-white communities and the collective memory of racial oppression is weakened.

2.1.1 Asian American Women

For Asian American women, families and co-ethnic communities microaggressed respondents by communicating that whiteness was superior to Asianness. This was especially the case when it came to romantic partners. Annie, a straight Chinese American woman in her early 20's, describes the way her mother pressured her and her sister toward dating white men:

I remember my mom would point out white men as being like the superior partner or, you know, maybe not saying exactly like that way but, you know, even she herself maybe expressing interest in them being better looking or having more means. [...] But I think that's something very vivid and interesting, if anything, like with white men being seen as like, the superior partner to be with. My mom would also encourage me and my sister to not be with Chinese men in particular, um, like she thought, you know, like she would raise us with very negative assumptions about Chinese men.

Not only was whiteness accepted by Asian American parents; it was often preferred. Even though Annie and her parents are ethnically Chinese, her mother idealized a white romantic partner for her and her sister over Chinese men. For many Asian American parents, white romantic partners were seen as the ideal partner, and in Annie's case, also associated with wealth and success. The covert messages Annie and her sister received from their mother about white men communicated that white men were better looking, more successful, and ultimately better suited to be romantic partners than Chinese men. Thus, Annie felt she should strive to date the prized white man. Autumn, a Filipina woman in her early 40's, received similar messages from her single mother. She shares:

R: I've never dated Filipino man, and I don't think I've ever seen her date a Filipino man either. So my impression was she wanted me to date a white man.

I: Okay, so whiteness was acceptable.

R: And also like, a goal (laughs).

Asian American women are more likely to marry outside of their ethnicity than any other race and make up 75% of Asian interracial marriages (Chou 2012). When Asian American women do marry outside of their own ethnic communities, it is most often to white men (Jacobs and Labov 2002). In my respondent pool, only three Asian American straight or bisexual women were coupled with Asian American men. Half of straight or bisexual Asian American women were currently coupled with white men, much to the approval of their parents. Yuna, a 40-year-

old Korean American attorney, describes the way her mother prioritized her white husband's desires over Yuna's:

Like, I don't have children. I don't want to have children. And my mother, like, she's always afraid that people will think that, my husband's mother especially, hates me because I've been unable to give him a son. She's very much afraid of these ideas about like, her vocal fears that I failed his family because he's the only son, but I think her fear is, as an Asian woman, I failed a white man.

Yuna notes the way her mother implies two things through microaggressions: that her white son-in-law will be disappointed in Yuna. and that a male child would be the desired sex to carry on his family's name. Though this message overtly suggests that Yuna may be disappointing her husband and his immediate family, the indication of this message is that whiteness and maleness is the highest-ranking tier on a racialized gendered hierarchy and should be valued as such. This statement perfectly exemplifies a gendered racialized microaggression as Yuna's mom unintentionally implies that major life decisions between Asian women and white men should ultimately result in the appeasement of the white male in the relationship, further upholding white patriarchal hegemony.

The pressure to date white romantic partners by Asian American parents did not exist in a vacuum; preference for whiteness is rooted in anti-Blackness, a rampant issue that has been acknowledged within many Asian American communities and a result of white racial framing (Chou 2012). Feagin (2013) asserts that dominant white racial framing infiltrates both white and

non-white spaces, resulting in the adoption of white supremacist ideologies by non-whites, including Black and Asian American women. White hegemonic patriarchy works to increase internalized gendered racism within women of color, communicating that even one's own ethnic group is ranked below whiteness, while Blackness is rated at the lowest tier of a racial hierarchy. Throughout my interviews, Asian American and Black respondents alike repeatedly disclosed their parents' anti-Black sentiments. Clara, a half Vietnamese, half white woman who works at a nail salon described the way her Vietnamese mother reacted when Clara began dating a half Black, half white boyfriend in high school. She recalls:

R: I think my parents have always preferred me to date white. So when I did date that one [guy] who was white and half black, they were kind of shook. They're like, 'Oh, that's weird.' My mom, I don't know. She thought it was kind of gross, but I was like, well, that's kind of racist.

I: Why did she say... why 'gross?'

R: I guess because she wanted me to date a white person. Yeah, I don't really know. It's really weird because in the nail industry, Vietnamese people talk so much shit about African American people. And African American customers. And even in Vietnam, it's like, they look down on them because of their skin color. And I'm like, what makes you better than them? Like, nothing does.

Clara's mother microaggresses her by conveying her partner is gross specifically because he is Black. While some people find all interracial relationships distasteful, it became clear to

Clara that an interracial relationship with a white partner would be preferred by her mother. She acknowledged her mother's distaste for her biracial boyfriend was racist, but more specifically, it was rooted in anti-Blackness. Clara further admits that her mother is only one of many Vietnamese people she interacts with that hold anti-Black sentiments. Many Asian parents had little interaction with Black people and relied on the stereotypes that have been portrayed through media to form schemas of Black communities. Controlling images of Black men and women alike paint them as poor, aggressive, and uneducated, ignoring the infinite variation of Black communities within the U.S. and beyond. These controlling images influenced the way Asian parents viewed Black people as potential partners for their daughters, but also influenced the way other Black people viewed their co-ethnic peers. Through controlling images, the white racial frame pits marginalized groups against one another to avoid a coalition that could ultimately threaten the strength of white supremacy (Chou 2012; Collins 2000).

Not only did families push for an ultimate goal of whiteness through a preference for white romantic partners, but they also communicated to Asian American women that their own cultural norms were lesser than. Sue (2010) describes pathologizing cultural values as a microaggression that suggests the values and language of the dominant culture are superior. Though Sue (2010) specifically notes "values" and "communication styles" in his definition of this microaggression theme, I argue that this definition can be extended to encompass other cultural norms, including food, names, and holidays or customs. The white racial frame has been established as the dominant cultural worldview in the U.S. (Feagin 2013). Thus, it was not unreasonable for Asian American families to associate whiteness with Americanness. The glorification of whiteness was imparted upon many Asian American women through familial pressures to conform to American culture, including language, food, and even names. Lizzie, a

Korean American social worker in her 20's, changed her Korean-origin name to a classically American-sounding name at the advice of her parents when their family moved to the United States. She shared:

My name is Lizzie, I picked it when I was 6 or 7. It's such a funny story now. I used to watch this show called Lizzie McGuire, there's this character Lizzie. She's like white and blonde and really smart. So I named myself after her. I wanted to be white, I want to have blonde hair and be pretty and to be characterized as the pretty girl. So I picked my name after her. I didn't even realize it. I told that story all the time and didn't realize how messed up it was until I was a full-grown adult. My brother did the same thing! He went by Matthew. Matt went by that in one of the movies. And now I'm legally changing my name to Lizzie because it's just become so convenient.

As a child, Lizzie associated Americanness with whiteness and chose a name that she believed embodied the epitome of whiteness; a name that, to her, suggested blonde hair and blue eyes, typical white features. Rather than encouraging her to embrace her Korean name in a new country, Lizzie's parents inadvertently sent the message that Americanness (and thus, whiteness) should be prioritized and internalized.

The microaggression of pathologizing cultural norms such as names and food was not uncommon within the families of Asian American women. These microaggressions communicate to Asian American women at a young age that Americanness, by way of

whiteness, is celebrated and strived for, while Asianness is to be hidden away, forgotten, or shamed. This message was perpetuated by Asian parents to encompass even seemingly insignificant norms of Asian homes. Yuna shared that her mother rarely allowed her friends to visit their home when she was growing up in a suburb of Washington DC. Yuna's mother believed her house was not Americanized enough. Yuna recalls:

I just didn't have a lot of Asian friends growing up. Maybe that would have made the difference, but she was very much afraid of being judged. Like anybody. She thought the house was messy or that like, it smelled like kimchi or that it smelled like an Asian house and I was like, I don't even know what that means! (laughs) I was like, isn't our house just a house?

Yuna's mother was socialized to believe that the smell of a Korean family's food and home was something to be ashamed of; something that should not be shared with non-Korean guests for fear of judgment. On the few occasions Yuna's friends were allowed to visit their family home, her mother would attempt to cook Americanized meals of scrambled eggs, spaghetti, and hotdogs, rather than the Korean dishes she usually cooked for her family. Though Yuna was able to rebuff some of the implications that Koreanness was inferior to whiteness and Americanness, many other Asian American respondents adopted this message for years. Annie discussed how these slight messages from her family were internalized to her relationships with her peers. Her mother's glorification of whiteness socialized Annie from a young age to perceive other Asians negatively, even beyond a preference of white romantic partners. Annie shares:

I think my mom's discouragement of, you know, getting together romantically with Han Chinese people affected my friendships as well because I went to Chinese school on like Saturdays for a good amount of my life and I remember like being really annoyed with the people I had to be with, I was like intentionally being bad at Chinese there, because I was so annoyed at like how good at Chinese they were; thinking they were obnoxious or like you know socialized to believe that. And I think that carried on through like, you know, middle school and high school; like I didn't have, for instance, like a lot of Korean American friends.

As an adult, her mother's comments about striving for white partners are more easily identifiable as microaggressions to Annie. Further, she tried to distance herself from other Chinese students by sabotaging her grades in Chinese school. However, she expressed regret that she viewed her Chinese peers as annoying, unfrienable, or undatable based solely on their race. Annie's mother illustrates a common contradiction within Asian American families; Annie and her sister were sent to weekend Chinese school to learn about Chinese cultural values, language, and norms, yet her mother also disparaged Chinese people as suitable romantic partners. This left Annie with a dissonance regarding whether or not Chinese values were worthy of upholding in lieu of white Americana.

2.1.2 Black Women

Black women also experienced a pressure to assimilate and strive to whiteness and a pathologizing of their own cultural norms from their families and intraracial communities. For

Black women, this microaggression was most often communicated through pressures to conform to white beauty standards, assumption of inferior intelligence, and similar to Asian American women, pathologizing values, language, and other cultural norms. Pressure to date white romantic partners was also present in some experiences of Black women.

Kala is a queer multiracial Guyanese woman in her late 20's who was raised in New York City. Most of her experiences with family pressures to strive toward whiteness came from her mother, a Black Guyanese woman. As an adult, Kala recognized the ways in which her mother policed her behavior and relationships through microaggressions that communicated Blackness was inferior to whiteness. She recalls:

My mom told me when I was allowed to date, which was when I was, I think 14, and only because we had moved from Brooklyn to Westchester, which is predominantly white. That was my suburb, or like, my school district was mostly whites. She said, and I quote, 'I'd rather you be gay than come home with a Black man' and I was like, 'wow, okay, so my mom is evil.'

Kala's mother sends the blatant message that Blackness is not welcome in her home and further denounces queerness as the 'lesser of two evils.' This microassault demonstrates a gendered, racialized, and sexualized microaggression, as she implicates queerness as only slightly more tolerable than Blackness. Though this statement was more overt than most microaggressions, it represents a normalized message throughout Kala's childhood: that Black men (and all women) and were not acceptable romantic partners. Kala believed she was only

allowed to date once her mother perceived the risk of a Black romantic partner as unlikely due to the racial makeup of their new predominantly white neighborhood, although this was not overtly stated. Kala did end up marrying a white man. Like Yuna's mother, Kala's mother situated white maleness at the top of a gendered racialized hierarchy. She compares her mother to the painting *The Redemption of Ham* by Modesto Brocos⁵, which features a dark-skinned Black grandmother praying in gratitude that her grandchild is white passing. She continues:

I think that perfectly represents my mother, like she is so mired in her own internalized anti-Blackness and colorist issues that she is so excited that I have this white husband who affirms that like, I'm worthy. And so she will constantly like, when I'm on FaceTime with her, I'm in Georgia she's in New York, and she'll see me outside in the sun and she'll be like 'are you wearing sun block? Go inside, you're gonna get too dark. What is Ben going to say? Don't get too dark for Ben, don't get too Black!' as if he will leave me at like the slightest tan.

Similar to Yuna's mother's concerns, Kala's mother communicates white romantic partners as suitable for her daughter, but further values (what she perceives to be) the wishes of Kala's white husband, Ben, over her own non-white daughter. Kala's mother believes Ben will see Kala as unworthy of partnership if her skin becomes too tan, or "too Black!" further perpetuating the message to Kala that Black skin is not beautiful and should be distanced from at all costs.

⁵ *The Redemption of Ham*, Appendix B.2

Another way whiteness was uplifted and Blackness was pathologized in Black families was through voluntary distancing from other Black families and neighborhoods, reflective of the way in which systemic racism alienates people of color within a racial group. Vanesia is a Nigerian American woman who was raised by her single mother in an overwhelmingly white suburb of Atlanta, GA. Her mother specifically chose that suburb because she believed her children should grow up around whiteness. Vanesia's mother made numerous microaggressive comments and decisions throughout her childhood that implied African Americans were inferior to both African diaspora living in the U.S. and white Americans. Vanesia recalls:

I don't know how to exactly describe it but whenever she and her Nigerian friends are talking about their Blackness in America versus African American Blackness in America, they're like, you know, 'Nigerians come here and they're able to succeed like that; why can't these African Americans pull themselves up by the bootstraps and get it together?'

Vanesia's mother applies the model minority myth to Nigerian diaspora in the U.S., which serves to uphold white supremacy by creating unrealistic expectations for people of color to succeed (Chou and Feagin 2008). Though Blackness is not monolithic, the pathologizing of African Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) by Vanesia's Nigerian mother communicates to her children that Black Americans are inferior to more recent Black immigrants, whom she sees as successful in the U.S. despite the fact that both parties are subjected to the violence of white supremacy. Systemic racism relies on the alienation within a racialized group to maintain white supremacy (Chou and Feagin 2008). This ideology reifies white supremacy by placing blame on

Black Americans for their own experiences of systemic injustice. Rather than acknowledging the 400 years of slavery, legal segregation, redlining, and other unjust disadvantages that have dramatically affected Black success in the U.S., Vanesia's mother attributes the conditions of ADOS Black Americans to their own lack of motivation, a classic example of *laissez-faire* racism (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith 1997). Still, Vanesia shares that her mother has been the victim of microaggressions herself. "It's just the complexity; she's like, are they being this way toward me because they're racist, or is it because I'm African and my accent is thick? Is it imperialist? Colonialist?" Vanesia witnesses her mother's cognitive dissonance when she herself experiences racism, yet her mother is quick to dismiss these microaggressions as she distances herself further from ADOS Black Americans and takes comfort in this distance. For Black and Asian women, the constant reinforcement that whiteness and maleness is superior to their own value as Black women resulted in several respondents' internalized gendered racism. This manifested through respondents perpetrating microaggressions against the self, including "I'm not like other Black people." Internalized gendered racism is further expanded upon in chapter 4.

The centralization of European beauty standards has been acknowledged as a gendered racialized microaggression (Sue 2010). Although not identified explicitly in early microaggression literature, Hall and Crutchfield (2018) recently identified colorist comments as fitting the definition of microaggressions under the centralization of European beauty standards. Colorist microaggressions may subtly communicate to Black women that lighter complexions and those that appear closer to white skin are the most desirable. Colorist microaggressions may occur both within and outside of racial groups, and thus have become a crisis even in communities that are not proximate to whiteness (Hall and Crutchfield 2018). These gendered

racialized microaggressions communicated that darker skin on Black women is something to be embarrassed of and ‘fixed’ through skin whitening creams.

Briana is a 32-year-old Black single mother living in Augusta, GA. She chose an apartment near her own mother’s house so that she could have extra help taking care of her toddler. Though Briana and her mother are both a deep brown in complexion, she recalls the way her mother disdained darker skin when Briana’s daughter was born:

With my baby, when she was first born, she was, I don't know if you've seen pictures, but she was like, darker than she is now. [...] And like, her ears were like black, and uh, I remember my mom like, hating when people would say like, ‘oh, she's such like a...’ like people call her like, Chocolate Chip or, you know, saying like, ‘she's such a beautiful dark baby’ and all these different things, calling her dark chocolate. And she was like, ‘well, she's not *that* dark’ and I'm thinking to myself, ‘well, mom she is, and it's okay. And the only comment that's making me upset right now is you, by not acknowledging how dark she is as if it's a bad thing.’

By insisting that her granddaughter was ‘not *that* dark,’ Briana’s mother perpetuates a colorist microaggression with the message that darkness is undesirable and unflattering. Briana does not take offense to the nicknames that others have given her daughter that accurately describe a dark complexion. Rather, she recognizes the colorism that is rooted within the implied message her mother is sending when she insists the baby girl is not as dark as she really is.

Colorist microaggressions from families and co-ethnic communities were common in most Black women respondents' experiences, regardless of the tone of their complexion. Colorism is a result of alienation from within racial groups, caused by systemic racism (Chou and Feagin 2008). Fanon (2008) notes that enslaved African Americans were first alienated from African cultures by the adoption of the English language; subsequent forced abandonment of culture and adoption of dominant (white) group practices have since transformed to a preference for lighter skin, which symbolizes the truth, purity, and power of whiteness. Alienation within a racial group occurs across gender lines, but alienation by way of colorism is particularly significant in the lives of Black women. Many researchers have found a double standard in which darker skin on Black men is preferred by Black women (Matthews & Johnson 2015; Hill 2002). In contrast, dark skin on Black women impacts them economically, psychologically, and socio-politically, as lightness is understood as superior (Matthews and Johnson 2015).

Hall and Crutchfield (2018) claim that the perpetrators' own Blackness is what makes colorist microaggressions even more dangerous than other racial microaggressions for Black women: the way microaggressions can typically be explained away by the perpetrator (i.e. *I'm not racist, I have Black friends*) is amplified ten-fold when the perpetrator is a member of the same racial background as the respondent. Colorism is rooted in anti-Black sentiments that further uphold white patriarchal supremacy by ranking skin tone on a continuum of light to dark. Darkness can only be attributed to negativity inasmuch as lightness is attributed to positivity. Thus, it is only through a guarded maintenance of white supremacy that anti-Black sentiments flourish, even within Black families and communities. Sailem, a college student in her early 20's, describes a recent incident where her cousin associated light skin with achievement and success:

R: She's fucking pretty. The bitch is just fucking pretty, okay. She should have been a model. I don't know what she's doing but she's short. She's my height, so put on some heels and get up there! Her face is so freaking symmetrical you know, it's crazy. But she's the darkest one out of her sisters. And Priscilla is the lightest one so she's yellow, you know, yellow (laughs). And so when they were talking, she said, and I quote, 'yeah I deserve to be light-skinned.'

I: What does that even mean?

R: It means exactly what you think it means. Yeah, like 'I'm too pretty to be dark skinned. I deserve to be light skinned.'

I: What did the [other cousins] say?

R: They laughed and I looked at her. I really looked at her and I'm like, 'girl, you're what? What the fuck are you talking about? Like, your mom is dark skinned, your dad is dark brown. Girl, you're gorgeous, you *deserve* to be light skinned? Where are you getting this?'

Pathologizing dark skin has been rampant in media, the criminal justice system, education, employment, and both physical and mental health services (Hunter 2007; Hochschild and Weaver 2007). Cooley (1902) theorizes that we see ourselves in how we perceive others to see us, as the self does not exist within a vacuum. The shame Sailem's cousin feels regarding her skin tone is tied to the way she witnesses society's judgment of dark skin. Thus, it is no surprise Sailem's cousin internalized anti-darkness messages as well. She saw lighter skin as a prize to be won by someone deserving of its privileges, rather than a complexion randomly attributed to

genetics and, perhaps, luck. By commenting that she was deserving of lighter skin to her deep brown sisters and cousin, she microaggresses her family, implying their skin, too, is not deserving of admiration. The underlying message of this gendered racialized microaggression is once again that dark skin girls will never be as beautiful as light skin girls.

Zenia, a queer Black 19-year-old college student, also shared the microaggressions she received from predominantly Black spaces that light skin was superior to dark skin. “There would be subtle messages in media, from my classmates, the light skinned girls were better. So you know, growing up with *Martin*, all these shows with dark skinned girls as hoochie mamas, or she is angry.” Not only was Zenia subjected to the glorification of light skin within Black communities and media; she also saw how dark-skinned women were more often portrayed as the controlling image of the Angry Black Woman (Collins 2000). This controlling image characterizes Black women as unreasonable, angry, and loud. Zenia noticed the ways in which media characterized the Angry Black Woman as deliberately dark-skinned, further marginalizing dark Black women more so than the marginalization of their gender and race alone. The internalization of these messages by other Black men and women was especially made clear when Zenia was on the dating scene. “The concept that not everybody dates Black women. That’s crazy to me [...] But they’d be like, I only date red bones, only date her if she’s yellow, stuff like that.”

When colorist microaggressions are constantly perpetuated on TV, in music, and even through family comments and behaviors, resisting the internalization of those messages takes an emotional and psychological toll on Black women. Vanesia shared that her Nigerian mother would give her skin lightening creams and soaps under the guise of a casual gift, without telling her their actual intended purpose. Though Vanesia recognized and worked to resist the anti-

Black messages of her mother's microaggressions, she still found herself internalizing colorist beliefs about her own dark skin, as well as other Black women's:

R: [T]here was always a tension for me not feeling fully comfortable in my skin because my mom obviously thought lightness was better and I did experience racism and colorism in my day-to-day life, so I wished I could go ahead and go for the leap and lighten my skin, or that it would just be taken out of my hands so I would stop having to feel that internal conflict.

I: Have you embraced your dark color?

R: It's still a day-to-day process for me because I still live with my mom and she's still toxic. But it's because I can see on other people, I see them and I'm like, umm you should be a couple shades lighter. So it's psychosis! If I can see them and embrace them for what they are, I have to be able to do that for myself and it's still kind of difficult.

Skin-bleaching and hair straightening practices indicate the internalization of racialized and colonial notions of European beauty aesthetics. These standards are rooted in gendered, racialized, and sexualized social meanings that are created and shaped by whites to maintain white supremacy and to police respectability and identity politics among people of color (Tafari-Ama 2016). Although all women are subjected to unrealistic standards of beauty shaped by white supremacy, women of color are expected to conform to both racial domination and gender domination (Chou 2012). Rejection of these ideologies may take intentional and purposeful learning, as colorist messages are frequently enforced both through microaggressions and more

blatant means. Actively unlearning these ideologies proved difficult for Vanesia, who received multiple colorist microaggressions in the predominantly Black spaces she frequented. When her Black peers made fun of her dark complexion by nicknaming her “Charcoal,” she felt unable to escape these relentless messages as they permeated both her home and school life. She was unable to find support from other dark Black girls and thus felt isolated within a community that subscribed to uphold the white racial frame. “It was really terrible to work through on my own, because I couldn’t talk to my mom about being called ‘Charcoal,’ because then she might be like, ‘oh just lighten your skin to solve these problems!’” Vanesia’s struggle between wanting to feel comfortable in her own skin and receiving messages that her skin was not beautiful from both peers and family reflects the heartbreaking ways in which incessant colorist microaggressions may impact the self-worth of Black women.

2.2 Not Black and Asian Enough

The belief that one can be more or less of their race is rooted in a globalized white ideology in which racialized identities are measured against unmarked whiteness. For African and Asian diaspora, this is further reinforced by *forever foreign* controlling imagery, in which all Asian and some African Americans in the US are perpetually perceived as recent immigrants. Like all controlling imagery, the standard of what and what not is American is defined by white hegemony. Because whiteness is conflated with Americanness, Asian and Black Americans who participate in American norms are seen by their co-ethnic family and peers as *too Americanized* (white) or distanced from their motherland or culture. The boundary between subscribing to whiteness while simultaneously upholding non-white cultural values and norms is ultimately an unattainable location to straddle for Black and Asian American women.

Counter to receiving microaggressions that communicated whiteness is superior, Black and Asian American women's own families and co-ethnic communities engaged in gendered racialized microaggressive behaviors that implied respondents were not Black or Asian "enough." These messages were received by both Black and Asian women, more often from peers than from family members. Johnston and Nadal (2010) situate many of these behaviors within multiracial microaggressions, under several themes including *exclusion or isolation* and *denial of multiracial reality*. They describe these microaggressions as occurring when a multiracial person is excluded due to their multiracial status or when they are denied the opportunity to choose their own racial identity. My multiracial respondents did share instances of microaggressions fitting into these existing themes. However, expanding upon Johnston and Nadal's (2010) work, I argue that a behavior or slight that conveys someone is not a true member of their race falls within the definition of racialized gendered microaggressions for full Black and Asian American women as well, rather than as exclusive to multiracial groups. This became evident as many of my respondents who identify as fully Black or fully Asian (rather than mixed) shared instances of exclusion and justification of their racial identities.

The ideology that Asian American and Black women must engage in a set standard of behaviors, clothing, tastes in music, or types of hobbies in order to be a "real" member of their race or ethnicity discounts the complexities of people within racial categories and casts women of color as monolithic. The standard of acceptable activities and behaviors for Black and Asian women are rooted in the controlling images within each race. "Real" Asian American women are docile and unacculturated to US customs according to these controlling images. Controlling images paint "real" Black women as ignorant, loud, and uneducated. Through an internalization

of these stereotypes, Asian and Black communities microaggressed my respondents by subtly communicating they did not belong within their self-identifying racial category.

2.2.1 Asian American Women

Nari is a queer Korean American woman in her mid-20's. She was born and raised in a predominantly white town in Georgia by her immigrant parents. When Nari was 14, she noticed an influx of Korean immigrant families moving into her town and attending her school. Though she speaks Korean fluently, she did not become friends with these students. "Because I was born and raised here, they just saw me as a very white person."

As previously noted, the tendency to associate whiteness with Americanness was not unusual for migrant Asian families. Race in the U.S. is typically framed in terms of whiteness and Blackness, so it is not surprising that Nari's Korean classmates discounted her distinctly Asian American experiences (O'Brien 2008). This association with whiteness conveyed to Nari that, to her co-ethnic peers, she was *not Korean enough*.

Nari and her partner Lizzie, also Korean American, shared that within Asian American communities, there are terms used to distinguish between immigrant Asian Americans and those who were born in the U.S.: FOB (Fresh Off the Boat) and ABC (American-Born Chinese). These terms serve as symbolic social boundaries that maintain a distinction between co-ethnic peers (Pyke and Dang 2003). The term FOB refers to immigrants of Asian descent who migrated to the U.S. but have not assimilated to U.S. cultural norms, language, or traditions. FOB is largely considered a derogatory term, though Pyke and Dang (2003) found it is used most often within Asian ethnic communities rather than by non-Asians. On the other hand, ABC is used to describe Asian Americans who maintain few Asian cultural norms. They may only speak English, cook Americanized foods and have primarily non-Asian friends. Although ABC specifically refers to

Chinese ethnic groups, it has been adopted and applied to other Asian ethnicities who are U.S.-born. Both terms reflect controlling images impressed upon Asian American communities. The FOB clearly mimics the forever-foreign stereotype of Asians who are unwilling and incapable of assimilating to Americanized culture. In contrast, the ABC represents a submission to white cultural norms and willingness to be dominated by other forms of whiteness, comparable to the Lotus Blossom controlling image. Though Nari's casual use of both terms suggest she had internalized these controlling images, she claims she did try to befriend the Asian migrant students in her classes:

I was in our honors society and a lot of Korean people were in that group.

I remember being friends with them but not really being friends. They spoke Korean in front of me thinking that I wouldn't understand Korean. I got, I don't want to say bullied, but bullied. I remember in class these Korean people were talking about me blatantly. [speaks Korean in a disgusted tone] They used to say stuff like that, which is essentially, "What is this girl? She isn't Korean, she's American. She doesn't speak Korean." I turned over (laughs)... I turned over just to hear. They took advantage of the language barrier we had. It made me feel like shit.

Nari felt so humiliated by this experience that she asked her mom to enroll her in Korean language classes to become better familiarized with her Korean identity. Though she felt bullied by other Korean students, as an adult, she recognized that their ostracism of her was a form of self-protection. She shared the ways in which other U.S.-born students would mock the Korean

immigrant students' English and that as an "ABC", she was automatically associated with them.

Nari continues:

They knew that I personify ridicule in a sense, me coming to them trying to make friends with them. Knowing that it's not possible, they were kind of like, "Are you trying to make fun of us? Because you're trying to be us, but you're not us. It's like you don't want to be like them, but you are them."

To differentiate themselves from Nari and other 'ABCs', her Korean immigrant classmates would quiz Nari about how often she ate Korean food and whether or not she could speak Korean with a *Seoul-mal* dialect. These microaggressive questions conveyed that she was too Americanized to claim a Korean identity and that, from their perspective, she benefitted from the subsequent privileges of American whiteness. However, many of the microaggression themes experienced by Asian International students have also been experienced by U.S.-born Asian Americans (Sue 2010; Kim & Kim 2010). Despite her status as an 'ABC,' Nari was not protected from gendered racism at all.

Language was a defining factor in whether my Asian American respondents received microaggressive messages that they were not Asian enough. Lizzie grew up in Kentucky and had similar experiences as Nari of ostracism from Korean immigrant students because she did not speak Korean well. Sarah, a Chinese, Korean, and white 31-year-old, felt she was not welcome at her university's Chinese American Affinity Group because she could only speak English. Charlotte, a queer Japanese and Taiwanese woman in her late 20's, admitted she did not even

attempt to attend an Asian American college club for the same reason. Yuna felt similarly and even claimed language was weaponized against Asian Americans who were not native speakers within these college clubs. While in law school, she attended one Asian American Student Law Association meeting:

I just had never been really super treated well by Asians in general. But yeah, like, I went to that meeting, I went to one. And like, everybody kind of, like they asked me like, oh, like, “Where are you from?” They would say to me in Korean, and I was just, I was just like, forget it. Like, I'm just not interested. Like we're in the United States, like we all go to a US institution, like we should all speak English, because it's exclusion! Like it's very much like, excludes anybody who doesn't know the language, even though, there's no malice behind it, but it's just purposefully intentionally exclusionary.

Yuna claims there was no malice involved when Asian Americans spoke Asian languages, yet also believed it was “purposefully intentionally exclusionary” of English speakers. She viewed this as a microaggressive action that invalidated her sense of belonging in a space designated specifically for Asian Americans involved in law. Though Yuna previously criticized her mother’s internalized racism, her insistence that Asian Americans should speak English while in a U.S. institution is indicative of her own underlying internalized racism and adoption of whiteness as the ultimate goal.

2.2.2 *Black Women*

Black women of all complexions received microaggressive comments that communicated they were not Black enough from other Black peers. This message was often conveyed to respondents who were honors students, soft-spoken and introverted, or dressed in modest clothing. These traits specifically defy common stereotypes of Black women, including the Angry Black Woman, the hypersexual Black woman, and Black women as unintelligent. Like Asian American women, Black women received this message primarily from co-ethnic peers rather than from family members.

Sue (2010) describes the racial microaggression theme *ascription of intelligence* as conveying that someone's intellect is contingent upon their race. In racial microaggression research, this is most commonly manifested through the model minority myth, in which Asian Americans are perceived as good at math and science, or high achieving in their finances and careers (Sue 2010). For Black women, the opposite assumption is true; Black women are repeatedly microaggressed by the message that their Blackness is equated with inferior intelligence. Even within Black families and communities, this message was widely adopted and implied. Thus, when Black women were successful in school, their peers conveyed that they were *not Black enough*.

Sailem described the relationship between high academic achievement and Black identity as incompatible. "There's like a level of stupidity. If you were smart and Black in my hometown during elementary and middle school, you were not Black. You were something else." The message that high achieving Black girls could not claim their Blackness was implied through both subtle and overt behaviors within Black communities, including direct comments and

ostracism. These microaggressive messages were twofold: Black girls are never academically inclined, and thus, the ones that are must not really be Black.

Sailem noticed her Black classmates started treating her differently around 3rd and 4th grade, consistent with the first year of gifted and talented programs for elementary schoolers. She was often referred to as “Oreo,” a common slight used to describe Black people who do not embody stereotypical Blackness. Similar to the “ABC” described above, Oreos are perceived as Black in skin color alone; their behaviors, language, and achievements personify whiteness. Though Sailem did not internalize this nickname at first, the overarching message eventually affected her when it was perpetrated by co-ethnic peers. She continues:

Okay I'm an Oreo, it is what it is. Middle school comes around and I'm really not comfortable with it. I never really had a problem with my Blackness. I never really had a problem with being Black. I had a problem with how people treated me because I was Black. Also, it hurt extra when the people who look like you are saying you're not Black enough because you don't fit this criteria and that criteria. The only difference between me and them at the time was that I had good grades. I read books.

Sailem was comfortable enough in her own Blackness to recognize that her peers' treatment of her reflected their own internalization of controlling images. However, typical of most microaggressions, not all respondents were able to pinpoint the intention behind these messages. Other Black respondents who were enrolled in gifted and talented programs experienced similar messages about the incongruency between Blackness and academic

achievement. Chelsea, a Black woman in her early 40's from Missouri, shared she was once accused of hating Black people by other Black girls because she befriended her white peers in the gifted and talented program. Briana, a Black woman, grew up in a well-integrated neighborhood in Augusta, GA. She had many Black peers, but no Black classmates in the gifted and talented program at her school. Like Chelsea, she spent time with primarily white friends from school, whereas her Black peers would not associate with her. When I asked if she tried to be friends with other Black students, she recalls: "I don't know, I just feel like I didn't fit in, like I wasn't the right type of Black." This continued throughout high school and college, where she received incessant messages from Black peers that she was not Black enough, not only due to her academic achievements, but also her clothing style, long hair, social circles, and dialect.

For Black women, language was also an indicator of how their Blackness was perceived by co-ethnic peers. Andrea is a 32-year-old queer Black woman who was raised in a predominantly Black town in Southwest Georgia. As a middle schooler, she received microaggressive messages from her classmates that implied real Black people spoke in a specific way. "I remember comments like, because of how I talked, which is without an accent essentially, essentially it's without a southern accent. And without African American vernacular that um, like 'you talk white' or 'you sound white,' or 'you want to be white.'" Andrea's classmates associated her dialect with whiteness, reinforcing the message that Blackness is contingent on exemplifying controlling images. Not only was she accused of "sounding white," but also of wanting to *become* white. These accusations draw distinctive racialized barriers around language and behaviors. The microaggressions Andrea received specifically accused her of subscribing to and striving toward whiteness, but the underlying message communicates "acting white has nothing to do with wanting to be white and everything to do with what does it

mean to be Black.” (Davis, Rowell, Stadulis and Neal-Barnett 2019). Similar to Asian American women who were deemed not Asian enough based on the inability to speak Asian languages, Black women were deemed not Black enough based on not conforming to “Black” vernacular English.

The relationship between gendered racialized microaggressions, academic achievement and dialect is clear when examining controlling images of uneducated Black girls and woman. This stereotype paints Black girls as incapable of learning, uncultured, and without social capital and class. The uneducated Black girl eventually becomes the Welfare Queen, who depends on government assistance, rather than a career, to afford her lavish expenses and many children with different fathers. Ravyn was one of three students who attended college from her almost exclusively Black high school graduating class. The combination of her dialect and good grades resulted in ostracism and bullying from her peers. Rather than priding herself on her academic achievements in school, she blamed them for exposing her as not Black enough. “[B]ecause I spoke proper English or because I was a straight A student, like, a lot of people did not care for me and thought that because I was quiet or reserved or introverted or whatever, that I was stuck up and like, felt like I was above them and none of those things are true.” Later, we will examine how Ravyn’s peers also questioned her femininity. Through gendered racialized microaggressions, the daily message she received from her peers was *you’re not Black woman enough*.

While language and academic achievement are more nebulous in terms of racialization, skin tone is often the first indication of a person’s racial identity. As described at the beginning of this chapter, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and colorism work in tandem to pathologize dark skin and glorify light skin on Black women. Research shows the many privileges light

skinned Black women have over dark-skinned Black women (Hunter 2007). However, light skin is only privileged inasmuch as experiences of racism are legitimized. Light skinned Black women received messages from within Black communities that they were not Black enough based on their complexion.

Kala is a multiracial queer Black woman with a light skin tone. The experiences she shared throughout our two-hour interview were consistent with anti-Black gendered racism. However, she noted several instances wherein her experiences were invalidated by other Black peers. These microaggressions were present in romantic relationships, work, and social circles, each communicating to Kala that she was not Black enough. She received these messages from both Black women and Black men she was romantically and platonically involved with. Black women perpetuated microaggressions that implied Kala was not Black enough to participate in Black cultural norms. “[T]here were offhand comments, like microaggressions are, or like, ‘Oh my god, I gotta wrap my hair. You know, you don’t know nothing about that because you’re not really Black’ or something like that.” Black men played up her Guyanese ethnic heritage as exotic but simultaneously denounced her Black racial identity.

Kala’s Blackness was repeatedly questioned as her co-ethnic peers read her as racially ambiguous. At one point, she was hired as a diversity center advisor at a women’s college, where microaggressive comments and questions from Black coworkers and students not only invalidated her Black identity, but also her position as an expert in her field. Black students questioned her advising role within Black Student Associations, (“You can’t be our advisor if you’re not really Black.”) and her supervisor would pick and choose when she acknowledged or dismissed Kala’s racial identity. She recalls:

[E]ven though she was a Black woman, I feel like this constant playing up, and dismissal of, and critique of my identity. And my phenotypical, like, appearance was constantly at the fray where I either shouldn't be doing this job because I'm not Black, or I only got the job because I'm Black, or I'm not Black at all and that's why I got the job, because I'm an in between.

Kala shares that her supervisor, another Black woman, would send her to sweet-talk a white male facilities employee when her department needed a favor. Kala had previously been sexually harassed by this man and felt her supervisor weaponized and sexualized her Blackness when it benefitted their department. Other times, her Blackness was downplayed or outright denied. As her Blackness was repeatedly questioned, the message that Kala received from Black coworkers and students clearly conveyed that it does not matter how she racially self-identifies; she was not Black enough to work in a diversity center. Blackness was perceived as one thing, and Kala was not it. Kala's lighter skin privileges her in many ways but does not protect her from gendered racialized microaggressions.

The implication that all Black and Asian women fit into neat categorical boxes ignores the nuance of experiences, skin tones, hair textures, body shapes, languages, and cultures that exist within Black and Asian communities. Black women and Asian American women who did not conform to predictable and neatly constructed controlling images were excluded and dismissed by their co-ethnic peers, resulting in many of my respondents' experiences of internalized racism, further discussed in section 2.5.

2.3 Body Talk

The belief that true Blackness or Asianness conforms to a set standard was communicated in additional ways to Asian American and Black women by their own families and intraracial communities through *body talk*. Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt (2016) found that Black women experienced gendered racialized microaggressions about their physical appearance from many white perpetrators, including classmates and professors. I found that Black and Asian American women received microaggressive messages about their bodies from within their families and co-ethnic peers as well. Though Sue (2010) does not specifically outline body talk as a racial microaggression, I argue that body talk falls under the definition of a microaggression situated at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and thin privilege. Body talk as a microaggression communicates to women of color that their bodies are not acceptable for women of their race to have. Body talk further communicates that women of color must fit into an idealized shape, one that is based in the hegemonic beauty standards that favor white women. For Asian American women, body talk microaggressions from within their families and ethnic communities included comments implying they should be petite or slender framed like other Asian women. Body talk microaggressions against Black women communicated that they need to be curvy, but not fat, and their hair should be loose and straight.

One way in which white supremacy persists is through the use of controlling images (Collins 2000). Controlling images exist to perpetuate the oppression of women of color, in turn maintaining the racialized and gendered status quo within the US. Collins (2000) claims that dominant groups use controlling images as instruments of power by exploiting existing symbols. These symbols persist through media, imprisoning Asian American and Black women into boxes that insist what “real” women of their races should look like. My research revealed the ways in

which families and communities of color both subscribe to controlling images of Black and Asian women. Black and Asian American respondents alike shared stories of the ways in which their families and friends would engage in body talk microaggressions, in contrast to men of color whose bodies were not as policed.

Controlling images work in tandem with European standards of beauty to subjugate Black and Asian American women. Hegemonic standards of beauty act as an operative to white supremacy, in which women of color are deemed worthy or unworthy depending on their subscription to hegemonic white femininity. Schippers (2007) describes *hegemonic femininity* as the heterosexual, middle-class femininity that is typically associated with white womanhood. Like masculinity, femininity exists within a hierarchy in which certain types are privileged over others. Hegemonic femininity, which centralizes whiteness, defines the standards of femininity, including beauty, of which all women are measured against. Though white women's bodies are also under relentless scrutiny, women of color are not afforded other privileges in political, social, or economic systems that allow white women access to systemized power elsewhere (Chou 2012).

2.3.1 Asian American Women

Asian American women are often portrayed in media as dainty and petite with flawless, light skin. The rise of Korean beauty (K-beauty) trends in the US has further contributed to the stereotyped ideal that Asian women have flawless skin. Lizzie described the way Korean American men in her social circle openly criticized Korean American women's bodies, attributing their comments to "Asian bluntness." She points out the double standard of both gender and race:

These guys have no problem telling [Korean] girls that they have too much acne, that if they fix their face they will be prettier. They have no problem telling girls they need boob jobs. They have no filter and they think they can talk to us women like this. I'm like, you don't talk to your guy friends like this. [...] So gender roles are seriously there because we would never say that to them. They don't talk to white women like that.

To Lizzie, Korean men valued the feelings of white women and other Korean men more than those of Korean women, who served as fair game for chiding body talk microaggressions. Her friends' expectations of what Korean women's skin and bodies should look like are informed by stereotyped ideologies of Asian women that are circulated in the little Asian-representative media that exists in the US. Many celebrity Asian American women today tend to fit within this frame, including Awkwafina, Vanessa Hudgens, and Constance Wu. However, Asian American women come from a variety of countries, cultures, and families that influence their bodies' shapes and sizes. The idea that Asian women should maintain flawless skin, as well as a slender figure, was expected of many respondents by their families and co-ethnic peers. Clara shared the ways in which her Vietnamese family perpetually engaged in microinsults about her weight, including comments such as "You're so beautiful, but you need to lose weight," and "you'd be so pretty if you just lost your weight." She further describes the fatphobic sentiments she experienced from other Vietnamese people in her job at the nail salon:

It's really weird because Vietnamese people either think I'm very beautiful because I'm mixed... Or they think I'm very ugly because I'm fat and I

could be prettier if I lost weight. And I'm like, okay, that's very extreme. [...] I do get 'Oh, you're so pretty because you have a tall nose and it's not flat like ours blah blah blah.' And I have a very defined chin. So they really like that. But then I do get a lot of comments on my weight. And it's very triggering. I hate using that word, but it is very triggering to hear that I'm fat. And I'm just like, why does it even matter? Why is that a thing that people hone into when they look at me? And it's only Vietnamese people who do that.

The messages Clara received about her body are twofold: that her body is not acceptable because she is fat, yet she is more beautiful than other Vietnamese girls because she is half white and has some typically white facial features, reinforcing the appeal of whiteness. However, both meanings fall under the definition of gendered racialized microaggressions. The compliments she received about her nose and chin convey that typically European features are more beautiful than typically Asian features, which pathologizes cultural norms and upholds white women as standards of femininity and beauty. The comments she received about her weight, however, compare her to other Asian American women, the stereotype of which is thin and petite, while also pathologizing fat bodies as inferior to thin bodies. To Clara, this reifies the message that her body is only beautiful in as much as it subscribes to white hegemonic femininity. Clara denies receiving body talk microaggressions from people outside of the Vietnamese community. However, Yuna's Korean parents also perpetuated body talk microaggressions. Yuna felt that her athletic build disappointed her parents, while her sisters had more slender frames. She acknowledged "I wasn't fat, I just wasn't the ideal shape that [my mother] thought Korean

woman should have [...] I wasn't 100 pounds." As a high schooler in the 1990's, she was able to adopt the grunge trend of baggy clothes to conceal her natural frame. Still, her parents frequently made slights about her beauty and value as contingent on her weight:

I'm trying to think when my dad said this. He said "Yuna would be really pretty if she lost 10 pounds." (pause) Like I definitely remember they had a meeting about that. (laughs) And I don't know like, I don't think it was like, a meeting centered around that. But it was more, I remember, it was, it was like a summer I came back from college, and they were like, oh, Yuna is... She's doing really well. She, you know, like, I think like they generally had like, they were like, okay, Yuna is gonna be okay. But it would be icing on the cake if she lost 10 pounds (laughs).

Yuna's parents bought into the media portrayal of petite Asian women and compared their daughters to this controlling image. As a teenager, Yuna internalized the microaggressive message that she did not fit into what Asian women "should" look like, to a point of changing her clothing style to downplay her natural shape. When she attended college, her parents included her weight as a measurement of her success in school, communicating that her academic achievement was not enough, and that her weight was the defining factor between "doing really well" and "icing on the cake."

2.3.2 Black Women

Like Asian American women, Black women experienced body talk microaggressions that also communicated they should adhere to a specific body type. However, body talk for Black

women varied between family members and non-family members of the Black community in some ways. Black women reported their family members engaged in fatphobic comments more so than Black peers, who more often perpetuated racially sexualized body stigmas. However, both families and co-ethnic communities engaged in perpetuating messages about Black women's hair.

Black families microaggressed Black women and girls by communicating fat bodies were not acceptable, unattractive, and unhealthy. For all the Black women that shared these experiences, comments about their weight were shrouded in concern about their health rather than a reflection of fatphobia within Black communities. A classic tenet of all microaggressions is that perpetrators are able to disguise the true message under an excuse of well-meaning concern (Sue 2010). Zenia described the way her father made the offhand comment "to lay off some food" when she was 12 years old. That comment still impacts her relationship with food today:

[I]t tore me apart. I didn't talk for the rest of the day, I don't think I ever had an eating disorder, but maybe disordered eating, where it's not an official thing, but it was very much... I even do it to this day. I won't exactly calorie count but if I have something sweet today I can't do anything else. Like if I have an iced coffee with caramel or mocha, I can't have much more than that.

Dunn, Hood, and Owens (2018) found that Black women's experiences of gendered racial microaggressions negatively related to their own body appreciation, so it is not surprising

that Zenia changed her eating habits after her father's comment. Her father claimed this comment was a mere cautionary suggestion reflective of the fact that diabetes runs in their family, though to Zenia, it did not come off as a genuine concern for her health rather than an attempt to police her body to adhere to the white-defined image of hegemonic femininity. This account was not unusual for Black women; Kala's mother also criticized her weight, veiled under concern for her own health and happiness. Black families attempted to police Black girls' weight through microaggressive comments about diet, clothing, and even the ability to find a romantic partner, under the guise of knowing the best interests for Black women. The psychological and emotional impact of microaggressions on the receiver are contingent upon the ways in which perpetrators claim their comment is good natured. This leaves Black women caught between addressing their perpetrator's true intentions and subsequently subscribing to an Angry Black Woman stereotype or dismissing the comment and struggling over the consequences of it for years after the fact.

While Black families perpetuated microaggressions reflective of fatphobia, Black peers tended to microaggress Black women through the sexualization of their bodies. Ravyn is a 30-year-old Black woman who grew up in a predominantly Black town in Mississippi. As a child, she considered herself a tomboy and dressed casually in t-shirts and tennis shoes. However, as a teenager, her body was constantly criticized by her peers for appearing too masculine. Ravyn recalls:

I mean like, through high school I was always told I have a flat booty and that I've gotten older. And I was a cheerleader growing up so like, continued to be perpetuated as physique-wise like, I had a lot of muscles

and I looked toned and fit, so like people say like, I was like a man which, whatever. [...] I did a lot of like overcompensating so whereas when I was little like I would just wear my tennis shoes and stuff, like as I got older, like at high school, I always tried to make sure that I looked girly so that I didn't get that kind of like reputation.

Hegemonic femininity situates women within a gendered and racialized hierarchy wherein white women are considered to possess the ideal traits of femininity (Schippers 2007; Frankenberg 1993). Controlling images of Black women as dominating, angry, and simultaneously hypersexualized and desexualized, directly counter these idealized feminine traits. Like Yuna, Ravyn internalized the message that her body was masculine to a point of changing her entire clothing style. Rather than the casual tennis shoes and t-shirts she was most comfortable in, Ravyn attempted to feminize her appearance through clothing to validate her womanhood to her peers. She further admitted to wearing “booty-enhancers” under her jeans to conform to a more accepted image of what Black women’s bodies are expected to look like. When I asked who perpetuated the microaggression that she was masculine, she responded, “absolutely mostly Black men” that were not only boyfriends, but also friends and peers. Research shows that, in comparison to white women, Black women are viewed to possess more masculine traits; a tenet of the controlling imagery of the Angry Black Woman and a reflection of the racial hierarchy within hegemonic femininity (Landrine 1985; Collins 2000; Schippers 2007). Associating Black women with masculinity serves to uphold white supremacy through both dehumanization and desexualization. If Black women are not seen as “true” women, they are deemed unworthy of the protections that white women receive contingent on their femininity.

In contrast, some Black women's bodies were overly sexualized by Black peers from young ages. Alicia is a 27-year-old Black woman originally raised in New York City. She developed breasts in middle school and shared the ways in which her co-ethnic peers would comment on her body, including coining a nickname: "Double D." In a specific memory, she recalled a middle school co-ethnic boyfriend that became upset with her when she wore a turtleneck on a field trip. "He didn't have access to my boobs on the trip." The following week, he broke up with her. Though the boyfriend never admitted that the modest shirt was the reason behind the breakup, Alicia felt the message was clear: he was only dating her for access to her body, and when that access was revoked, her value was lost on him.

Though there are some differences between body talk microaggressions perpetuated by Black community and Black families, they are reunited in communicating the difference between "good" and "bad" Black women's hair. Black women's hair has been a subject of scholarly research across disciplines for decades (Okazawa-Ray, Robinson, and Ward 1987; Prince 2010). Black women's hair has been policed, politicized, and debated in media, research, and within Black families and communities. Therefore, microaggressions surrounding hair are both raced and gendered. Pathologizing curly and natural hair on Black women is often considered a tenet of colorism. As such, microaggressions that imply Black women should adopt "good" hair may also be perceived as relaying the message that whiteness is the ultimate goal. However, I categorized hair under body talk microaggressions for the purpose of this study due to the nature of other body talk microaggressions that conveyed similar messages of the expectation that Black women can easily alter their bodies. Though complexion is stigmatized within Black communities, lighter skin is typically indicative of white genealogy and is more difficult to conform to on a daily basis. Through sew-ins, relaxers, and perms, hair is more easily alterable

than skin-tone. Therefore, I found hair microaggressions more consistent with body talk microaggressions as families and ethnic communities expected Black women to alter their hair more often than they were expected to change their skin tone.

All twenty of the Black women I interviewed reported receiving comments about their hair. Microaggressions surrounding Black women's hair took two forms: pathologizing natural, curly hair and praising straight, loose hair. Microaggressive messages about hair communicate that for Black women, naturally kinky hair is unkempt, unruly, and dirty, and that straight or loosely curled hair is professional, beautiful, and clean. Although the natural hair movement allegedly began in the 60's and 70', followed by a second wave in the early 2000's, the stigma of "good" and "bad" hair has followed Black women for decades. Within a white racial frame, hegemonic beauty standards emphasize whiteness as beauty. Hair stigmas have resulted in lost jobs, expulsion from school, and denial of employment for Black women and girls with naturally tight, kinky or curly hair (Harmon 2020). The pervasive image of "good" hair is rampant in media on popular Black women like Beyoncé and Tyra Banks; it is no surprise pathologizing natural hair has been internalized within Black communities. Black families and communities discussed natural hair in relation to beauty, job opportunities, and career success. Sailem describes the way her family warned her about the consequences of natural, tightly curled hair:

When I first went natural, my whole family was really against it. Everyone kept saying my hair looked unkempt or they'll tell me these stories of women who went natural and how their husbands and their boyfriends left them because they let themselves go. [...] My granny blow dried my hair

one time and they told me I look like Don King⁶ and yeah it was like really bad. People would constantly ask me, especially early stages when my hair was this short, what I'm going to do about my hair? Even now. Now that I cut my hair people ask me all the time what I'm going to do with my hair, like I have to be doing something.

Once again, the warning that men will leave their wives if they do not maintain European beauty standards reflects the way microaggressions about hair are both gendered, raced, and sexualized. Sailem's story further exposes the widely accepted expectation that Black hair should be altered in some way, even if not specifically through chemical relaxers. Black respondents rarely shared incidents where their natural hair was blatantly called "bad hair." Instead, the omission of praise of natural hair paired with the excess of compliments when their hair was straightened, reveals the ways in which the unspoken may also manifest as microaggressive. Kamara, a 29-year-old Ecology graduate student, shared that her father would only compliment her hair when her mother straightened it. Zenia had a similar experience at age 15 when she stopped straightening her hair. "I never would get compliments about my natural hair [...] so I was like, oh my god, do I look ugly? Because people aren't saying anything. And when you're used to getting the constant validation and it's not there anymore, it moves you."

I asked Sailem to describe what "good hair" means in Black families: "Loose hair type. Okay the closer to European, the better. So if you can't have straight hair you better have loose curls. You want to look mixed; you know what I mean? Or like you have white heritage." Through a desire for "good hair," whiteness is once again perceived as the ultimate goal, while

⁶ Photo of Don King's hair, Appendix B.1

typically Black hair is pathologized as shameful and unruly. For Black women whose natural hair was “the good hair,” comments from within Black communities reflected the anti-Blackness and white supremacy of stigmatized hair. Mya, a 22-year-old multiracial Guyanese woman, claimed she is constantly complimented about her natural loose curls from other Black women and men. Still, she recognizes these compliments as microaggressions that invalidate other Black women’s natural hair. “I don’t see it as a compliment at all.”

The stigma of natural Black hair as unmanageable further allowed hair microaggressions to be disguised as well-meaning intentions from Black family and community. Black family members utilized hair microaggressions as a tool for respectability politics, associating naturally kinky Black hair with unprofessionalism. Such microaggressions imply that regardless of one’s qualifications, they do not belong in “professional” spaces if their hair does not conform to “good hair” standards. Ravyn is a Program Manager at a Historically Black College (HBCU) in Atlanta, GA. She has been natural for 12 years, much to the disapproval of her mother:

My mom hates it. Like, like, despises it. And like, every time she sees me, like, calls my hair nappy. Like, no, it...it’s a thing. And I tried to like, reeducate her, because I know she grew up in this era, and she, for example, if I have like a job interview or whatever, her first thing is, “I hope you’re going to straighten your hair” and you know, part of it is, okay like she grew up in that era, and the white racial frame dictates that I straighten my hair in order to get a job and be presentable, quotation marks. And so I need a job and I need to do what is necessary to be able to make myself marketable, but then in my mind I’m like ‘well, I don’t want

to work for a place that I can't wear my hair as it grows out of my head'
and that would not... gel well for her.

While Ravyn has embraced her natural hair for years, other Black women described the pain, money, and time they endured to maintain straight hair. Two respondents shared how chemical relaxers ruined the health of their hair, even resulting in permanent hair loss. The claim that microaggressions surrounding hair were made by family and community for the best interests of Black women cannot be upheld when the very act of straightening their hair was causing physical and psychological damage.

The notion that hair can be “good” or “bad” depending on texture reflects a larger ideology that bodies in general can be “good” and “bad” as well. Through fatphobia, sexualization, and hair stigma, Asian American and Black women alike experienced microaggressive body talk from within their families and co-ethnic communities. Within an intersectional lens, I define body talk microaggressions as subtle comments or behaviors that communicate a person does not fit within the framework of normalized, celebrated bodies for one’s race and gender. These messages imply that bodies should conform to set standards dependent on one’s race and gender, that bodies are indicative of women of colors’ worth, and that typically European features should be strived toward by women of color.

2.4 Intraracial Sexualization

Body talk microaggressions were not the only way women of color experienced racialized sexualization from intraracial peers. Several respondents experienced comments or slights that communicated Black and Asian American women were expected to engage in certain

sexual activities or sexual availability because of their race and gender. These microaggressions occurred from intraracial peers, strangers, and romantic partners.

Black women were more likely than Asian American women to report intraracial microaggressions centralizing this theme, due to a number of factors including racialized masculinity. hooks (2003) argues that Black masculinity is shaped by white supremacy, and the subjugation of Black women by Black men (and masculinity) is rooted in the gender norms that were normalized by white society during the Atlantic Slave Trade. White masculinity is constructed in such a way that prevents men of color from accessing the power associated with it (Eng 2001). For formerly enslaved Black men to attempt a reclamation of the traits that depict white-constructed tenets of masculinity as valuable, Black women must conform to the sexist gender roles reflected in white colonial societies. The unwillingness to be further oppressed by co-ethnic men, in addition to white slaveowners, painted Black women as uncooperative, angry, and masculine themselves (Collins 2004). Because sexuality is racialized, the anger associated with Black women is inseparable from controlling images of their hypersexuality.

Anneka Marshall (1995:5) notes the sexualized objectification of Black women is “used by ‘white’ people and Black men to legitimize [their] sexual and social exploitation.” When Black women are depicted as sexually promiscuous and insatiable, their morality and credence are undermined. This weakens Black women’s ability to gain social, economic, and structural power that relies on respectability politics (Collins 2004). Like sexist gender roles, controlling images of Black women as hypersexual were also constructed and normalized by white society (Feagin 2000; Collins 2004) yet is internalized and maintained by non-white communities as well.

The adoption of controlling imagery that upholds white supremacist patriarchy and subjugates Black women within Black communities reflects the hegemony of white racial framing. Thus, it is no surprise Black women respondents reported several incidents of sexualized racial microaggressions by Black communities that suggest the intraracial adoption of such controlling imagery.

In contrast, only two Asian American women respondents discussed incidents of intraracial peers sexually objectifying them. Like Black women experiencing intraracial sexualization, this is also partially due to racialized masculinity. Asian American men are depicted as effeminate and sexually incapable within a white constructed hierarchy of masculinities (Eng 2001). In contrast to controlling imagery of hypersexual and violent Black men who are threatening to the virtue of white women, white racial framing and hegemonic masculinity work in tandem to paint Asian American men as laughably non-threatening, impotent, and hyposexual. When Asian American men are exposed exclusively to controlling imagery of their sexual and masculine ineptitude, their image of self can be affected (Chou 2012). This internalized self-image may influence the willingness of Asian American men to engage in behaviors and comments that communicate themselves as sexual beings, including comments that sexualize women of all races (Chou 2012).

Though some of my Asian American respondents were immersed in their ethnic cultures, lived in predominantly Asian neighborhoods, and socialized primarily with Asian American friends, Asian American women are more likely to also socialize with white peers, live in white neighborhoods, or be romantically involved with white partners than Black women (Livingston and Brown 2017). The proximity to whiteness that some Asian Americans are afforded is a direct result of anti-Blackness; the creation and weaponization of the fictitious “honorary white” status

of Asian Americans upholds white supremacy, prevents non-white interracial coalitions, and paints Asian Americans as the “good minority,” which further subjugates Black Americans. Asian American women thus have more exposure to and experiences of sexualization by white men, further discussed in Chapter 3.

2.4.1 Asian American Women

Though less commonly reported than Black women, some Asian American respondents did discuss sexualization by intraracial groups. Nazimah is a 30-year-old Indian Criminologist living in New Jersey. She taught undergraduate courses at a public college with a diverse student population. Nazimah describes her experiences of South Asian male students attempting to flirt with her when she instructed their classes:

[T]he way I can tell it's about the fact that I'm Indian, is that they'll be talking to me and then they'll slip into talking in Hindi. And they feel like they can establish that comfort, but I've only seen it with men, not women, because I've had South Asian female students, right?

Nazimah strictly speaks English when she teaches classes and gives no indication that she would prefer to speak Hindi. Still, she claims several South Asian male students attempt to establish a sexualized comfort and familiarity with her through this shared language. To Nazimah, the fact that (presumably straight) South Asian women do not engage the same behavior solidifies the flirtatious agenda of her South Asian male students, and also speaks to the fact that this is not a strictly racialized microaggression, absent of the influence of gender. When

I asked Nazimah if South Asian male students would also flirt with white women graduate instructors, she explains with certainty:

No way, 100% has to do with my female identity and my race; I don't even think they'd hit on a white woman... See, because this is a minority male institution, I don't think they'd hit on a white woman that easily either, because there's a power dynamic.

The power dynamic Nazimah is describing is not only that of professor and student; it's that of race as well. She claims South Asian male students would not flirt with their white women professors because their whiteness affords them power and academic credibility; that boundary is to be respected. Although all women are sexualized in some way, white women's whiteness protects their professional identities without the risk of also being racially sexualized. Nonchalantly slipping into Hindi communicates to Nazimah that she is seen as a peer, unlike her white women colleagues, and is expected to grant these students access to personal, intimate facets of her life such as speaking a language she does not use with other students. This elucidates that their comfort is not strictly because of her gender, or strictly because of her race, but because of the intersection of the two, as well as with her perceived age and sexual orientation.

2.4.2 Black Women

Black women shared many incidents of racially sexualized microaggressions from intraracial peers. Unlike with Asian American men, comments and behaviors that indicate the self as an uncontrollably hypersexual being align with, and are internalized from, the controlling

imagery of both Black men and women alike (Collins 2000). Thus, Black men and women are socially expected to sexualize other Black and non-Black bodies. Within a white racial frame, this controlling imagery is perpetuated and utilized to justify the literal and metaphorical castration of Black men and women.

Sailem is a queer Black college student in her early 20's. She has experience dating partners of many ethnicities, but primarily dates Black men. Sailem claims that the way Black men interact with her is markedly different than the way they interact with non-Black women. She shares an incident that occurred when she went on a date with a classmate:

[T]his dude, when we went on our first date, he's like, "Yeah I saw you and you were just drenched in sexual energy." This man saw me in my Philosophy class at 11 in the morning. I'm wearing sweatpants and t-shirts, I participate in class because that's me, but drenched in sexual energy? I think not.

Sailem interpreted her classmate's comment as both gendered and racialized, communicating that her identity as a Black woman, regardless of her baggy attire, typecast her as sexually vibrant. She is unable to escape the controlling imagery of the jezebel even when her clothing does not align with the stereotypical portrait of sexually promiscuous Black women. Instead, her Blackness is what solidifies the projection of this controlling imagery onto her by Black men. Sailem recognized this lack of control over perceptions of the body as a lose-lose situation for Black women and girls:

Like we're responsible for our own objectification. Even the term "fast" usually used for black girls who are just, their bodies are naturally becoming. You know, you grow breasts and your hips get a little wider and the way you act and the way you always interacted with the men and women within your sphere, is sexualized now; it's like you're actively trying to be sexual, whether or not that's true. Because it's usually not. You're punished for it and you're socially condemned and it's horrific.

Though Black women of all shades described racialized sexualization by Black peers, those with lighter skin experienced a particular type of exotification. Kala describes the way two of her previous Black romantic partners perpetuated gendered, racialized and sexualized microaggressions.

[T]he entire relationship was... felt like I was a fetishized object. And that when we were, like, sexually intimate, it was constantly about like, how exotic I was, and like, I was mixed with something and so they would not ever acknowledge that I was Black, they would play up my Guyanese identity or like Dominican identity, call me 'spicy.'

Kala is ethnically Guyanese, so her partners' claims were not necessarily inaccurate; however, she racially identifies as a Black woman. These partners avoided acknowledging that label. The ambiguity of her skin tone allowed her partners to impose non-Black fantasies onto her, removing her Black identity from times of shared intimacy. As previously described, Kala

repeatedly experienced microaggressions at work that communicated her Blackness was not legitimate; here, she is not even safe from this message in her own bedroom. Rather than feeling connected to her partners, she felt exotified and objectified by them: a sexual token, distinctive from other Black women. These incidents demonstrate the power that anti-Blackness and white racial framing has on the racial construction of sexuality.

These two experiences are both similar and remarkably different. Sailem experienced an intraracial microaggression that communicated her Blackness established her as overly sexual when she wasn't; Kala's intraracial microaggression experiences communicated that her sexuality was removed from her Blackness. Though seemingly at ends, the commonality between these women is the lack of agency in their own sexualization. While Black women are sexualized by partners and strangers of all races, they are punished for exerting agency over that sexuality. Under chattel slavery, enslaved Black women's sexuality was the property of slave owners (Nagel 2003; Collins 2004). Thus, Black women who assert power over their sexuality reflect the reclaiming of their bodies, freedom, and independence, which is perceived as threatening to Black masculinity (Collins 2004).

Black masculinity must be considered in context of its relation to all masculinities and to Black femininities. Hegemonic masculinity defines "real" men as authoritative, analytical, and forceful (Connell 2005). Hegemonic masculinity further depends on femininity to reinforce its superiority; "real" men must have control over women of their racial ethnic groups (Connell 2005; Collins 2004). Thus, domination over Black women, which includes projecting or removing sexuality from Black women's bodies, is one way that Black men are able to subscribe to this gender ideology as it continues to be reinforced by patriarchal white racial framing.

Microaggressions communicating that Black women's sexuality is not theirs to define are utilized to advance their subjugation and subvert attempts at reasserting bodily agency, even within non-white patriarchal spaces. However, for Black women, these microaggressions were not strictly perpetrated by Black men. Mya is a queer 23-year-old Indo-Guyanese woman living in Atlanta. She shares microaggressive comments made by her Black women partners that also reflected an attempt at achieving hegemonic masculinity:

I have only dated Black women; they've been of all shades, some would be mixed, some would be dark. But a few of them definitely wanted this ideal type look. And it shifted from being from the male gaze to the women's gaze, and then just dating masculine centered women, a lot of them take on... their understanding of masculinity is so informed by men and boys that, not that it's an excuse, but they don't realize they're playing into the same thing, so it's the whole, oh, a dark skinned man with a light skinned woman, but that's how I see it now.

Mya, who has never dated Black men but dated white men as a teenager, sees similarities between white men and masculine-centered Black women in the way she is sexualized; both expected her to perform gender as highly feminine. Mya shared microaggressive comments that she received from one partner that communicated high femininity was expected:

One woman explicitly, a Black woman I dated in North Carolina, she would just make subtle comments, 100%, about when I wanted to wear

[tennis shoes] or, I don't wear heels, and that was a comment that was like, very much known that she usually dated women who wear heels, and I ended up twice that year, which is a lot for me, ended up wearing heels because I was trying to fit into what she wanted. [...] So there would be many times I would go to school at NC State and I would be wearing very casual clothes, comfortable clothes that I wanted to wear, and then I would go home and make myself look more femme before I saw her.

Mya sees this expectation as an indoctrination of the ideology that darkness is masculine and lightness is feminine, and that the masculine-centered queer Black women she dates attempt to mirror cisheterosexuality through their, and her, gender performance. To complicate matters, sexuality is often a marker of racial belonging; historically, queerness has been considered, within Black communities, as “somehow un-black” (Nagel 2003). Collins (2004) claims heterosexuality is often one of the few social privileges afforded to Black women, who are marginalized by their race and gender, and often by their class. By attempting to mirror heterosexuality through the sexualization of light-skinned, high femme Black women, masculine-centered queer Black women may seek to gain social power that is typically exclusive to straight, cisgender, white men.

Under a white racial framing, the sexualization of Asian American and Black women by intraracial communities serve to subordinate women of color within both white and non-white spaces. The adoption of white imposed sexual controlling imagery further leads to adversarial relationships within racial groups that ensure the hegemony of whiteness is not being collectively challenged. Intraracial peers utilized microaggressive comments or behaviors to communicate

that Black and Asian American women do not have agency over their bodies or the perception of their bodies, even within co-ethnic spaces. The differences in Asian American and Black men's sexualization of coethnic women can be explained through examination of the ways in which controlling imagery and masculinity are shaped by the racialization of sex and ethnosexuality.

Most current racial microaggression research examines interpersonal interactions that occur between a white perpetrator and a person of color. My findings make clear that Black and Asian American women not only experience gendered racialized microaggressions from white perpetrators, but also from within intraracial communities. Next, I outline my theoretical conclusions regarding internalized racism as the cause of this phenomenon.

2.5 The Role of Internalized Oppression

As a critical race feminist scholar, I define racism as “prejudice plus institutional power,” both of which are required for racism to exist (Bridgman 1972). Though people of color in the US do not have the extent of institutional power that whites have, white supremacist principles permeate non-white spaces by enforcing the white racial frame as the dominant ideology. One of the many ways people of color are harmed by white supremacy is through the internalization of white racial framing, wherein non-whites normalize, centralize, and idealize whiteness. This “mental colonialization” or “indoctrination” does not necessarily require the experience of overt racism to internalize a dominant white world view; it occurs without conscious consent (Osajima 1993; hooks 2003; Pyke 2010). Thus, although people of color do not hold the institutional power to be racist per se, they can and do internalize white supremacy through this dominant framing. Put simply, Hamad (2020:206) notes: “Across the world, whiteness has become so attached to the symbols of privilege, wealth, and status that it no longer even needs European-derived white people themselves to perpetuate it.”

Unconsciously internalizing a white racial frame seems unavoidable for those who are constantly exposed to its parameters and serves a specific function to white supremacist hegemony: the internalization of one's own dehumanization removes responsibility from the oppressor, allowing for continued exploitation (Fanon 1961). Further, in the US and other white societies, immigrants and people of color are promised certain societal benefits (including racialized in-grouping) if they assimilate and accept white ideologies, or threatened with ostracism if they refuse (Hamad 2020). Of course, these promises are often limited, if not entirely empty, to prevent a true reorganization of institutional power; those empty vows ensure that the oppressed support the very parameters that are weapons of their oppression to begin with (Pyke 2010). Still, the promise of the possibility to escape exploitation is desirable enough to adopt, internalize –and impose upon others– a white racial framework.

Thus, members of marginalized communities are often facing three levels of oppression: interpersonal (between individuals), institutional (between themselves and institutions), and internalized (within themselves) (David and Derthick 2017). Each of these levels work in tandem with the others to maintain a constant state of oppression and white dominance. Though internalized oppression varies across groups, psychological research suggests that characteristics of internalized oppression are a common experience among people of marginalized groups (David, Petalio, and Crouch 2019).

Like all forms of oppression, the manifestation of internalized oppression can be both blatant and subtle, individualized, collective, and institutionalized (David, Petalio, and Crouch 2019; Pyke 2010). Since microaggressions are subtle and ambiguous in nature, targets are more likely to attribute the oppressive nature of their experience as a consequence of personal factors (i.e., 'I am being too sensitive') rather than a product of systemic white supremacy; David,

Petalio, and Crouch (2019:130) note, “This is one way in which microaggressions and internalized oppression are linked: Microaggressions – because of their subtlety and vagueness – are the types of oppression that might be more likely to be internalized.”

2.5.1 Within-Group Microaggressions: Respondents as Perpetrators

My findings suggest that Black and Asian American communities engage in *within-group lateral oppression*: when marginalized people use the dominant (in this case, white) societal framework to marginalize others within their own group (David and Derthick 2017). Throughout our interviews, my respondents often shared accounts of their parents, siblings, peers, and friends perpetrating gendered racialized microaggressions against my respondents that reflected internalized white supremacy and patriarchy: the pressure to assimilate to whiteness, the policing of their bodies, the classifying of hobbies, clothing, and dialects as not Asian or Black “enough,” and racialized sexualization. Microaggressions within these themes reflect a non-white perpetrator’s internalized belief that whiteness defines what is normal, what is acceptable, what is exotic, and what gets racialized at all.

However, the awareness of microaggressions that allowed my respondents to recognize them when perpetrated by intraracial family and friends, also allowed them to reflect on their own behavior through a new perspective. My respondents frequently shared memories of their own internalized oppression manifesting as microaggressions; incidents where, upon time, distance, and reflection, they recognized their comments were rooted in internalized racism and misogyny. Briana cringes as she shares an incident that occurred when she was an undergraduate attending a predominantly white college in Georgia:

I was on the bus and there was this Black girl on the bus too. She was a lighter skinned girl, though, not that it really makes a difference, but she was a lighter skinned Black girl. And she was actually an athlete; she was on the track team. And she had on some short shorts and maybe a crop top and she was really loud on the phone. And there was some other white people on the bus whispering, talking about it. So, when I was getting off the bus and I passed them, I was like, “Hey, we're not all like that.” (pause) And now it's like... I can't believe I said that, but I was just like, to be Black, at that moment, so embarrassed.

Briana's own internalized gendered racism caused her to depict another Black woman as loud, unruly, and lascivious: the tenets of the Jezebel controlling imagery. Further, her internalized oppression compelled her to seemingly *apologize* to white people for the (completely normal) behavior and dress of another Black woman. In this moment, Briana enacted a gendered racialized microaggression against the woman on the bus, one quite similar to the intraracial microaggressions enacted upon Briana by her Black friends and family.

Several Black women in my respondent pool shared similar accounts; it was clear that unlearning internalized oppression required much more consciousness from my respondents than internalizing it to begin with, but that unlearning was being done. Like Briana, Zenia also internalized gendered racist controlling imagery of Black women. She shares:

I had a warped vision of Blackness. I was like, I'm a good Black person. I'm articulate, [...] I come from a two-parent family, [...] obviously I'm

better. So my parents both have masters degrees, and I was a smart kid, and being a smart kid already has its own ego associated with it. So being Black and being smart, it's like double team.

Here, Zenia's internalized oppression caused her to distance herself from her Black peers, to see herself as "a good Black person" in contrast to a "bad" one, specifically because of her two-parent household, articulate speech, and academic success – characteristics never attributed to Blackness in controlling imagery. Though Zenia was not long out of grade school at the time of our interview, she was able to recognize the role that internalized oppression played in her recent ideology.

Many Asian American women were also able to recognize the influence of internalized oppression on their perspectives of other Asian Americans. Some went so far as to verbally reject their Asian ancestry, such as Lizzie, a 25-year-old queer Korean American woman. Lizzie shared that, as a child, she often thought to herself, "I don't even like being Korean. I hate all Korean people. They are so backwards; I hate Asian people. Oh my god, I am totally not like them." Annie also distanced herself from her Asian ancestry even in predominantly Asian spaces. Recent immigrant and US-born Chinese students alike attended a weekend Chinese school where Annie was a student, and she recalls purposefully befriending only those who seemed more Americanized:

We'd be friends because we struggled together and were shitty at Chinese. Like, we cheated on Chinese, it was like that. And we thought we were like cool for that, you know, and even the way we dress or the type of

music we'd be into and stuff like that. And just being like, "Oh, this particular Chinese student is so annoying for being so good at Chinese." It was so stupid, honestly.

Like Briana and Zenia, Annie's internalized oppression caused her to view stereotypically white traits as superior. Interestingly, where Zenia saw academic success as a deciding factor in her status as "a good Black person," Annie internalized the model minority myth to view academic success as un-American – something only her Chinese-born immigrant peers obtained. This speaks to the adaptive nature of white supremacy, which constantly shifts to weaponize identical traits as both acceptable and unacceptable depending on whom they are associated with.

To be completely clear, internalized racism is a consequence of white supremacy, not of a flawed psyche in people of color. Largely studied in context of psychological adjustment, self-image/self-esteem, and in-group attitudes, research on internalized racism has often ignored the structural, macro-level influence of white racism and hegemony (Pyke 2010). As Solórzano and Perez (2020:105) note, "when racism is reproduced in Communities of Color [...] it is because of the historical legacies of racism and perceived white superiority that have shaped our society. The preference for whiteness we may see shows up in our own families and communities and is bound by centuries-old narratives that white is better, good, civilized, virtuous, beautiful, etc." Internalized oppression must be considered in juxtaposition to the social institutions within which white supremacy is embedded.

2.6 Discussion

Though racial microaggression research typically focuses on white perpetrators, and gender microaggression research typically focuses on male perpetrators, the oversaturation of interracial and intergender microaggression research fails to account for the intersectional nature of oppression. My research found that Black and Asian American women are the recipients of gendered racialized microaggressions from within their intraracial families and intraracial communities as well. These messages work hand in hand with white supremacy to communicate that whiteness is superior, that women of color must fit into a typecast model, and that women of color's value is contingent on their bodies.

I have outlined four themes in which Asian American and Black women were microaggressed from within their intraracial families and communities, however, the experiences shared within these themes are not mutually exclusive. For example, the pathologization of Black women's natural hair may also fit within the theme of *Whiteness as the Ultimate Goal*, though I chose to situate it within *Body Talk*. Also categorized here as *Body Talk*, Lizzie's description of Korean American men criticizing Korean American women's small breasts could be situated within *Intraracial Sexualization*. Further, the ways in which families discussed my respondents' bodies may also be situated within the theme *Not Asian/Black Enough* or *Intraracial Sexualization*. Each of these instances are encompassed in the overarching theme of gendered racism. Thus, it is essential to consider the ways in which microaggressions perpetrated by intraracial families and communities against women of color are extremely permeable and imply multiple hidden messages when considered across themes.

Within Black communities and Asian American communities exists countless varieties of ethnicities, cultures, and migration histories that cannot be reduced to monolithic experiences.

Further, other marginalized identities such as citizenship status, sexuality, religion, disability, and class influence the experiences women of color have with microaggressions. Though I recognize the variation within these communities, I have chosen to examine the experiences of Asian American and Black women as panethnic groups who experience similarities of gendered racialized oppression under a patriarchal white supremacist society. My findings are consistent with Feagin's (2013) concept of White Racial Framing in which communities of color internalize white habitus norms and ideologies, furthering the prioritization of keeping structural power within whiteness. I argue this is also applicable to androcentric norms and ideologies, consistent with my findings of discrepancies between women of color and men. Though there are infinite variations in microaggressions dependent on one's location within a matrix of domination, AADOS, recent migrants, 'FOBs' and 'ABC's all experienced gendered racialized microaggressions from members of their intraracial communities. Internalized racism, a direct byproduct of white supremacy, shapes the ways in which whiteness infiltrates non-white spaces, ensuring the hegemony of white supremacist ideology and the dominant white racial frame even in the absence of white actors.

3 WHITE PERPETRATORS OF GENDERED RACIALIZED MICROAGGRESSIONS

Much of the existing research on microaggressions experienced by marginalized racial identities center white perpetrators. Whiteness is inherently unmarked; as education systems teach white history, medicine reflects white research, and the dominant perspective in the U.S. centers a white racialized framework and habitus, it is no surprise that whiteness is seen as the default, that normal is equated with whiteness, and that those who do not fit within boundaries of whiteness are deemed the racial other. My findings were not abnormal to this phenomenon; both Black and Asian American respondents shared countless experiences of microaggressions that were perpetrated by white strangers, peers, coworkers, and family. I outline gendered racialized microaggressions perpetuated by whites in three categories: within white households, by white women, and by white men.

3.1 Compliments of the White House: White Families & Households

Five of my respondents identified primarily as women of color but were raised in what they considered to be white households. For the purposes of this study, I define white households as families in which one or both parents of the respondent are white. White households may also include white siblings, stepsiblings, and grandparents who live within the home, but do not include current white spouses or in-laws, who are discussed in subsequent sections. I focus on three of the five women, who each lived in different types of white households. To capture variance, I will share their distinct experiences with microaggressions from white families.

3.1.1 Sunnie, A Korean American Adoptee

Sunnie is a 33-year-old full Korean American adoptee who was raised in the Southwestern U.S. She has two older white siblings and one younger white sibling, none of whom are adopted. Raised by two white religious parents, Sunnie was the only person of color in

her household. The microaggression Sunnie's family most frequently engaged conveyed an adoption of colorblind ideologies.

Bonilla-Silva (2014:2) defines colorblind racism as an ideology that explains the effects of modern racism as a result of non-racial dynamics. Colorblindness specifically ignores the complexities of how new racism manifests systemically for people of color. Insisting that race is insignificant in terms of academic, career, financial, or social success discounts the way white supremacy is institutionalized, and legally and covertly reinforced. As race continues to be considered a sensitive topic in the U.S., many people, white and non-white, have adopted colorblind racist ideologies to distance themselves from overt racism and take comfort in the belief that race does not matter. However, race shapes the lives of everyone, including whites, even in unmarked ways. In a country that was founded upon white supremacy through indigenous genocide and an entire economy built on the enslavement of Black people by whites, race is arguably one of few identity factors that has consistently and relentlessly mattered throughout U.S. history. When implemented as a microaggression, colorblind racism communicates that one's race is insignificant and that their experiences, obstacles, and privileges are a result of their own efforts or failures of success rather than realities influenced by unjust, systemic barriers to non-whites.

Sunnie's family occasionally acknowledged the significance of her race by preparing traditional Korean foods, however, these attempts were sporadic rather than transformative of Sunnie's racial socialization. Shiao, Tuan, and Rienzi (2004) found this behavior common for white parents of adopted Korean children; occasional token gestures were scattered among the predominantly colorblind upbringing. Most often, they adopted a colorblind ideology that was expressed through gendered racialized microaggressions.

Colorblind microaggressions were both spoken and unspoken by Sunnie's family. As discussed in the previous chapter, the omission of acknowledgement, rather than a direct action or comment, may also act as microaggressions as silence can communicate a message. Sunnie recalls her parents' limitations and discomfort of addressing racial difference that resulted in their colorblindness. When her younger brother was born, Sunnie's parents bought each of their children a water baby doll of their own. Her sister and brother received white babies with blonde hair. Sunnie's doll was Black. She recalls the pain she felt in realizing her own doll was different from her siblings':

I was kind of offended that my baby doll did not look like my sister's or my brother's baby. [...] Like, like a brown baby, like not, not like super dark, but you know, tan. So I, so looking back, I'm like, probably that's something that if I had been more aware, I would have appreciated but at that point, I was like, that was just a marker of me being different. So I didn't appreciate that and they took that doll back immediately and got me the one that, you know, I felt looked like, I wanted it to look. But I think that's when I realized that oh, I guess, like anything out in the world, like, like things out in the world that represent who my family is, what my family looks like, don't represent what I look like, if that makes sense.

Sunnie's parents matched her siblings' skin tone and hair color with blonde, white dolls, but in an attempt to celebrate her racial diversity, paired with a lack of access to Asian baby dolls in the early 1990's, they conflated her Asian-ness with general non-whiteness and believed the

Black doll represented her racial identity more so than the white dolls. Rather than explain what it means to be white, Black, or Asian in response to Sunnie's upset, her parents quickly exchanged the Black doll for a white doll and never spoke of it again. The Black doll itself communicated to Sunnie that she was not like her family, and the lack of conversation surrounding the doll further communicated that race was both insignificant and taboo.

The reality is that colorblindness, regardless of the good intentions in implementation, does not benefit transracially adopted children in white families. Shiao, Tuan, and Rienzi (2004) specifically found that the majority of white parents who adopt Korean children engage in colorblind parenting approaches that serve to racially socialize Korean kids as "honorarily white," rather than as truly colorblind. *Honorary whiteness*, outlined by Bonilla-Silva (2014) categorizes marginalized racial groups who are not white, but experience economic and social privileges and tend to socialize primarily with whites rather than those in what he refers to as the collective Black. However, honorary whites will never benefit from every privilege of whiteness, regardless of how strongly parents attempt to instill white norms and downplay the significance of race in their lives. Further, Bonilla-Silva's (2014) triracial model fails to consider the influence of other marginalized identities on so-called honorary white women; do Asian American transracially adopted women truly benefit from honorary whiteness in an unstable racialized hierarchy?

Sunnie experienced colorblind microaggressions from other members of her family as well. Her white sister internalized the colorblind ideology present in their upbringing and now perpetuates gendered racialized microaggressions through a colorblind lens. Sunnie claims her own college education allowed for an awakening in which she learned to think critically about her experiences with racialized sexism. In an attempt to communicate to her white sister how

Asian women's realities are distinct from those of white women, Sunnie challenged her about a specific gendered and racialized microaggression she is often subjected to. She recalls their exchange:

I said, 'have people ever made a comment towards you, strangers on the street that was like in another Asian language, because they assume that that's what you speak, or said something about how they want you to love them long time and all of that?' And she was like, 'Yes!' as if that meant that when it was spoken to me it wasn't racist.

Sunnie's white sister claims she, as a white woman, is also subjected to catcalls that are racialized and sexualized specifically about Asian women, and thus Sunnie's experiences with the same catcalls are not based in gendered and sexualized racism. Not only does this reflect a colorblindness that rejects Sunnie's marginalized race along with her gender, but it is likely not true; in this claim, Sunnie's sister further engages in a microaggression consistent with white women's Oppression Olympics, discussed in the next section of this chapter.

3.1.2 Clara, a biracial Vietnamese and white American

Clara is a 28-year-old biracial woman who was raised by her white father and Vietnamese mother in a southern suburban town. When she was a child, she remembers a peaceful household in which her father encouraged her to learn Vietnamese and take part in Vietnamese traditions. However, after her mother's sister moved in with them for several years, his demeanor toward Vietnamese women changed. She recalls:

I guess during that time, it was really hard because I guess my dad thought my mom changed or something. I guess it was just being with her sister who was in Vietnam for you know, 40-something years and adjusting to always eating fried stinky fish, which I love. But, you know, he was just like, we have this new house and now it just smells like fish all the time. Like all this stuff and basically all of our savings went into bringing her here. And I think that's kind of where the resentment came from. And it changed my mom and made her more Asian, Vietnamese.

Clara shared that she enjoys cooking and eating traditionally Vietnamese foods, but that her father engaged in microinsults that pathologized the traditional cultural value of food. Clara's mother migrated to the U.S. from Vietnam as an adult and has always spoken, cooked, and celebrated her Vietnamese ethnicity. However, it is clear from this statement that Clara internalized some of the messages she received from her father: that her Vietnamese mother somehow became "more Asian" (implying less white) after spending time with her sister. The message Clara received from the microaggressive comments of her father implied that becoming "more Asian" was something to resent. This resentment seemed to exacerbate around the 2016 presidential election.

I've had fights with my dad. It was over Donald Trump too, every fight we have is over politics. And I just remember one day I was like, 'you're racist,' and he's just like, 'Oh, you think I'm racist? I'm not gonna talk to you anymore.' I don't even remember what it was. It was probably just

some dumb shit. He has called me a chink before but not.... he's just like, 'haha, you're just a chink!' and then I'm like, 'Ha!' And we will both laugh about it. It depends on the context. He's never said it when we're fighting, but sometimes he'll be like, 'the Blacks,' and I'm like, that really irks me. 'Why do you have to say it in that way? Why can't you be like, Black people? Or African Americans?' but it's always just like, 'the Blacks.' It's just like, the way he says it really fucking pisses me off. And I don't know, I don't want to be like, he's racist, but those are things that racist people say.

Clara considers herself politically progressive and is able to recognize when her father engages in anti-Black rhetoric. However, she dismissed his microassault of the derogatory slur, chink, as playful. Throughout their interviews, it became clear that Clara and Sunnie both recognized anti-Black microaggressions as racist, but had more difficulty framing Anti-Asian rhetoric in the same way. Sunnie admitted this was due to the colorblind framing of her upbringing and actively attempts to resist this tendency as an adult. Clara, however, internalized the anti-Asian microaggressions her father perpetrated, and often excused and dismissed his gendered racism against Asian women more so than she did when he engaged in anti-Black microaggressions. The only exception to Clara's dismissal of her father's anti-Asian sentiments during our interview surrounded his comments about predominantly Asian spaces at the beginning of the COVID-19 spread in March 2020. She continues:

I'm like, 'Oh, let's go to Lin's Bistro,' which is a local Chinese restaurant. And this was before, you know, we were on lockdown. And he's just like, 'that's the last place I'd want to eat right now.' And I'm like, why? We've been going to them for years and just because it's a Chinese restaurant doesn't mean anything. And I feel like I've gotten a lot of shit from him, because my mom and I went to H Mart which is the Korean Market. And he was just like, 'Jesus Christ. Why would you go there?' I'm like, what's any different than Kroger? At least they have the shields protecting the customer and the cashier!

The COVID-19 pandemic served as an opportunity to understand how honorary whiteness is unstable. The alleged Chinese origin of the virus, paired with the incessant anti-Asian rhetoric of Donald Trump in media, engaged monolithic stereotyping and cast all Asian Americans (rather than just Chinese Americans) as unclean, dangerous, and forever foreign. Many Asian Americans experienced both microaggressive behavior and blatant, violent racism from non-Asians (Kambhampaty 2020). Though violence and racism against Asian Americans has been part of U.S. history for centuries, model minority controlling imagery serves to minimize or fully erase anti-Asian violence from public discourse since the 1960's (Feagin 2013). However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a rise in anti-Asian racism in both covert and overt attacks; in the first quarter of 2021, the largest U.S. cities experienced a 164% increase from the year prior in physical violence inflicted upon Asian Americans (Farivar 2021). Though harassment, shunning, and violent acts were inflicted upon Asian Americans in general, Asian

American women in particular saw over twice as many incidents as Asian American men (Yam 2021).

The importance of this distinction is no better demonstrated than in the March 16, 2021 murders of six Asian and Asian American women in Atlanta, GA. Four Korean women and two Chinese women were murdered by a 21-year-old white man, Robert Aaron Long, who claimed he saw these women as temptations of his sexual addiction (Chappell, Romo, and Diaz 2021). Though Long claimed the attacks were not racially motivated, the businesses he targeted, and witness statements that he yelled anti-Asian rhetoric during the attacks, make this claim unlikely. This event cannot be fully understood outside of context of the frequent sexualization of Asian women, paired with these particular women's working-class occupations and the rise of anti-Asian sentiments in the U.S. at the time of the murders; Asian and Asian American women in sexualized, working-class occupations are viewed as dirty, un-American, and ultimately, disposable.

Once viewed as the model minority within honorary whiteness, Asian Americans, many of whom are second-, third-, and fourth generation, are still often regarded as un-American. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this forever foreign ideology, and sentiments such as those of Clara's father justify both blatant racism and anti-Asian microaggressions. The message Asian Americans received from physical assaults, subtle comments, and jarring stares communicated that, regardless of their citizenship status or inability to speak Asian languages, they did not belong, and they were not safe.

3.1.3 Serena, a biracial Black American Woman

The sense of belonging and not-belonging was especially difficult for respondents who felt alienated within their own homes. Serena is a 23-year-old biracial Black woman whose

parents are divorced. She spent most of her childhood in California with her white Jewish mother, her white stepfather, and her white half-brother.

A trademark tenet of microaggressions as outlined by Pierce (1980:251) is that the incident itself may seem inconsequential, but the “relentless omnipresence” and daily accumulation of each act or comment are what make microaggressions toxic to body, mind, and general wellbeing. The previous chapter identified families and coethnic communities as culprits of using microaggressions, making many women of color feel unsafe from perpetual covert gendered racism. For children of color in white households, this feeling is twofold; similar to coethnic family and peers, the adoption of a white racial frame drives white families to engage in gendered racialized microaggressions against girls of color. However, in white households, race is often not considered a salient identity to maintain the illusion of colorblindness and preserve whiteness as the default, un-raced race (Shiao, Tuan, and Rienzi 2014; Haney Lopez 2006). This hinders girls of color’s understanding of how their early experiences are raced and gendered. Serena describes a microaggressive incident from childhood that has vividly stuck with her over a decade later:

This one thing may seem like not a big deal but like, it definitely like, was. I was like, probably 12, and I was at my mom's house, and she was having a birthday party for my little brother. And so basically, a bunch of white families were coming over and I had one of my friends with me who was white. And my mom asked me to open the door for people. And I like, go, and I am like, greeting people at the door and like, literally I didn't even open the door for one family, before I get to this family, and I opened the

door and they just stare at me, like literally they don't even say hello. They don't say 'is this the party, is this the right house?', they're just like, like a mom, dad and kids they're all just like... Like they couldn't believe! And I was like, um, I didn't know what to do. And then my mom like comes and opens the door so she shows herself. And they go, 'oh, now we know we're at the right house now.' [...] Why would a brown girl be at the party anyway? And then for the rest of that party I just became hyper aware of it, I was like, 'wow, this is how they see me' and I was like, despite the fact my pictures are all over this house, people were asking my friend, my white friend, they were like, 'oh so you're Jonah's sister.' Like even though... it's just so wild. And like although that wasn't the first, an instance of overt, like, 'I hate Black people' it was still like, 'oh my god, I am other.'

Though this incident was not specifically perpetuated by Serena's immediate family, she associates the feeling with a sense of not belonging in her white household. The white family's expressions of shock communicated to Serena that a mixed Black girl does not belong in a white family's home. Serena understood that, when isolated, this incident may be perceived as a one-off slight in her life; she even qualifies the story by ensuring the interviewer understood this as "a big deal." From a critical race theoretical perspective, microaggressions serve to perpetuate a larger system of racism: white patriarchal supremacy. Serena's anecdote is situated within an accumulation of microaggressive events in her life, including being perceived as her brother's nanny and being perceived as adopted by two white parents. The cumulative effect of such

incidents reflects the broader system of white patriarchal supremacy and is what left Serena emotionally exhausted and feeling like ‘the other.’

Another classic tenet of microaggressions is that often, they are easily explained away or excused (Sue 2010). Davis and Ernst (2019:763) define *racial gaslighting* as “the political, social, economic, and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist.” Racial gaslighting relies on particular narratives, called *racial spectacles*, that obscure the existence of white supremacy as a dominant power structure in the US (Davis and Ernst 2019). Extending intersectional theory and everyday racism into the concept of racial gaslighting and racial spectacles, gendered racialized gaslighting is a process that normalizes white supremacist heteropatriarchy and obfuscates the realities of women of color in particular. Unlike blatant sexist racism, gendered racial microaggressions tend to leave women of color feeling this gaslit by the perpetrators or those who associate with the perpetrators: their experiences with gendered racism minimized or denied. Serena attempted to discuss the incident with her mother after the party was over. Her mother dismissed the microaggression as not racially motivated because she knew the family as nice people. Serena recalls:

Yeah my mom was like, now she thankfully came around, but when I told her about it she was like, ‘no, they're not racist, like, because they didn't mean it.’ Well, I don't know how they meant it, but because she thought they didn't mean it like that, because they're nice people, then it wasn't racist, I was like, it literally, it is. You can feel it.

The dismissal of another family's microaggressions was, in itself, a microaggression as well. This response communicates to Serena that incidents she perceives as racialized are not truly racialized. If white parents are unable to conceptualize race as a salient identity for their children, girls of color are left without the tools and language to combat the message that they do not belong within their own families. Further, the fact that Serena's white family did not discuss racial matters at all prevented them from acknowledging the validity in her lived experience. Serena's mother claimed the white family's actions were not racist because the intention to cause harm was not present. However, the unconsciousness of their shock was precisely what defines their behavior as microaggressive. In her colorblind microaggressive response, Serena's mother failed to acknowledge the hidden ways racism manifests, regardless of intent.

Serena's mother assumed that because she did not perceive Serena's experience as a racist event, it must not be racialized at all. Throughout my research, white women assumed their experiences with oppression could be extended to others' as well. This mindset served to advance and excuse gendered racialized microaggressions experienced by my respondents, which functioned as microaggressions themselves. Microaggressions from white women tended to fall under one of three themes: Oppression Olympics, white saviorism, and a rigid subscription to controlling images.

3.2 White Women: Oppression Olympics, White Saviors, and Controlling Images

Not all perpetrators of microaggressions were considered of equal weight for respondents. Both Black and Asian American women reported that microaggressions were particularly harmful when the aggressor was a white woman. Just as Black and Asian American women's lived experiences are shaped by their race and gender, white women's lives are also raced and gendered (Frankenberg 1993). The intersection of their privileged race and

simultaneously oppressed gender situates white women at a specific location within a matrix of domination: as oppressor/oppressed.

Types of microaggressions perpetrated by white women varied between Black and Asian women, but each recollection was distinct due to the perpetrator's race and gender. When I asked respondents about white women, I was consistently met with groans and eagerness to talk about the ways in which white women have harmed their psyches through microaggressive actions and comments. Interestingly, more Black women than Asian American women reported experiencing gendered racialized microaggressions from white women. The types of gendered racialized microaggressions perpetrated by white women were concentrated in themes I have identified as: Oppression Olympics and a rigid subscription to controlling images.

3.2.1 The Oppression Olympics

Oppression Olympics refers to the ideology that there is a hierarchy of suffering, which serves to discredit the suffering of another oppressed group (Martinez 1998; Hancock 2011). Ultimately, Oppression Olympics uphold white supremacy by preventing marginalized groups from forming coalitions around their shared experiences and understanding of oppression by those in power. Instead, those who engage in Oppression Olympic ideology believe their marginalized identities are equally or more oppressed than someone else's, and that the empathy another marginalized group may receive is undeserving in relation to their own subordination. Of course, all marginalized identities do share one thing in common: their oppression. However, the liberation of those with intersecting marginalized identities cannot be essentialized; women's liberation, as a general struggle for social change, does not necessarily reflect the needs of all women within the seemingly unified group (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). When white women use gendered racialized microaggressions to manifest Oppression Olympics, Black and Asian

American women receive the message that the interlocking oppression they experience as both gender and racially marginalized identities is not significantly different from the gendered oppression of white women in a patriarchal system of power.

Hancock (2011) outlines five tenets of Oppression Olympic ideology. For the relevancy of this study, I define each tenet within racialized and gendered frameworks, although additional marginalized identities including sexuality, class, disability, nationality, and age may also be weaponized or subjugated under Oppression Olympics. Leapfrog paranoia describes a ‘me first’ approach to Oppression Olympics; this was highly evident in the suffragette movement wherein white women’s political platform was rooted in their belief that they should receive voting rights prior to Black populations (Hancock 2011). Willful blindness describes a deliberate ignorance of one’s own political agency in order to cast oneself in pure victimhood. When ignoring their racial privileges, white women are able to claim that subjugation under patriarchy is the worst form of oppression. Movement backlash occurs when the privileged believe that progress of the oppressed infringes upon their own rights and agency; white women may view the celebration of Black Lives Matter or Black is Beautiful movements as ‘reverse racism.’ Defiant ignorance describes the denial of stratified power systems and all oppression that occurs beneath them. White women may avoid reading about racial disparities in neighborhoods and health to absolve themselves of accountability or white guilt. Finally, Compassion Deficit Disorder describes a misplaced or absent sense of compassion, and potentially a victim-blaming ideology that dehumanizes the oppressed. White women may feel compassion for R. Kelly rather than his victims of sexual assault (Hancock 2011).

When employed by white women, Oppression Olympics are inherently dependent on colorblindness. Colorblindness relies on a neoliberalist ideology that does not acknowledge race

as an obstacle or advantage to success (Bonilla-Silva 2014). When claiming one “does not see race,” a microaggression in and of itself, women of color’s oppression is reduced to their other clearly marginalized identity: gender. Minimizing the significance that race has on women of color’s lives creates an opportunity for white women to claim equal footing with women of color in a skewed and oversimplified understanding of power and privilege. Colorblindness thus allows white women to engage comfortably in Oppression Olympics, where the power afforded to them by their race is masked by their marginalized womanhood. Many of my respondents recognized the ways in which white women employ Oppression Olympics through gendered racialized microaggressions. Sunnie describes Oppression Olympics as a practice specific to white women:

I do not like it when white women try to compete with women of color for like, ‘Oh, we are more marginalized.’ I don’t think that that’s healthy. I don’t think that it’s good to create a hierarchy. So I don’t try to do that. But when you do face women of color who are saying like, no, this is a specifically racialized attack or microaggression towards me or towards whoever, and white women are like, ‘Well, you know, we’re also marginalized too, because we’re women.’ And it’s like, well, this is not a competition. And I don’t see that so much coming from women of color. I don’t see women of color, or even women of color who are LGBTQ taking these parts of their identity, and I guess, I guess you could say weaponizing them where it’s like, we’re battling each other. And it’s my perception, at least my experience, that white women (pause) do that and

maybe it's because, as white people, they do have a lot of privileges. So there is maybe either a cognitive dissonance or this inner conflict. [...] So I don't know what it is that they need to work out, but they need to work that out (laughs).

Within a matrix of domination, women of color experience the unique oppression of the intersection of their race and gender (Collins 2000). White women are not unfamiliar with patriarchal oppression; however, the familiarity with one marginalized identity cannot be accurately extended to experiences of oppression outside of that identity. Further, familiarity with some types of oppression does not absolve white women of exerting their racial power over other marginalized groups. By discounting the significance of race to Black and Asian American women, white women engage in willful blindness. This colorblind ideology was communicated to Black and Asian American women through gendered, racialized microaggressions. Andrea, a Black queer woman who worked at a predominantly white university, discusses the way her boss, a queer white woman, utilized both willful blindness and defiant ignorance dimensions of Oppression Olympics:

[W]hat I found a lot with the white woman that was my boss is that it literally was like, yes, we can talk about women's things and sometimes queer things, but anytime it became race it was just like not a thing she could do, not a thing that she could hear; she did not believe that she was perpetrating oppression in that way. She literally did not believe that. And it was really hard to work for someone who saw themselves as like, really

social justice focused, really understanding intersectionality, and can speak the language for miles but never actually looked at herself. Um, and it has been my experience, especially with queer women, that I just avoid, because they have enough language to be dangerous.

Andrea viewed the racial protection that white women have, regardless of other marginalized identities, as dangerous, especially from white women who can “speak the language” of critically analyzing oppressive systems. In this academic setting, white women were familiar with power and oppression enough to critique unequal systems that perpetuate their own subordination but were unable to be held accountable for their own power and agency over racially oppressed women. Historically, white women have weaponized their white privilege to further oppress people of color, and specifically women of color. This has been evident in areas such as chattel slavery, the suffragette movement, and reproductive justice (Jones-Rogers 2019; Hancock 2011; Roberts 1997; Glenn 2002). Andrea’s white, queer boss microaggressed her by weaponizing both colorblindness around racial inequality, and her critical awareness of queer and gender subjugation.

The danger of white women’s employment of Oppression Olympics was recognizable with other respondents as well. Kamara, a Black 29-year-old graduate student, shared her unease with white women’s tendency to sexualize Black men in her presence, which implied they believed the ‘sisterhood’ bond between women was stronger than Kamara’s allegiance to Blackness. Kamara shared she felt “least comfortable around white women” because of this assumption of sisterhood. Serena describes similar microaggressions from white women in her life:

I totally feel like it's a different kind of racism because they think that, some of them, think that they're kind of immune because they're women. So they'll say things like, or even, you know, saying things about Black men. Like, they think because they're talking about a man that I'm going to agree.

Through an intersectional and critical race perspective, femininity and masculinity are both raced and co-constructed in relation to one another (Frankenberg 1993). Regardless of a shared gender, the experiences of Black, Asian American, and white women are inherently raced; ignoring this racialization disregards the way intersecting identities are interlocked and inseparable (Collins 2000). Thus, actions that subtly convey an adoption of colorblindness imply that white women do not acknowledge the importance of how gender is racialized. Vanesia claimed, “The concept of womanhood is so frustrating to me because there’s the angry Black woman stereotype, but anger is masculine. So Black women are ostracized from womanhood because womanhood and fragility are tied to each other. So womanhood is white. That’s just saying Black women can’t really be women.”

White women’s racialized femininity affords them the myth of pure white womanhood, an identity that is to be protected by white men (Glenn 2002). Sailem, a Black college student living in Atlanta, GA, shares an incident in which a white woman classmate engaged in Oppression Olympic microaggressions when they were having a class discussion on white privilege:

So her boyfriend at the time had this friend who had better grades than him and everything, but he didn't do this internship that her boyfriend did. And so they applied for the same job; he didn't get it, her boyfriend got it because he had the internship. And she's like, 'Yeah that wasn't because of privilege; that's because he had the internship.' I'm like, 'Yeah, okay so what you're saying right now is because your boyfriend's friend did not do free labor, he didn't get it... not only did he not do free labor, he couldn't afford to exchange his time. He is punished within the labor market for a job he is qualified to do by not getting the job. Do you not see the privilege?' And then she's mad. She is really mad and she starts yelling. And she's yelling, mind you, she's yelling. And she's like, 'I'm not privileged I was raped! Yeah, I got married really young, my husband was abusive, and I left him. I don't have my parents paying for me to go to school!' and she's crying. Proceed tears. 'My parents don't have money. My parents don't pay,' blah blah blah. And I'm like, girl I hear you. I'm speaking this tone the whole time. I'm like, 'yeah I hear you but none of our parents are paying for us to go to school either.' The teacher tells me to stop yelling at her.

Sailem's classmate microaggressed her through willful blindness. She denied the reality of anti-Black hiring practices, as well as her own white privilege, and redirected the victimization to herself as a survivor of sexual assault. Dyer (2005) notes that whites set the standard of humanity in ways that benefit their own success. This is embodied within a white

racial frame, where white cultural norms are considered universal societal norms as well. Crying, as a societal norm, communicates injury and helplessness, which elicits automatic sympathy for Sailem's classmate. Her helplessness was legitimized through her tears, which also absolved her of taking responsibility for her colorblind microaggressive statements (Accapadi 2007). Hamad (2020:124) posits the weaponizing of tears is strategic: designed to empower the white woman at the expense of the woman of color for the benefit of white society." Conversely, Sailem, whose behavior did not fall within the standard of white societal victimhood, was blamed by the professor for causing harm to her classmate.

Of course, the classmate's sexual assault was not related to the reason her boyfriend was hired over his Black friend. Yet her ability to weaponize her tears, paired with the professor's microaggression instructing Sailem to stop yelling, communicated to Sailem that her lived experience as a Black woman was not as valid nor valued as her white woman classmate's, and that, within a white racial frame that promotes white societal norms, regardless of who was yelling, she would be cast as the aggressor. Regardless of this woman's subjugated gender and identity as a survivor of sexual assault, hers and other white women's tears are fundamental to the maintenance of white supremacy (Hamad 2020). Microaggressions that conveyed an adoption of the controlling image of the Angry Black Woman plagued many Black respondents. White women's tendency to adopt additional controlling images of Black and Asian American women are outlined below.

3.2.2 "I'm Not Poor, I'm Just Black!" White Saviorism, Colorblindness, and Subscriptions to Controlling Images

Controlling images are widespread accepted stereotypes that exist to hide or justify the oppression of women of color (Collins 2000). My respondents shared many incidents where

white women subscribed to controlling image stereotypes of Black and Asian women and communicated this adoption through gendered racialized microaggressions. As microaggressions, the maintenance of controlling images justifies the oppression of women of color by subtly dehumanizing them as the 'other' (Collins 2000). Black women identified white women as heavy subscribers to the Poor Black Woman controlling image. In contrast, white women most often perpetrated microaggressions that communicated Asian American women are perpetually foreign and unamerican.

Blackness was largely conflated with poverty by white women, who employed microaggressions to convey this belief to my Black respondents. The controlling image of the poor Black woman mirrors the controlling image of the welfare queen, who relies on government assistance to afford her lavish expenses (Collins 2000). Many respondents received messages from white women through gendered racialized microaggressions that communicated Black women are inherently poor, uneducated, and on government assistance. Alicia is a 28-year-old Black woman pursuing a graduate degree. Though her graduate program paid her a stipend and covered her tuition, Alicia worked weekends at a senior living facility in an Atlanta suburb to make some extra cash. She describes a conversation she had with one white woman in the care of the facility:

[T]his one older white woman had taken a liking to me, which is fine.

And, I ended up opening up by telling her that I was getting my doctorate.

And she was like, 'oh, our, our son is in so-and-so he's getting his

doctorate! He's going to be an oncologist, he's going to be a doctor, like a medical doctor.' Whatever the case is. She starts asking me how I pay for

school. And I was like, well, I got a fellowship and everything else. ‘Oh, how’d you get that? Is it from the government?’ I was like, um, I’m going to go. I have other tables. And I was like, ‘um, well, no. But um, you know, I’m just going to go...’

The controlling image of the poor Black woman and welfare queen are so ingrained and reinforced within a white racial framework that this white woman was unable to imagine any other reality for Alicia, even after being told the details of her departmentally funded fellowship. Understanding a reality outside the boundaries of controlling images proved difficult for many white women who interacted with my respondents.

As white women occupy a position of oppressor/oppressed within a matrix of domination, they are able to adopt simultaneous identities of both victim and savior. This manifests in a white savior industrial complex (Aronson 2017) in which white privilege is justified as necessary to save those less fortunate, without consideration of the policies and systems whites have supported that reinforce inequality. Hamad (2020:80) notes the gendered aspects of white saviorism: “The language of the White Saviour (sic) is not one of liberation or sisterhood: it is a language of imperialism. Nothing gives away a White Savior Complex like white women rallying to ‘save’ brown women despite the gruesome history of what ‘saving’ has entailed.” White women perceived Black women to be in need of saving from the ills of Black womanhood, which they conflated with poverty. Briana, a 32-year-old Black woman, an incident in which a white coworker subscribed to the controlling image of the poor Black woman, assuming Briana was in need of charitable donations:

So, um, there was one of the ladies in the department that I worked in, she offered me, she was like, you know, 'I'm getting rid of some of my daughter's, you know, clothes and some jackets and stuff. You know, do you want to look at them?' I'm like, 'yeah, sure.' And she's like, 'yeah, I know, it'd be like a second Christmas for you!' And I'm just like, what? Like, I'm not poor, I'm just Black! Or, um, she made little comments; that one stands out that I remember the most, but she would say stuff like that all the time. All. The. Time. [...] She really thought she was doing me a favor. And like, any of my friends will tell you, like, I had way more clothes than I needed. And like, of all the things that she had, like, there was just one huge like jacket, like you could go skiing in and I kept it because it was yellow and that's my favorite color and everything else I threw in the dumpster. So it wasn't even like, a bunch of like, super nice things or anything. And, uh, yeah. She was like 'it's like a second Christmas!' That's what she said.

Briana accepted her coworker's offer for secondhand clothes initially believing it to be a simple friendly gesture, but soon realized the coworker viewed her as poor and needy. The fact that the coworker believed her daughter's used clothing was equivalent to receiving Christmas gifts reflects her adoption of the poor Black woman controlling imagery. An adoption of this controlling image, when paired with an adoption of a white savior complex, resulted in the use of gendered racialized microaggressions that Black women respondents felt were particularly offensive. Ciara, a Black graduate student of Public Health, was subjected to many white women

coworkers and classmates who adopted the poor Black woman controlling images and white saviorism through work in disadvantaged, often Black, communities. She lamented, “All Black people are not people that need your help.” When enacted through microaggressions, white saviorism implies that Black women and communities are poor, unable to help themselves, and in need of charity work that only white people are capable of performing.

Asian American women also experienced microaggressions from white women that primarily communicated an expectation of embodied controlling images. White women often implied Asian American respondents were not truly American because they were not white, and instead adopted a controlling image of Asian American women as perpetually foreign.

Previous research on Asian American experiences of microaggressions outline perpetually foreign messages for all Asian Americans (Sue et al. 2007). However, much of the research that has established this as a common theme among Asian Americans has predominantly analyzed Asian American women, yet do not frame the experiences intersectionally. For example, Sue and colleagues’ (2007) landmark study on Asian American microaggressions included a total of ten Asian American respondents, nine of which were women. Accordingly, I argue these microaggression are both raced and gendered.

In some cases, my respondents admitted these particular microaggressions were likely white women’s attempts at being respectful of their ethnic backgrounds. However, the faux pas and microaggression lies within white women’s assumptions that Asian American women are more adoptive of their ethnicities’ cultures than the American culture in which they were raised. Danielle, a queer Chinese American geologist, explained how her therapist’s small gestures were well-meaning but off-putting:

People from the kindness of their hearts and with good intentions want to know or share facts about my culture. I am so separated from my culture; I don't speak Chinese. Even my therapist, she tries so hard to be inclusive and learn about my culture because I am probably her only Asian client. Almost every session she will have some little tidbit or some fact she learned about. It's kind of sweet but I'm also like, how do I tell this person this is annoying to me. [...] Last week there was a book written by a Chinese American woman who talks about how it was hard for her to grow up Chinese American because of all these gender pressures and things. And to be fair it was very relevant to what we were talking about, but it rubbed me the wrong way. Stuff like that. I would wear a red shirt and she would say, 'oh that's a lucky color in your culture!'

Danielle's therapist likely thought she was utilizing culturally competent practices by incorporating Chinese books and references into their sessions. However, Danielle's culture is not exclusively Chinese; her ethnicity is. This distinction is often disregarded, if recognized at all, for Asian American women.

Gendered racialized microaggressions that imply perpetual foreignness further communicate that whiteness is the norm, and anything outside of whiteness is foreign. Perhaps Danielle's therapist would also audibly attribute her white clients' clothing to American cultural significance, but to Danielle, these seemingly innocuous gestures only othered and tokenized her to a monolithic Chinese woman's experience. It was not the book itself that bothered her, rather, the message of this and other slight actions conveyed she must relate to it solely due to her

Chinese identity. Even when the materials were significant to their session, the repeated microaggressions from her white therapist felt like an overcorrection of colorblindness into tokenism.

People of all races claim colorblindness as a way to absolve themselves of guilt and/or accountability for racism; if someone “does not see color,” they believe they are incapable of enacting or upholding racialized inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2014). My participants shared several instances of experiencing claims of colorblindness from many types of perpetrators. However, an adoption of colorblindness reflects a misunderstanding of the differences between inequality and inequity and disregards the significance that race has on people’s everyday experiences. Colorblindness as a gendered racialized microaggression implies that the oppressive experiences of my respondents are completely independent of their statuses as Black and/or Asian American women.

Recently, as race becomes a more salient and less taboo topic to the general public, the adoption of colorblindness has been more widely recognized as problematic. Many areas of work have included cultural competency strategies within their training to emphasize that race matters. However, my findings suggest this can lead to an over-correction of colorblindness that results in tokenism. Of course, Danielle’s experiences were a result of her identity as a Chinese woman, but also of her life as entirely situated within the United States. The over-correction of colorblindness by her therapist resulted in the assumption that Danielle’s life centered around being Chinese, when sometimes a red shirt is just a red shirt.

The adoption of colorblindness and the overcorrection of it can and do coexist. The instability of colorblindness is evident in microaggressions that simultaneously communicate Asian American women are foreign to the U.S. and that their experiences are not racially

relevant. Amy is a 32-year-old Viet, Chinese, and Pacific Islander woman who was born and raised in California. Before Amy was born, her mother immigrated to the U.S. during the Vietnam War as a refugee. Now, Amy is now married to a white man. Throughout our interview, she discussed the ways in which her mother-in-law, a white woman named Lisa, would frequently switch between colorblind microaggressions and an overcorrection of colorblind microaggressions to communicate she viewed Amy as perpetually foreign. Though they have had deeply involved conversations about race, Lisa's colorblindness, as well as her over-correction of it, still act as microaggressions against Amy. Amy laughs as she describes her mother-in-law:

And she doesn't understand how bad it sucks (laughs) and how like certain things you say, certain things you do could be considered racist. And oh, and when you say like, 'oh, like so and so did this thing, and it was racist,' she's like, 'well, why do you assume that they would say that because you're Asian?' And I was like, 'because this is just what happens all the time.' You know, so it's a little bit gas light-y. But it's not because she's malicious; she's really trying to understand and she's just not understanding.

Amy did not see Lisa's microaggressive question as mean spirited and believes it may have reflected a genuine interest. However, this question conveyed that Lisa was not fully convinced Amy was an expert on her own oppression. Accordingly, as is common of microaggressions, Lisa's intention did not make the comment less damaging to Amy, who spent

emotional energy trying to convince her mother-in-law that her experience was rooted in racism. When I asked Amy if she would identify her mother-in-law's comments as an ascription to colorblindness, she instead described an over-correction of it.

Her thing is a twist on that. It's like, not that she doesn't see color. She doesn't think that people should say that, but she wants to talk about it! She's like, 'what's that like?' You know, and sometimes you don't want to talk about it. (laughs) She's really interested in talking to my mom, because like, her refugee story. Like, 'whoa, like, that's just so different from my experience!' And it really comes from a place of um, genuine interest in people, but it can really come off as insensitive.

Lisa often engaged in colorblindness and an over-correction of colorblindness, both through microaggressive statements. When Amy described an experience that was rooted in racism, Lisa questioned the validity of her claim; to Lisa, race did not matter in this context. However, the incessant orientalism of Amy's own mother as a Vietnamese refugee over-corrects Lisa's colorblindness to a point of exoticism and entitlement to the satiation of her own curiosity, potentially at the expense of reliving trauma or expending the emotional energy that reacting to microaggressions typically costs. Teetering through colorblind and over-corrective microaggressions, Lisa simultaneously disregards and tokenizes the racialized experiences of Asian American women.

The controlling image of the Asian American woman as perpetually un-American was even imposed upon children by white women. When Clara was in second grade, her teacher, a

white woman, recommended she attend English Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) classes. ESOL classes are for students whose first language is not English. Clara was born and raised in a small suburb of Atlanta, and English is, in fact, her first language. She recalls:

The only reason they put me in that class was because my mom came to the school. She speaks English well but it's not perfect. But they put me in ESOL, because she wasn't fluent in English. And yeah. So for the first half of the year, I missed recess every single day because I would go to ESOL.

Within a white racial frame, Asians and Asian Americans are depicted as poor English speakers, their speech and language mocked as part of a forever foreign controlling imagery, framing Asian Americans (and other people of color) as culturally inferior (Feagin 2013). Accents associated with non-white skin, such as Asian, Latinx, or Black accents, are subjected to racialized mocking or assumptions of inferior intelligence in ways that European accents are not (Lippi-Green 2011). Clara's teacher assumed her Vietnamese mother's imperfect English reflected Clara's own fluency in the language. At seven years old, Clara did not question where teachers told her to go. This reflects a power dynamic in which recognizing and resisting microaggressions may not always be feasible. Instead of challenging her teacher, she went to ESOL classes for months until her parents found out. Interestingly, neither the ESOL teacher, nor Clara's general studies teacher, realized this mistake despite the months she attended these classes; Clara's Asian appearance, paired with a single event in which her mother came to the school, solidified to both parties that English must not be Clara's first language.

Schools served as a location for gendered racialized microaggressions throughout my respondents' lives. Existing research on microaggressions has largely focused on respondents enrolled in college, but my findings suggest grade schools are also rampant sites of microaggressions from both peers and teachers. This is especially important to consider in terms of power dynamics when teachers microaggress their students. Sarah is a Korean, Chinese, and white 31-year-old woman who grew up in the suburbs of Washington D.C. She identifies as fourth generation as she is a descendent of Chinese migrants who came to the U.S. to build railroads. Sarah shares an incident that occurred in middle school when a substitute teacher, a white woman, asked the students to share where their families were from:

So just like, she went around and basically started like asking people like, you know, where's your family from, thinking that they'd be like, 'oh, we like moved from California,' or something, or that they specifically have immigrated recently from a different country or something. But so, you know, like my white classmates are going around and being like, Oh, you know, like I'm a quarter like, Portuguese and like, Italian and German and English, you know, all of this stuff. Then we got to me, and I told her like, oh, like my family's from California originally, you know, and I'm part Chinese and Korean and blah blah, blah blah blah. And for some reason, even though she said cool after all of like the white and other people saying all of the things that they were, for some reason for me, she was like, 'Oh, you're like one of those mutts aren't you?' And then proceeded to be like, you know, went on like a deep dive of like, 'okay, so you're not

really from California then?' and I'm like, at least as far back as all of these other white people, but for some reason, like, you know, the answer I gave just wasn't enough.

This white substitute teacher subscribed to the controlling image of perpetually foreign Asian Americans and microaggressed Sarah by refusing to accept that her family was “really from California.” While her classmates shared German, Italian, and Portuguese ethnic ties, their whiteness in the U.S. went unchallenged. Further, the substitute derogatorily equated Sarah’s multiracial ethnicity to a mixed-breed dog. When I asked Sarah if she pushed back in response to the substitute’s dehumanizing and invalidating microaggressions, she alluded to the power dynamics that inevitably exist within teacher/student spaces. She recalls: “I was like, 12. But even at that age, I was like, that is definitely a word she did not use for other people. And this line of questioning is weirdly invasive. But I didn't really say anything because you know, it was an authority figure, right? So no.”

White women microaggressed both Black and Asian American women in similar and distinct ways that ultimately relied on colorblindness, Oppression Olympics, and a rigid subscription to controlling images. This rigidity results in a continuous circulation of controlling images that ultimately justify the oppression of women of color (Collins 2000). Through white women’s microaggressive actions, Black and Asian American are pushed to the margins as the other, which characterizes them as unfamiliar with, and undeserving of, the norms of white Americana. Perceived differences and subsequent othering are not based on skin tone and culture alone; my respondents shared stories of white men who microaggressed them by implying Asian American and Black women are sexually distinct from white women.

3.3 White Men and the Perception of Black & Asian American Women as an Experience

Most gendered racialized microaggressions from white men were concentrated on a single theme: Black and Asian American women are sexually distinct from white women. This was elucidated through microaggressions that communicated orientalist exotification and Black hypersexualization. Both Asian American and Black women experienced sexualized exoticism in the form of gendered racialized microaggressions from white men. However, contrary to white women's perpetuation of gendered racialized microaggressions, more Asian American women than Black women reported exoticized microaggressions from white men.

Edward Said (1978) describes orientalism as Western civilization's racism toward Asian and Asian Americans. The sexualization of Asian American women is rooted in the impression that Asian women are exotic and mystifying, a component of orientalism. The depictions used throughout history in U.S media perpetuated these stereotypes, specifically portraying Asian and Asian American women as submissive lotus blossoms or tiger moms/dragon ladies, both of whom are sexualized by white men. Research and history show that Asian American women have almost exclusively been portrayed in a sexual light (Zheng 2016). From a critical race theoretical perspective, immigration laws, military imperialism of Asian countries, mail-order brides and sex tourism reinforce this portrayal of Asian women as exotic sexual experiences (Zheng 2016).

Orientalism and exotification are only possible through comparison to a white norm. Within the white racial frame, as whiteness is considered the standard to which everything is compared, Asian and Black women are considered deviant from the norm of white womanhood (Frankenberg 1993). Accordingly, the sexualization that Black and Asian American women experience from white men is directly related to both their gender and their race. Gendered

racism is further compounded when women of color identify as queer. Nari is a queer Korean American woman in her mid-20's living in Atlanta, GA. She recalls one incident at a bar where a white man fetishized her and other queer Asian American women she was with:

This guy came up to us and said, 'Looks like I am going to be having dumplings for dinner tonight.' [...] And I think because, I think because when I'm out, especially with people that identify as queer, we experience this form of, we experience a harsher form of fetishization. We aren't just fetishized for being Asian, but because men see us as couples, they are kind of like, 'looks like I am getting a two for one tonight.'

Queer women are often fetishized by straight men who see their queerness as an exotic obstacle of which they are entitled to pursue. The assumption that all queer women are open to engaging with straight men reflects a belief that their sexual orientation is a malleable phase. The gendered racialized microaggression that Nari and her friends experienced mocked their race and invalidated their queerness and thus, their knowledge of self. Gendered racialized heterosexism as interdependent was not lost on Nari. "[I]t's like this combination of both, where it's like, if I get insulted because I am a bad driver, it's not only because I'm Asian, it's because I am a woman as well. When I get fetishized about that, like I said, it's not just because of my race or my gender, but also because of my sexual orientation."

Controlling images depict Asian and Asian American women as docile lotus blossoms who are servile and obedient of their white husbands. This imagery began after the War Brides Act was amended in 1947 that allowed American men serving in the U.S. military to bring Asian

wives to the U.S. upon return (Chou 2012; Espiritu 2007). Korean, Japanese, and Pilipina women tended to marry non-Asian GIs (Espiritu 2007), which led to a sudden normalization of Asian women with white husbands in the U.S. The controlling image of Asian women as exclusively interested in white men continues to be maintained today, reinforcing white men's entitlement to access to Asian women.

The perpetrator's microaggression addressed race, gender, and sexuality concurrently. He assumed that because the women are queer, they would be willing to engage with each other, as well as him, simultaneously. He assumed that because they are Asian American women, they would be willing to engage with him, a straight white man, at all. Finally, he refers to these women as dumplings, a food commonly associated with many Asian ethnicities. This microaggression is completely dependent on the identities of Nari and her friends as queer Asian American women.

Asian American respondents shared that it was not uncommon for ethnic-specific foods to be used as microaggressive pickup lines. Nari's partner Lizzie, also a queer Korean American woman in her mid-20's, similarly identified bars as a place of explicit sexualization and exotification from white men who reduced their ethnic identities to foods. Lizzie sighs as she shares a common experience at bars:

[T]hey would say 'You look so different from other Asian girls.' They would ask 'Where are you from? Where are you really from?' Then they would make comments like, 'You're so exotic' and those things. The exotic thing, yeah that's more so at the bars and stuff like that. So I don't feel unwelcome, it's more like 'Oh where are you from? Oh you're

Korean? I love kimchi. I've dated a lot of Asian girls in my past,' and like, okay why does that matter to me?

These gendered racialized microaggressions bothered Lizzie specifically because she knew white men would not use culturally detailed food pickup lines on white women. "It's not like I even mentioned food. I just said I was Korean." Further, "where are you really from?" serves a specific purpose as a microaggression used against Asian American women. Over half of my Asian American respondents reported hearing this phrase used as a pickup line from straight white men. This common orientalist microaggression implies several expectations: that Asian American women are not local to the area of which they are in, that Asian American women are not really American and thus are exotic, and that Asian American women are willing to share their ethnic background to strangers, which further reflects an entitlement to access. Though this phrase was often used as a pickup line, that was not its only function. Both Asian American and Black women received "where are you really from?" microaggressions from white men and white women who could not comprehend a reality in which women of color are objectively American.

The gendered racialized microaggressions Lizzie shared also reduced Asian American women to a monolithic stereotype, implying that because he had previously dated "a lot of Asian girls," Lizzie would also be interested in him. Lizzie felt white men would not tell white women about a history of dating other white women as a flirtation strategy, but to Asian American women, this microaggression implied an assumption of monoracial ingroup trust. Lizzie was not the only Asian American respondent who learned of white men's dating rosters of Asian women. In some cases, this was used as a microaggressive pickup line, and in others, Asian American

women found out later on in relationships with white men, which raised suspicions of their own tokenization. Annie, a Chinese American community organizer in her early 20's, shares her experience with a white college boyfriend:

I couldn't get, you know, whether or not he was interested in me for who I was or for my ethnicity. And I was like, I ended up breaking up with him, um, and honestly, it was like a 30 to 40% reason why, because I just really couldn't figure it out. I knew that he had dated several Asian American women before me and I was just like, that's already giving me weird vibes; I'm like, I don't know if you only date, you know, Asians, and feel weird. Yeah. So yeah, for sure that's a very vivid experience that I just eventually was like, nah.

A hallmark trait of microaggressions is that they often leave the recipient uncomfortable, yet unable to identify exactly why. Annie's white partner would often bring up "Asian related topics" such as Japanese customs and Asian politics, which even furthered her suspicions and feelings of tokenization. His interests, when paired with his history of dating primarily Asian women, implied to Annie that he fetishized Asian women as romantic partners. In her research on Asian American sexual politics, Chou (2012:92-94) notes that for Asian American women, "it can be difficult to distinguish genuine interest from interest resting on fabricated constructions of an othered person. [...] The difficult part of interracial relationships for people of color is how to differentiate genuine interest from attraction based on preconceived notions." Annie was unable to discern if her college boyfriend *only* dated her because of her race, but she also could not rule

out that it was a possibility. This experience reflects Fricker's (2007) notion of hermeneutical injustice, an inability to grasp one's own experience due to one's marginalization from the dominant framework. The uncertainty affected Annie through several years of dating other white men, uncertain if their attention was rooted in ethnosexual stereotyping or a genuine interest in her as an individual person. "I remember thinking you know or, I think in college feeling like, feeling like I had it differently in a sense because I would always have to question why someone was into me, you know. Was it because of my Asian-ness?" Autumn, a Filipino woman in her early 40's, shared similar skepticism of past partners who had primarily Asian exes. "[I]f we were at the point in the relationship where we would learn about their previous partners, if they had only dated Asian women, it was always... like 'huh, maybe let's think about this.' Which happened a lot. Like enough for me to notice that there is a slew of them."

The sexualization of Asian and Asian American women by white men has long been present in the U.S. (Lackey and Chou 2019; Espiritu 2007; Chou 2012; Hamad 2020). Fetishization as a gendered racialized microaggression operates to suggest women of color are exotic and that sex with these women is distinctly different from other women. Accordingly, Asian and Black women alike are perceived as exciting sexual experiences rather than as individual human beings. Sarah is a multiracial Korean-Chinese and white woman in her early 30's. When she signed up for the dating app OkCupid, she was constantly subjected to sexualized microaggressions from white men that implied her body was exotic and therefore abnormal. She described one incident that stuck with her: "I don't remember the exact wording but I thought it was like, both white and Asian. And it was something about like, 'which of your body parts are the Asian part?' or something, you know?" Yuna, a Korean American lawyer in her early 40's, experienced similar body-focused microassaults from white men at her college. "I

remember in undergraduate years, they would be like, ‘Oh, do you have a sideways vagina?’ And I was like, I don't know what that is. I can assume no, I have a regular vagina.”

Comments alluding that Asian women’s bodies are unlike white women’s bodies are rooted in orientalism and gendered racialized exotification, as well as the subscription of whiteness as normal. This particular realm of exotification of non-white bodies depends on stereotyping sexual characteristics which further casts women of color as the Other. Casting Asian American and other women of color as other serves to justify the ethnosexual and systemic violence inflicted upon them, including rape, invasion, or trafficking (Nagel 2003). There is no better evidence of this than the violent murders of six Asian American spa workers previously discussed, whose murderer viewed them as sexual temptations that must be eliminated (Chappell, Romo, and Diaz 2021).

Though more heavily concentrated for Asian American respondents, Black respondents also shared examples of racialized sexualization through microaggressions perpetuated by white men. The difference in reports of sexualization from white men by Asian American and Black women should be considered in context of controlling imagery. In a study involving who straight white men were open to dating, Hwang (2013) found that 77.1% of white men surveyed were willing to date Asian women, compared to 48.3% who were willing to date Black women. The discrepancy between Asian American and Black women in relation to sexualization from white men can be traced to anti-Black ideologies in which Black women are devalued and portrayed as unattractive, masculine, or angry. Collins (2004) argues that controlling images of Black women, including the angry Black woman and the strong Black woman, are at odds with the idealized notions of femininity. As femininity and masculinity are both raced and co-constructed, Black women are portrayed and perceived as masculine specifically in relation to the femininity that is

afforded to white women (Frankenberg 1993). Though there exists a hierarchy of femininities as well (Schippers 2007), gender is further raced to cast Asian women as ‘double feminized’ due to alleged submissiveness (Zheng 2016).

Accordingly, many of Black women in my respondent pool who shared incidents of white men exotifying and sexualizing them in microaggressions that were similar to those experienced by Asian American respondents were light-skinned Black women. The microaggressions they experienced from white men were directly related to the perceived ambiguity of their light skin tones, including the “where are you from” ascription of exotica. Kala, a multiracial, bisexual Guyanese woman in her late 20’s, shares incidents in which her white husband’s friends and coworkers exotified her body and skin tone:

I remember like, being on the computer like reading his, whatever they’re called, the aim messages before AIM went away. And I would be like, ‘what is he saying about me?’ And I would read messages about like, ‘Yo, what does it look like, like when you F her? Like, your white penis in like her...’ And I was like (silence), but I couldn’t say anything because I had been snooping. But I was like (silence) whenever I would have to be around his friends. When we became a serious couple, and we started working after school, I mean in terms of graduation, his coworkers would comment on pictures of us [...] he would come home and be like, ‘oh yeah, blah, blah, blah, blah, Alicia asked me about this and like, you know, where’s your mom from?’ And I’m like, people are interrogating you about me as an object and you don’t see it. So, this is me after having gone to

grad school, so I'm like, how don't you understand that I'm being objectified?

Though these microaggressions were not directly aimed at my respondents, the impact of the message stuck with them as if they had experienced them first-hand. Kala still felt the internal jab of her husband's friends and coworkers' exotification of her non-whiteness. Microaggressions such as these may occur more frequently than has been researched. In contrast to direct microaggressions, the perceived in-group safety and comfort that white men or women feel when speaking with other white people may result in less self-monitoring. Because these behaviors and comments still convey negative gendered racialized slights, and are still, indirectly, experienced by the (unintended) target, I argue they fall within the definition of microaggressions. However, as they are not directly aimed at my respondents, I refer to these as *proximate microaggressions*.

Sexualization and exotification proximate microaggression experiences perpetuated by white men were common among Black and Asian American women who had white spouses. Jasmine is a light skinned Caribbean-Canadian woman in her late 30's, living in a predominantly white North Carolina town with her white Czech husband. She shared that her husband once admitted his white friend assumed her body was different from those of white women. "[H]e's a really nice guy, but he's like, really ignorant. He asked Jacob if it was different kissing a brown girl and my husband... I was like, it's so stupid, I was like 'did he really say that?'"

A specific difficulty that surrounds proximate microaggressions is that targets are unable to react as the microaggression organically occurs. While respondents may not always choose to engage, the option to resist, identify, and combat general microaggressions in the moment that

they occur empowers some Black and Asian American women as a reassertion of agency (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt 2013). With proximate microaggressions, that immediate agency is unavailable because their experience of the event is delayed from the actual occurrence of the microaggression. I discuss reactions and resistance more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

White men sexualized light skinned Black women in similar ways as Asian American women: as exotic and mysterious. This speaks to the fact that light skinned Black women are still afforded the benefit of some aspects of femininity. In contrast, dark skinned Black women are cast as masculine and aggressive, which situates them at the bottom of the hierarchy of femininities (Landrine 1985; Collins 2000, Schippers 2007). Accordingly, when white men sexualized darker skinned Black women, their comments reflected an assumption that Black women are hypersexual, a trait that is far from the chaste white woman who embodies the ultimate image of femininity, and actually considered an aspect of masculinity (Schippers 2007; Connell 2005; Glenn 2003). Briana, a Black woman who works at a dry cleaner, describes an incident with a white male coworker.

[H]e's always flirting, like 'ooh, I'm about to take you to the back and we're gonna blah blah blah blah' like a joke like that. And it's like, do you think because I'm Black that I would even consider like, I'm just gonna fuck? Is that what this is? I don't... I don't know what it is because I'm not giving anything off. Like, I have a kid and you're married with kids, I'm not interested.

Briana confirmed that her coworker did not speak to his other women coworkers, all white, in this manner. She believed these comments were directed at her exclusively because he perceived her as hypersexual. The coworker microaggressed Briana through sexually explicit comments that implicitly suggested she must be interested in engaging with him due to her identity as a Black woman. His comments reflect a subscription to the controlling image of the Jezebel, a promiscuous Black woman with an insatiable appetite for sex (Collins 2000).

White women and men's perpetuation of gendered racialized microaggressions against Black and Asian American women were distinct from those perpetuated by co-ethnic family and peers. However, both are influenced by, and exist within, a white racial framework that dominates the ideologies and norms of those who subscribe to it. Critical Race Theorists understand the normality of racism, which permeates institutions as well as individual interactions (Delgado and Stefancic 2012).

3.4 Discussion

White supremacy dominates the U.S. through white racial framing, the normalizing of white experiences and subsequent alienation of non-whiteness. Microaggressions are a particularly useful tool of white supremacy in that whiteness is unmarked, and microaggressions are able to maintain white supremacy through subtle actions, comments, behaviors, and ideologies that appear "normal" to those who have internalized a white racial frame. I have identified the unique ways in which white perpetrators microaggress Black and Asian women: white families both tokenize and dismiss non-white women's racialized experiences, white women perform oppression Olympics, white saviorism, and a rigid subscription to controlling images, and white men see women of color as sexualized experiences rather than as complex, individual human beings. Each of these themes reflect the dominance of white racial framing

where women of color are inferior, sexual objects, threatening, or unreasonable, ultimately painting women of color as uncivilized in contrast to white women's civility. These themes emerged regardless of whether the respondent was Black or Asian, queer or straight, and acquainted or unknown to the perpetrators.

Though my respondents experienced gendered, racialized microaggressions from white men and women alike, they repeatedly noted the particular harms of those perpetrated by white women. Gendered racialized microaggressions enacted by white women was an almost universal experience, shared by 33 of my 35 respondents. Respondents expressed frustration with the microaggressions themselves, but further discussed white women's reactions to being confronted about the microaggressions as a source of unrest. Many scholars have noted white women's strategic use of tears and symbolic innocence and virtue to cast women of color as Angry Black Women, Dragon Ladies, and Bad Arabs (Hamad 2020; Frankenberg 1993; DiAngelo 2018; hooks 1984). Thus, the burden faced by my respondents was not just the gendered racialized microaggressions themselves, but also the ways in which they were forced to calculate how to respond when they were microaggressed at all. In the following chapter, I discuss the ways my respondents calculated when and how they would react to, and cope with, being microaggressed through three methods: Passive Responses, Active Responses, and Collective Coping.

4 RESPONDING & COPING WITH GENDERED RACIST MICROAGGRESSIONS

In their 2013 study, Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt identified *Resistance Coping*, *Protective Coping*, and *Community Coping* as thematic strategies that Black women college students use to cope with gendered racial microaggressions. Extending their work, my findings suggest Asian American and Black women alike engage in coping strategies that fall into these themes but include several subthemes that varied slightly from their findings. My respondents engaged in *Resistance Coping*, *Protective Coping*, and *Collective Coping*, which aligned with Lewis and colleagues' sub-thematic finding of *Leaning on One's Support Network* (2013). Further, *Picking One's Battles* was also uncovered as a thematic process for my respondents, and served as both a resistance and protective coping strategy. I discuss this theme in relation to the relationship of the perpetrator and the target, as well as the labor involved in educating perpetrators on microaggressions and gendered racism. A model of assessment in responding to gendered racialized microaggressions is available in Appendix C.

The transactional model of stress and coping, described by psychologists Lazarus and Folkman (1987), theorizes that a two-step cognitive appraisal occurs when an individual experiences a stressful event. The primary appraisal determines whether the situation is threatening or harmful, and if so, the secondary appraisal determines whether actions can be taken to "improve the troubled person-environmental relationship" or cope with the event (Lazarus and Folkman 1987:146). A plethora of research has determined racism as a stressful psychological event (Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams 1999; Brondolo, ver Halen, Libby, and Pencille 2011, among many). This is magnified ten-fold when the racist event can be easily brushed off, as microaggressions typically are (Sue 2007).

Within this model, the first appraisal allows women of color to identify a comment or behavior as a gendered racialized microaggression. The second appraisal requires them to decide how to cope with the event: if they will respond to the microaggression (resistance coping), or if they will walk away (protective coping) (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt 2013). Further, building from Lazarus and Folkman's (1987) work, I argue that reacting to these slights requires a third evaluative component. After identifying the event as a stressor (the first appraisal) and deciding whether or not to confront the microaggression (the second appraisal), a third appraisal must occur in which the target decides if their response will be comprehensive or concise. *Comprehensive responses* include an educational aspect: an explanation of how the microaggression was offensive to the perpetrator, which costs time and energy from the microaggressed. *Concise responses* simply identify the microaggression as offensive to the perpetrator without extending an explanation as to why or how. While concise responses may still require emotional energy due to "emotion memories" (Hochschild 1983), the heightened energy and time that is required in comprehensive responding for further engagement or education is not present in concise responding.

Several scholars have identified the processes by which individuals cope, but most are similar in strategy. For example, in contrast to the resistance coping, protective coping, and community coping processes described above, other scholars have identified "engagement strategies" and "disengagement strategies" to describe attempts to manage stressors through problem-solving, emotional support, and cognitive reframing (Tobin, Holroyd, and Reynolds 1984). Kevin Nadal (2014) developed "A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions," in which he outlined three considerations in which an individual may assess how to react to microaggressions. His work suggests the targets ask: "did the microaggression really occur?",

“should I respond to this microaggression?, and “how should I respond?” Further, he outlines five questions targets may ask after they have determined the microaggressive slight took place. Those questions include an assessment of physical safety, receptivity of the aggressor, a potential change in the relationship with the aggressor, the potential for personal feelings of regret in a passive response and questioning the personal implications of choosing a passive response. Regardless of whether a target responds through active, passive, or collective measures, each event requires women of color to mentally calculate these risks and benefits in choosing their method of responding. Despite the variety of processes and identifiers present in previous research, the general consensus remains consistent that people of color respond to racism as a stressor, and that those responses may be active, passive, or collective.

While coping with, resistance to, and responding to microaggressions are not necessarily one in the same, for the purposes of this study, I discuss these three components in similar light to one another. In the time immediately following the experience of a gendered racist microaggression, Black and Asian American women must have a response if the microaggression is recognized. They may engage in directly responding to the perpetrator or opt for an indirect response, but a response occurs regardless. Resistance, however, is a type of response and is not necessarily compulsory after the recognition of a microaggressive event. Responding, and thus resisting, each involve consideration of the perpetrator of the microaggression, whether directly or indirectly. Coping is an internal response that specifically refers to the ways in which Black and Asian American women protect themselves in the aftermath of gendered racism; for some women, that protection included responses and acts of resistance directly addressing the perpetrators to reestablish their own sentiment of agency in the situation. For others, coping was a private matter, reserved for the target herself, or to be shared

with friends in counter spaces. Thus, as the boundaries between responding, resisting, and coping are permeable, the three actions can be both discrete and indistinct.

4.1 Resistance Coping and Proactive Responding

Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt (2013:61) describe resistance coping as “active strategies that incorporate both cognitive and behavioral ways to deal with the situation.” In their study examining Black women college students, they identified *Using One’s Voice as Power* as a specific subtheme present in resistance coping strategies for Black women college students who experience gendered racialized microaggressions. These coping strategies have been identified by previous research in several fields, also termed *engaged coping* (Tobin, Holroyd, and Reynolds 1984), in which problem-solving behaviors are engaged to manage the stress of a given event. Several of my own respondents spoke of reacting to microaggressive behaviors and comments with active, straightforward responses. I define proactive responding as intentionally identifying the microaggression as such to the perpetrator and responding to the perpetrator of the microaggression shortly following the moment in which it was enacted.

4.1.1 The Call Out and Cut Off: Concise Responding

Throughout my interviews, I found that resistance coping through proactive responding took on two forms: concise responses and comprehensive responses. Women who utilized concise responses would point out that the perpetrator’s comment was rooted in gendered racism, but not participate in further conversation or education about it. Given the emotional energy that is spared in choosing to forego an educational explanation with a potentially defensive perpetrator, concise responses, in some ways, were both acts of resistance and acts of protection. Sunnie, a straight 33-year-old Korean American woman, previously shared that she determined

her response to gendered racialized microaggressions based on the perpetrator's race. When white people microaggressed her, she used concise responding:

I make it a point to respond. Like very succinctly, just to be like, "that's not okay." Or even just like, "fuck you." Yeah, just get people to, like, so that they know you don't just talk to somebody based on what you think about their race.

Sunnie felt a proactive response was warranted when she was microaggressed; rather than letting the comment go unchecked, a proactive response was always warranted. By adopting an active concise response, she also protected herself from the potential defensiveness and denial that often follows accusations of everyday racism and sexism. "I don't invite a conversation. I don't invite people to defend themselves."

Jaia, a 21-year-old bisexual Black woman, also used concise responses when she felt white people tokenized her blackness through gendered racialized microaggressions. Having grown up in a predominantly white family and a predominantly white town, she often met people who, she suspected, had little to no exposure to other Black women. Thus, Jaia was often tokenized as "the Black friend" in these circles. When asked how she responded to this tokenization, she describes concise responding:

I just don't put up with it. If I feel like I'm in that position where people are like, "oh, I got my Black friend," I'm like, "no, like, that's not who I am. If that's who you think that's who I am, we're gonna exit this friendship."

I've learned to like, read the signs. Like, if this person is just using me to get the status that they want. So I just stop it.

Concise responses allowed Jaia and other Black and Asian American women to address the gendered racialized microaggressions they experienced without the added burden of explanation that comprehensive responses require. However, unlike passive responses, concise responses bring attention to the perpetrator's misstep. This provides an opportunity for the perpetrator to take accountability for their microaggression.

Due to their ambiguity, microaggressions typically leave targets wondering if the slight occurred, was intentional, or happened at all (Sue 2007). Proactively responding (whether concise or comprehensive) allowed Black and Asian American women to regain agency in naming their own experiences of marginalization, an important tenet in Critical Race and Intersectional theories (Collins 2000; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). For some respondents, that sense of restorative agency was crucial, empowering, and attainable through active responding. Serena is a 23-year-old, straight, biracial Black woman living in California. When she perceives a gendered racialized microaggression, she proactively responds, regardless of who enacted it:

Any even slight, like a slight feeling that I feel like someone is stereotyping me, I will call it out. And like I said before, even if they weren't... (pause) I would rather be wrong, and be uncomfortable for that two seconds of having like, a moment where I was wrong, when I called someone out, than like, having to walk away and be like, "wow, I think I

was just stereotyped really, I think that person spoke to me like that because of x y and z, about myself.”

For Serena, proactively responding to microaggressions was an act of self-care; she knew if she did not confront the perpetrator in the moment, she would agonize over the incident for weeks. Further, unlike Sunnie, by proactively responding to the microaggression immediately after its occurrence, Serena provides an opportunity for the perpetrator to defend their remark or action – admitting that she misunderstood the event was still more tolerable to her than lamenting over the microaggression that went unaccounted for. Still, Serena typically chose concise responses over comprehensive ones, another protective strategy utilized to prevent expending extensive emotional energy. She shared, “white people around [will be] like, ‘yes, you have to educate.’ I’m like, that’s not my job. Like you guys are the ones who are standing around being like ‘this is a great conversation!’ Like, no! You’re like, not emotionally disturbed by this conversation!” Here, Serena echoes Annie, Amy, and many others’ experience with the emotional cost of educating perpetrators about gendered racialized microaggressions.

4.1.2 The Emotional Cost of Comprehensive Responding

Existing research speaks to the emotional burden of experiencing microaggressions, but the emotional burden of *responding* to microaggressions is specifically unique. Comprehensively responding to gendered racialized microaggressions requires emotional energy that not all respondents were willing to exert. Thus, picking and choosing their battles on whether or not to respond served as a protective measure against expending energy that they perceived would be wasted on some perpetrators, or, as Annie stated, “an act of love” toward others. Shareese, a straight, 21-year-old Black woman, described this exertion of energy as futile: “I just sit there in

silence. It's just like, why do I want to waste my time talking to a brick wall?" When my respondents determined that comprehensively responding to a gendered racialized microaggression was warranted, the energy spent was no less taxing, as comprehensive responses often require a set-up of educating the perpetrator on what microaggressions are and how they are gendered and racialized, even if not immediately obvious. Kala, a bisexual multiracial Guyanese woman in her late 20's, shared:

I used to feel like I had to educate every single person and like, get them to understand completely and I would cry. [...] But I realized that like, all this emotional labor I was putting into like, addressing microaggressions was more about convincing the other person that I was a human being. And now, I have all the time to make you feel deeply aware that what you've done or said is racist, is ableist, is homophobic, is transphobic. And to me, it's a political project and no longer this emotional appeal, this call to 'no, I'm a person, and I deserve humanity.' Instead, it's, 'I'm a person I deserve humanity and you owe it to me and I'm not gonna let you get away with pretending to be ignorant and like feigning this 'oh, I didn't know, like I was just joking.' When it comes to like my emotional investments, I used to think that I had to like, be available. Then I went the other opposite end of the binary and was like 'Google is free.'

Kala spent countless hours and energy attempting to educate perpetrators of microaggressions on why their comments and behaviors were harmful, engaging in

comprehensive responses that often brought her to the point of tears. For perpetrators to then claim ignorance only furthered Kala's upset. Today, she recognizes that the act of comprehensively responding to microaggressions was particularly draining due to more than simply the time and energy it required: her humanity depended on it. Thus, she felt obligated to engage every opportunity, regardless of the energy it robbed her of.

The denial of Black women's humanity is a deeply American tradition, evident in the selling, rape, and abuse of Black women during chattel slavery, the long history of experimental surgeries and forced sterilization of Black women, the erasure of Black women in women's and Black rights movements, and the disproportionate prosecution of Black women, to name a few (Roberts 1997; Collins 2000). Today, Black women and other women of color are repeatedly gaslit as the realities of their historical oppressions are denied or forgotten, left out of most American History classes or common knowledge. Thus, the burden of educating others about this significant history, and its ties to modern oppression, tends to fall onto women of color, who often feel they have to "be available," as Kala felt, to provide teaching moments at every educational opportunity. Kala's experience reflects a deeply recognized feeling among many women of color. In her memoir *Minor Feelings* (2020:18), Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong states, "Patiently educating a clueless white person about race is draining. It takes all your powers of persuasion. Because it's more than a chat about race. It's ontological. It's like explaining to a person why you exist, or why you feel pain, or why your reality is distinct from their reality. Except it's even trickier than that. Because the person has all of Western history, politics, literature, and mass culture on their side, proving that you don't exist." When the emotional weight of educating others became too much for Kala to carry, she reframed her

approach. She now views engaging these conversations as a “political project” rather than an emotional one, and no longer feels the obligation to engage every time.

Kala’s comment, “Google is free,” reflects a common sentiment among women of color who felt the burden of addressing microaggressions relied on educating others’ about the ways in which gendered racism can be subtle. Despite Kala’s intention to reframe the responding of microaggressions as a political project rather than an emotional one, the nature of political projects that involve the intersections of race and gender is that they are inherently personal for women of color (Lorde 1984; Crenshaw 1991). Thus, comprehensively responding to gendered racialized microaggressions and other forms of gendered racism costs women of color a specific type of emotional energy that is not required of men and white women. By noting “Google is free,” Kala points to the fact that educating oneself through existing resources (websites, essays, and blog posts written by women of color and accessible through search engines) is costless, both monetarily (for the microaggressor) and emotionally (for the microaggressed). Ciara echoed Kala’s frustration with the expectation that she would educate others on how their behavior was marginalizing, when other resources cost less emotional energy. This was especially onerous immediately after experiencing a microaggression, wherein emotion memories of other acts of gendered racism were also provoked for Ciara. She shared:

I don’t want to recall all the bad things that white people have done to me right now; I’m tired. I’ve dealt with a white person today that made me upset, I don’t want to do it. And I don’t want to do it so that you can be more informed. That’s not fair. If you want to be informed, read a book,

watch a movie, google it, watch some interviews, there is too much knowledge at your fingertips for you to use me.

Ciara previously shared that she chose when and how to comprehensively respond based on her relationship with the perpetrator and the social environment within which the microaggression occurred. Here, we can see *why* picking and choosing was necessary, specifically related to the emotional burden, emotional memory, and energy cost that comprehensive responding takes. Ravyn noted, “the biggest thing is like, having to feel like I have to educate people. And like, I know like, they, they can't know what they don't know necessarily, but also it's a lot of emotional labor to feel like you have to keep educating everybody you interact with.” Here, Ravyn acknowledges that familiarity of microaggressions is not universal, and that enactors of microaggressions may simply not know their messages are harmful. Still, ignorance of microaggressions does not absolve perpetrators of harmful messaging that buttresses white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, and the burden of explaining that harm, once again, becomes a burden that women of color are expected to carry.

4.2 “Think of it as An Act of Love:” Picking Battles

4.2.1 *Relationship with the Perpetrator*

The phrase “you need to pick your battles” refers to the belief that not all events of wrongdoing should, or need to, be addressed. Picking one’s battles serves as a protective function, both physically and mentally (Houshmand, Spanierman and De Stafano 2019). In an interview about microaggressive responses, Dr. Alisia Tran noted most people do allow many microaggressions to slide. “They have no choice, they’re so common, and you can’t fight every battle – but these things can stay with you or build up” (Yoon 2020). Actively responding to

racism and sexism costs psychological and emotional labor and can also be dangerous, as challenging white supremacy can risk the loss of jobs, security dignity, or even life (Chou and Feagin 2008). By picking one's battles in responding to microaggressions, my respondents were required to assess the situation to determine if addressing the microaggressive act directly with the perpetrator would be a beneficial task (see Figure 1).

After determining a gendered racialized microaggression had occurred (the first appraisal in a transactional model of stress and coping), Asian American and Black women respondents often relied on assessing several factors to determine if and how they would respond (the second appraisal). This second appraisal determines if the "battle" is "picked" or not, and often reflected the considerations outlined by the *Guide to Responding to Microaggressions* (Nadal 2014). Specifically, this second appraisal required my respondents to assess their relationship with the individual perpetrator. For some women, if the perpetrator was a close friend or relative, the respondent felt more comfortable addressing the microaggression head-on. Ravyn, a 30-year-old Black woman, feels second chances are warranted if friends engaged in microaggressions toward her, but only upon contingency:

I think it honestly depends on how invested I am in the relationship that I have with that person. If it is a financial relationship, meaning I'm their customer, then I just don't choose to spend my money in that space anymore. If it is a friend, in the past I have like sat down and had very mature conversations with people about like, 'this is why this was not okay.' And, you know, if they respect what I'm saying and can move on move forward then we can remain friends. In the past I've not been able to

remain friends with the people who didn't take those conversations appropriately. In a workspace with my supervisor, I've quit jobs before.

To Ravyn, some relationships are worth saving after a microaggressive event by addressing the offense with the perpetrator directly; a friend's microaggressive faux pas can be forgiven if they are open and willing to take accountability during this confrontation (Ravyn's comprehensive response). Unfortunately, not all people were willing to accept this grace. Ravyn described taking protective measures, including terminating friendships, jobs, and patronage as a result of experiencing gendered racialized microaggressions that went unaccounted for. Annie, a straight, 22-year-old Chinese community organizer, also picks her battles depending on her relationship with the perpetrator and perceived the use of the comprehensive response as reserved for those worthy of salvaging their relationship. She claims:

If you care enough, you have to pick your battles, right? You can't confront every single time; it's too draining, right? So when you do choose to confront, like, think of it as an act of love, that you care enough about this person, you care enough about this relationship, that you care enough about what that means to you, that you choose to confront.

Annie knew confronting every microaggression with a comprehensive, or even a concise, response would be “too draining,” and saw expending the emotional effort required of comprehensive responses as “an act of love.” To Annie, this specifically meant her parents, sister, and close friends. As discussed in previous chapters, gendered racist microaggressions are

not strictly enacted by strangers; family and close friends do engage in and perpetuate gendered racism against Black and Asian American women daily. Though not impossible, it would be isolating and unrealistic to cut ties with every enactor of gendered racism upon their first offense. In speaking about the choice to proactively respond, Kevin Nadal told New York Times journalist Hahna Yoon (2020), “If the person who committed the microaggression is in your life, it can always be worth bringing up. In the same way that a family member or friend may hurt you and it takes years to recover, the impact of a microaggression can be long-lasting, too.” Thus, Annie and Ravyn alike were willing to expend their time and energy to address these offenses with some perpetrators, carefully picking their battles to determine which confrontations would be constructive.

Choosing to respond to microaggressions directly with the perpetrator is not without risks; pointing out the sexist and racist undertones of a microaggressive comment or behavior is often met with resistance from the perpetrator (Sue et al. 2007). Still, respondents saw this risk as an opportunity to salvage a relationship with someone who may be in their daily lives. Throughout our interview, Amy, a 32-year-old, straight Vietnamese Pacific Islander, often shared her white mother-in-law’s countless gendered racialized microaggressions toward her. When asked if she responded to every microaggressive comment made, she shares:

It depends. Obviously, her relationship is really valuable to me, and so I'll take the risk. But like, other people, I'm like, ahh (laughs), I don't have the energy. You know, and sometimes I get to that point with my mother-in-law, where I'm like, look, I don't have the energy to talk to you about this anymore.”

Amy identifies comprehensively responding to microaggressions as risk-taking, knowing she may be met with defensive denial from her white mother-in-law. Still, she is willing to take this risk with her mother-in-law in particular, with whom she finds value in their relationship. Further, like Annie, Amy specifically notes the energy that is required of women of color to talk about racism, sexism, and microaggressions in general, and the expending of this particular burden is largely dependent on the race of the perpetrator.

4.2.2 Race of the Perpetrator

As outlined in chapter two, Black and Asian American communities perpetuate gendered racialized microaggressions regularly onto Black and Asian American women. Many of my respondents noted that the race of the perpetrator is often considered when determining which microaggressions are chosen to confront, in both the second and third appraisal. Mya is a 24-year-old queer Guyanese woman living in Georgia. Her light skin tone and her hair's naturally loose curl texture receive many compliments from other Black women, which Mya views as a result of internalized white standards of beauty. She notes:

With Black and brown people, I feel like I have more patience, and I care more about understanding why something that they've done was wrong or offensive or could be taken that way, in the sense that I am not going to explain my humanity to white people. I definitely used to do that, but I think I learned as a survival mechanism. Just put an X by their name and keep it moving. So I will call their ass out in the moment with white people [...] versus with a Black or Brown person, if they do something

like that. Even with compliments about hair, I have this desire to engage in the conversation

For Mya, white perpetrators of microaggressions typically warranted a confrontation, but not a subsequent conversation, reflecting the energy required in both responses are not mutually exclusive. Further, she describes this second effort as “explaining [her] humanity to them,” elucidating the emotional and psychological burden that these conversations have. In contrast, she sought to engage Black and brown perpetrators of microaggressions in conversations about internalized colorism and misogyny, in line with Annie’s sentiment that this engagement is “an act of love” for fellow Black and brown people. Sunnie, a straight, 33-year-old Korean American woman, also finds herself more willing to forgive other people of color who perpetrated gendered racialized microaggressions toward her. She shares:

I think that I'm much gentler with other people of color. Because my kind of thought process is, is that like, if they think about it, if they knew, kind of where, where these assumptions that they're kind of exposing are coming from, they would go, “oh, people do that to me,” or “I've had a similar experience.” So I try to explain a little bit more, if they are people who I know.

Like Mya, Sunnie recognized that internalized racism and misogyny may be contributing factors to the ideologies that cause gendered racialized microaggressions to be enacted by people of color. Throughout my interviews, several women shared similar sentiments on how they chose

which microaggressions to respond and react to. Black and Asian American women alike were unlikely to fully engage white people, and specifically white strangers or acquaintances, who microaggressed them. Instead, my respondents would either identify the microaggression to the perpetrator without extending room for additional conversation, or mentally note that the microaggression occurred, and “put an X by their name and keep it moving.”

4.2.3 The Social Environment

A respondent’s relationship with the perpetrator was not the only determining factor when choosing whether or not to engage in addressing a gendered racialized microaggressions; the setting within which the incident occurred also played a role. Ciara, a Black, straight woman in her 20’s, notes that her decision to respond is dependent on several factors, including who is involved in the conversation:

I think it’s a couple things; I think about my relationship with that person, as in, is it worth it? Am I going to have more interactions with them where this could come up, or is this the first time I’m meeting them in passing, and I’m not going to be bothered by them anymore? So my relationship with the person, the frequency that we would have future interactions as well. And then I think also the severity of the comment. Sometimes it’s also dependent on if I’m the only Black person in the conversation. So if I stand up, are there others who, worst case scenario, could support me. Or is this a hill I’m going to have to stand on by myself. So sometimes it’s based off that.

Here, Ciara notes that she is more likely to address a microaggressive comment or behavior from perpetrators that she would have future interactions with, strengthening that one's relationship with the perpetrator plays a significant role in deciding. However, Ciara not only picked her battles depending on her relationship with the perpetrator; the physical and social environment she occupied further determined her response. If Ciara was the only Black person in the conversation, she was more likely to let the microaggression go unchallenged. Because microaggressions are easily excused as not-racist, she knew that accusing a perpetrator of engaging in a subtle racist remark would be difficult if others were not there to validate her claims. Further, Ciara also believes that other Black people would identify the offense in similar ways as she did. Briana, a 33-year-old pansexual Black woman, shares a similar take:

[I]t's just me here and I don't want to have, to have to prove to you that what you said was racist. You know, I don't feel like having to be the wrong person here for everyone to be like 'but it wasn't like that way' and I have to give everybody a history lesson. I hate that.

Like Ciara, the social environment within which the microaggressive event took place determined whether Briana would choose to address the comment with the perpetrator. This not only reflects the community coping strategies employed by almost all of my respondents; it also speaks to the emotional energy that responding to microaggressions requires for Black and Asian American women. Experiencing microaggressions, by and of itself, is emotionally, psychologically, and mentally taxing for women and people of color (Sue et al. 2007). When and

how to respond to them, however, takes additional energy and has unique consequences and advantages for women of color, depending on the approach.

4.3 Protective Coping and Passive Responding Relationship with the Perpetrator

In contrast to proactive responding, Asian American and Black women often reacted to microaggressions through more passive methods as a self-protective coping strategy. Protective coping strategies, sometimes termed disengaged coping (Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, and Wigal 1989) are the that women cognitive and behavioral ways of color engage to reduce the stressful cumulative effect of gendered racialized microaggressions (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt 2013). The need for protective coping strategies speaks to the harmful nature of gendered racism in general; respondents felt the need for protection from the experience of the microaggression itself, as well as from the lingering psychological effects.

Forty percent of my respondent pool confirmed their use of passive responses to gendered racialized microaggressions at some point in time. My findings indicate that Asian American and Black women passively respond to gendered racialized microaggressions in two distinctive ways: by walking away from the interaction and by altering their behavior to reduce the likelihood they will be microaggressed. Within this second subtheme of altering behavior, respondents altered food they ate, the physical locations they occupied, and the people they interacted with.

4.3.1 *Walking Away*

Walking away after a microaggression occurred was a common passive response to gendered racialized microaggressions. I define *walking away* both literally and figuratively; the respondent may have physically walked away from the perpetrator after they experienced a gendered racialized microaggression or may have figuratively walked away from their

relationship with the perpetrator. Black and Asian American women alike utilized walking away as a protective strategy after experiencing gendered racialized microaggressions.

Nari, a 22-year-old queer Korean American woman, and her group of Korean American women friends, often spent time at Atlanta-area bars. Throughout our interview, Nari shared many incidents of gendered racialized microaggressions occurring at these locations, primarily from white men, including comments such as, “Looks like I’m going to be having dumplings for dinner tonight.” When I asked Nari how she typically responds to gendered racialized microaggressions, she describes walking away as the easiest and least-risky response:

Because I feel like educating them is harder than to just walk away from it. But then here's the thing: they expect me to be okay with it at the same time. Because, and I completely feel like, this is the reason why some Black women can't lash out. They can't be angry because they know like, ugh, “did I get you angry now? There's no reason to be angry.” It's a sense where like, I can't say anything because they're like, “oh don't worry I wasn't trying to offend you.” But you were, and that was rude. Me asking for a half assed apology is not worth it.

Here, Nari alludes to the emotional energy required in educating someone through comprehensive responding, but further describes an entitlement she often perceives in the perpetrators that make proactive responses less worthwhile. To Nari, proactively responding, whether concisely or comprehensively, to a gendered racialized microaggression would invite these perpetrators to mock, patronize, and gaslight her.

Further, Nari spoke to the way Black women are typecast as loud, angry, and disagreeable, noting this stereotype may prevent some Black women from proactive responding if they were microaggressed in the same ways. The influence of controlling images seemed to make a significant impact on Nari, who also described the docile, subservient controlling image of Asian American women as a reason for her use of passive responding. “Especially with the way that media portrays everything, it's hard for us to like, to say stuff back. So like if we're at a bar and it's uncomfortable for us, we are going to move, we are going to leave to another bar.”

Still, Nari seemingly felt some guilt about letting these remarks go unchallenged. Throughout our interview, she repeatedly commented, “I know I should,” when I asked if she ever used proactive responding when she is microaggressed. She shared, “I know that us just walking away from the issue isn't any better, but for us, in that moment, sometimes it's better for us to walk away. Especially in unsafe areas like bars.” However, knowing her own energy would be spent, only to receive a “half-assed,” non-genuine apology, was simply not worth the emotional cost. Like Nari, Julie, a 29-year-old queer Chinese American woman, also seemingly felt some guilt over using passive responses. When I asked if she ever actively responded to the gendered racialized microaggressions she experienced, she shared, “Probably not as much as I should, like, if I if I do I call it out in like a more of a subtle way. [...] Sometimes – most of the time – I just try to like, fucking just, back out of the conversation because I just don't want to deal with them. But I probably should call it out more often than not.”

Fear of a perpetrator's reaction to a proactive response, or confrontation, was a driving factor in my respondents' decisions to use passive responses. When asked if she would ever engage a proactive response, Remi, a 19-year-old straight, biracial Black woman, shared, “I would definitely want to, but I probably wouldn't if it were a stranger just because I'm, like, so

passive, and I wouldn't want them to, like, get angry or really hurt me or yell at me or something.” Like Nari, Remi acknowledged that perpetrators of gendered racialized microaggressions may react aggressively if they felt accused of sexism or racism. Julie, too, considered the perpetrator’s feelings when gauging how to respond; she recalls an event in which a white man mistook her for another Asian American woman named Marlene:

R: [He] was like, “Oh, hey, you remember when you when you ref[ere]ed my daughter?” And like, had a picture of Marlene up, and was showing it to me. And I was like, “Yeah, that... that was great! See you later!”
(laughs)

I: Okay, so you played along with it?

R: I just, I didn’t want to embarrass him. Because like, that would have been pretty bad for him because he had a picture. So yeah, I usually play it off and just wander away.

The irony of this particular consideration is that the targets of the microaggressions, Black and Asian American women, are considering the feelings and reactions of the perpetrators seemingly more so than the perpetrators consider the targets’ feelings and reactions before enacting the microaggression at all.

Walking away also served as a protective coping method that allowed Black and Asian American women time to consider how they may respond to the microaggression in the future. This was often the case when my respondents knew they would have future interactions with the

perpetrator. When Briana experienced gendered racialized microaggressions from strangers, she typically used passive responding as an opportunity to learn more about the perpetrator and their ideologies. She describes her typical reaction:

I tend to be less confrontational, just to hear what people have to say, because it's like, I can't learn what to argue against if I'm not listening to you. So sometimes I will correct people to get into their ass, but a lot of times now I don't, because I want to hear what you have to say and how far this is gonna go.

Rather than addressing the gendered racialized microaggression to the perpetrator in a proactive response, Briana's strategy was to learn from these experiences to better understand where the perpetrator of the microaggressions ideologically stood. She believed this would better equip her to engage proactive responses later on in the relationship, if gendered racialized microaggressions continued to occur.

4.3.2 Intentional Behaviors, Locations, and Company

At times, respondents used coping strategies to protect themselves from the discomfort of experiencing microaggressions by altering their behavior. Of course, as demonstrated in previous chapters, Black and Asian American women were rarely in spaces where they were fully protected from gendered racialized microaggressions, even when occupying predominantly non-white and/or non-male spaces. Still, my respondents shared many examples of ways they adjusted their behavior to minimize the likelihood of experiencing gendered racialized microaggressions.

For respondents who chose this method of protective coping, altering one's behavior included changing their spoken language, abstaining from certain foods or other cultural norms, and self-monitoring their tone of voice. Though this strategy was employed as a measure of protection from being microaggressed about language, tone of voice, and cultural norms, the onus of altering their natural behavior, and the energy required to enact that change, was still on Black and Asian American women.

Black women who utilized this tactic to avoid gendered racialized microaggressions pointed to the controlling image of the Angry Black Woman (Collins 2000). This controlling imagery characterizes Black women as loud, aggressive, irrational, and unjustifiably angry (Collins 2000); Black women respondents attempted to avoid solidifying this stereotype to others by altering their own behaviors considered similar to the trope. Zenia is a 19-year-old, straight, Black woman working on her bachelor's degree in Atlanta, GA. She considers herself a social justice activist and spent most of her teenage years advocating for racial justice. In our interview, Zenia described how her advocacy was construed as irrational anger by peers and strangers alike, evident in the gendered racialized microaggressions she experienced that implied she embodied the Angry Black Woman trope. As she got older, she began altering her tone and calls to advocacy to avoid fulfilling that stereotype. She shares:

When I first started my activism, I was very radicalized, but I feel like people exaggerated it a lot. They would pitch me as an angry Black woman, especially because I'm dark skinned. So that was a big thing in the early high school years. And it got to a point where I toned it down,

subdued myself for other people. Because people would ostracize me so much, talk down to me so much for it.

Nuru and Arendt (2019) identified *tone policing* as a specific racial microaggression that women of color activists experienced from white women. Tone policing is a communication practice that “prioritize[s] the comfort of the privileged over the oppression of the disenfranchised” (Nuru and Arendt 2019). Simply put: women of color are expected to discuss injustice in a calm, collected, and digestible fashion; otherwise, they are viewed as angry and irrational like the Angry Black Woman. Zenia spoke of both blatant and subtle comments from her peers that communicated they viewed her as fulfilling the Angry Black Woman controlling image. Further, she explained her dark skin tone was an additional factor to navigate in her attempts to oppose the embodiment of the Angry Black Woman. Zenia admitted she may have exerted more proactive responses to microaggressions as a younger teenager, but as she aged, she typically employed more protective strategies, such as changing her tone of voice and “water[ing] yourself down”: coping strategies to protect herself from being microaggressed.

Though Black women with dark skin are more likely to be categorized as the Angry Black Woman than lighter complected Black women (Collins 2000), Mya, a 24-year-old, queer, multiracial Black Guyanese woman with light skin, also felt she altered her behavior at times to avoid personifying the Angry Black Woman controlling imagery. Similar to Zenia, Mya had been active in social justice and anti-racism work since she was a teenager. Though she previously noted she uses proactive responding when microaggressive perpetrators are white, she also shared that she has altered her tone of voice to appear less hostile, a technique utilized by many women and people of color referred to as *code switching*. Mya’s light skin did not save her

from gendered racialized microaggressions; after receiving countless implied messages that she was “too much” in her critical activism, Mya now constantly self-monitors to ensure she is not exemplifying the Angry Black Woman stereotype:

I overthink everything, all of my actions, everything. In some spaces, just letting things go, because I can't be bothered for that to be added to the reason of why people think I'm problematic and “too much,” this, that, and the other. Which I also think is semi-growth and semi-toning it down.

Mya admitted that there are times when she believes proactively responding to a microaggression is warranted but does not engage them to avoid being cast as the Angry Black Woman. She viewed picking her battles as somewhat reflective of personal maturity, but also recognized that she sometimes altered her behavior specifically to avoid being typecast as this controlling imagery.

Mollified tone of voice to avoid fulfilling controlling imagery was not the only way women of color self-monitored speaking; Asian American women shared attempts to disprove the forever foreign stereotype through altering their spoken language and other cultural norms in certain spaces. Nari, fluent in both Korean and English, admitted that she only spoke English in predominantly white spaces, even when she was speaking to Korean friends. She shared, “Even the way we talk, you know? When I'm in American establishments I will speak English. Korean places, I'll speak Korean. [...] And most of the Americanized spaces that I go to, I take a lot of ABC friends rather than FOB friends.” Here, Nari's strategy to avoid gendered racialized microaggressions influences more than just her self-monitoring of which language she, herself,

will use; she goes so far as to calculate which of her friends will contribute to forever foreign controlling imagery (FOB, “Fresh-Off-the-Boat” friends) and which will appear more Americanized (ABC, “American-Born-Chinese” friends). To Nari, the likelihood of being gendered and racially microaggressed was lesser when she was with other Asian Americans who speak English as a first language, and avoiding the risk of experiencing microaggressions was important enough to her that it influenced

Of all 35 respondents I interviewed, Nari shared the most attempts at protective coping through passive responses. She regularly made intentional choices about where and when she allowed herself to participate in Korean cultural norms. At her home in a largely Korean suburb of Atlanta, Nari ate Korean foods, spoke Korean to her parents and siblings, and celebrated Korean holidays and traditions, which she preferred to US-centric foods and customs. However, these norms were left behind when she traveled into the city for school and work. When I asked Nari if she ever brought Korean food to school, she shared, “I just don't bring it because I eat in the library and I know it won't be the most pleasant smelling. I only know my Korean friends will understand that.”

Food was an oft-discussed topic in many of my interviews, wherein my respondents were told their food “smelled like shit” (Clara), “looked like shit” (Alicia), or was unpleasantly odorous (Chelsea, Kala). For Asian American women, food was both nurturing and alienating: a tribute to their ancestors, symbolic of parental affection, and simultaneously, a fragrant conformation to others that they were, in fact, “not American.” Specifically avoiding certain foods in public spaces was a common tactic used by Black and Asian American women alike in a protective coping strategy to avoid being microaggressed, but was especially prevalent in Asian American women’s stories. Nari notes the specific smell of Korean foods, characteristically rich

in chili powder, garlic, fish sauce, and fermentation, and describes it as unpleasant. Autumn, a straight, 42-year-old Pilipina woman, is also hyperaware of the smell of her food, after an incident she experienced in childhood. She recalls:

I definitely have felt like, oh, I have to edit what I do. So when we first moved, the first year in the States was in San Francisco, and I must have been in first grade. I told my mom I really want to bring sardines to school for lunch. I really loved it, apparently. And I was like, I want to bring sardines to school, I want to bring it. So I brought it and my classmates reacted as you could imagine, I mean, they're six-year old's, first graders. You know, it's very smelly it's very fragrant.

As a first grader, Autumn learned that the Pilipinx foods she was accustomed to were unnatural in the US, and that altering her diet in public would protect her, in some capacity, from the shame she felt bringing sardines in her lunch that day. Humiliation of non-white cultural norms such as food is a tool utilized by white supremacy to shame Asian Americans and other non-whites into assimilating to white, US culture. Charlotte, a 27-year-old, bisexual, Taiwanese Japanese woman, described the shame surrounding non-Americanized food as “the classic immigrant story”:

[Y]ou go to school with like, in my case, it's these like fish chips that I really like. But like, fish chips are weird! And so, I would try to eat my

fish chips really quickly, like in between classes so no one else could see my fish chips.

Unlike Nari and Autumn, who avoid bringing Asian foods into non-Asian spaces at all, Charlotte was unwilling to give up her beloved fish chips. Still, she utilized protective measures, eating them in secret, to avoid negative comments about them from non-Asians.

Black women also discussed altering behaviors around food to avoid being microaggressed. Black Caribbean women and recent African diaspora women shared sentiments similar to Asian American women, wherein the fragrance of their food confirmed forever foreign ideologies from non-Caribbean microaggressors. Black ADOS women, however, discussed food stereotypes as symbolic of their oppression. Similar to Charlotte, Andrea, a 32-year-old queer Black woman living in Massachusetts, is unwilling to deprive herself of foods she loved, yet is intentional about the foods she eats in public spaces to avoid fulfilling an anti-Black stereotype. She shares:

I literally will not eat fried chicken, or like watermelon, in public, seriously. I was like, I have to be happy when I have good friend chicken up here because there's no good fried chicken here. But I was talking to my friend and I was like yeah, I literally will not eat any of that stuff in public. [...] I just don't eat that stuff in public. And I remember that whole Popeye's shit happening, me and my friend got Popeye's and we just sat in the car. Because we're like, No, we should probably wait 'til we get home.

Watermelon and fried chicken became stereotypes of Black ADOS diets during and immediately after chattel slavery, when chicken was a cheap and easy-to-cultivate source of meat, and when freed Black farmers grew and sold watermelon after emancipation (Black 2014; Demby 2013). Since both foods are typically eaten with one's hands, they furthered controlling imagery of Black people as lazy, unclean, and uncivilized, as "table manners are a way of determining who is worthy of respect or not" (Demby 2013). Though surrounded by others eating the same fried chicken in a fast-food restaurant, Andrea and her friend intentionally chose to eat their food at home to prevent confirming this stereotype to others in the restaurant.

Alicia, a 26-year-old, straight Guyanese woman, also changed her usual behavior to avoid fulfilling a different controlling image after receiving frequent gendered racialized microaggressions in public: that of the poor, Black, single mother. Alicia is coupled, but unmarried, to the father of her toddler Damani. She does not wear a ring nor other outward displays that signal her relationship with Damani's father. Microaggressions are not just verbal; looks of judgment, sighs, and other body language are also subtle messages that communicate Black women are viewed as "lesser than" (Sue et al. 2007). Before Damani began attending daycare, Alicia intentionally grocery shopped at night to avoid larger crowds witnessing her use of a WIC (Women Infant and Children) card at check-out. She describes her typical experience:

So the cashier has to go through everything, make sure it's actually WIC before I sign off on it stuff like that and then scan it, write the amount. I sign it off, and it's like a lengthy process, like whatever. And I'll have my groceries or whatever, and I'll pull out like, the WIC or whatever and I've heard people groan that are behind me in the aisle. Ugh! [...] I try my best

to ignore them but that has affected me not going when there's a lot of people in the store. Especially if I have Damani with me. So before Damani was in daycare and I would have to go to the store, I just sometimes wouldn't go to the store.

To Alicia, the groans from other customers were not just symbolic of impatience; they communicated that these customers saw her as fulfilling a racist, sexist stereotype. When she would previously grocery shop at any time of day, after having her child and qualifying for WIC assistance, Alicia altered her routine to evade the risk of experiencing the microaggressive looks and groans.

For Black and Asian American women, protecting themselves from being microaggressed went beyond changing their daily behaviors; my respondents were frequently intentional about the people they interacted with and the specific locations they occupied as well. As evident in previous chapters, gendered racialized microaggressions occur across locations, not only in predominantly white spaces. However, my respondents felt they would be less likely to experience gendered racism if they were intentional about their surroundings and their occupation of white space. White space refers to settings and situations in which common behaviors are judged negatively and relevant to the race of non-white people (Anderson 2015). The intentionality about space and company spanned workplaces, grocery stores, gas stations, neighborhoods, and even places of work. Ravyn shares that she left a job in Arkansas because the gendered racism she experienced was never acknowledged by her supervisors:

I was a contractor to the state, and nobody at my home base was like, acknowledging that I was experiencing racism and sexism, like, and so I ended up having to leave just for my own sanity because I was like, falling into depression, into a depressive pit. And didn't want to like, wake up in the morning, let alone go into work.

Ravyn points to the emotional impact of the racism and sexism she experienced at work; it caused her to become psychologically depressed and affected her willingness to go to work. Here, it is clear Ravyn's depression was a result of the gendered racism she experienced, *and* the lack of acknowledgement of it from her coworkers and superiors. Microaggressions not only marginalize women of color through the inherent racist and sexist messages they convey, but also work twofold in that their innocuousness allows them to slip by the definitions of overt racism and sexism without consequence. Ravyn previously shared she was more than willing to spend her own emotional energy on comprehensive responding to a gendered racialized microaggression, but after repeatedly facing denial and gaslighting about her experiences, she felt her attempts to proactively respond were ineffective. Finally, she walked away from the job, protecting herself from that particular work environment. At the time of our interview, Ravyn was employed at a Historically Black College in Atlanta, GA. Though she still experienced gendered racialized microaggressions in this space, they did not occur every day. "[I]t still feels heavy, but it's a little bit lighter than when I had to endure it on a day to day, literally like every day I'm having to hear it. It's like somebody keeps poking you over and over and over and it's like, one cut, not so much, but you get 1000 cuts, then you're bleeding out."

The elaborate strategies Black and Asian American women used to protect themselves from microaggressions speaks to the harm that they cause; these women would rather eat alone, deprive themselves of food they love, constantly code switch, and leave salaried jobs, than to risk the experience of being microaggressed. Of course, altering their behaviors, locations, and company kept only mitigated the risk of experiencing microaggressions in part, and only certain types of microaggressions – despite taking precautions to change their jobs, language, tone, clothing, social circles, or hobbies, Black and Asian American women could not change the fact that they were Black and Asian American women.

Vanesia is a 20-year-old, straight, Nigerian American woman working on her bachelor's degree. When Vanesia was a child, her single mother moved their family to a predominantly white city in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, where she recalled being referred to as “Oreo,” “Nubian Queen,” and comments about her hair being made from white peers. Vanesia describes her attempts to avoid such gendered racialized microaggressions:

Since I've been in college and can choose which spaces I want to be in, I've avoided primarily white spaces as much as I can because I don't want to deal with it. [...] I don't really try to have white friends because I know that there's going to be an instance where I have to educate them, and I don't feel like I have the energy to do that right now. With all of my experiences with having white friends, eventually there is a time where I have to put the labor in and tell them why such-and-such is wrong, or even if I'm not educating them, where they'll say something and I'll be thinking

about it, what was the subtext, where did that come from? Is that rooted in an oppressive standpoint? And it's exhausting, having to deal with that.

Vanesia recognized the emotional energy required in proactive responding, which she was familiar with from years of occupying predominantly white spaces. As a college student at a racially diverse campus, she was able to be more discerning about her peers and general surroundings than she was in childhood. Though Vanesia was not protected entirely from gendered racialized microaggressions (many of which came from her Nigerian mother with whom she lived with), she was still able to guard herself from experiencing quite as many by enacting this passive response. Kamara, a straight, 29-year-old Black woman, employed a similar strategy:

I'm just like increasingly more intentional about like who I spend my time with, I think day to day, it's not too daunting, it doesn't take too much, kind of like from me, like emotionally and productively. So I think that's like a fortunate thing for myself and yeah, and I think like, when it does happen, I'm like, I have like, like, a small group of friends here that I can tell and immediately talk to. So I do have kind of like a space to express like, how I'm feeling about stuff, which is nice.

Here, Kamara specifically speaks to the contrast in emotional energy that her approach takes, rather than the exhaust from the seemingly inevitable task of educating white friends about microaggressions that Vanesia, and others, described. Having experienced that exhaust herself,

Kamara utilized the protective coping method of choosing her friends and spaces, which provided her with both a buffer from white-perpetrated microaggressions, and a group of friends to openly discuss experiences of oppression with. Keeping this small group of friends reflects a strategy that is extremely important among women of color in coping with gendered racialized microaggression experiences: Collective coping.

4.4 “There is Validation within a Community”: Collective Coping

Collective coping refers to the ways in which Black and Asian American women utilized social support networks to cope with the everyday gendered racism they experienced. The many stories my respondents shared of gendered racialized microaggressions included incidents where they were the sole target as well as incidents where they were microaggressed within a larger group of Asian and/or Black women, especially in co-ethnic spaces. Despite having no official space wherein Black and Asian American women were completely guaranteed safety from microaggressions, collective coping was discussed as a strategy they employed, and as a recommendation to other Asian American and Black women who may deal with future incidents of microaggressions.

Previous research has identified collective coping as integral in the lives of Black women experiencing racism, including racialized microaggressions, who tend to seek supportive community through those with similar race and gender identities (Davis 2019; Houshmand, Spanierman, and De Stafano 2019; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt 2013). This shared identity and positive evaluation of support from in-group identities reflects a collective memory within Black communities and families, and specifically among Black women, wherein the daily accumulating experience with gendered, racialized oppression is shared among members of the community rather than individualized; thus, the burden of that oppression is disseminated (Davis

2019; Feagin and McKinney 2005). In contrast, research indicates that Asian Americans, especially those occupying predominantly white areas, lack the collective memory, and subsequent utilization of collective coping, that is often found among communities of Black women (Chou and Feagin 2008). Further, very little existing research addresses the importance of coping *at all* for Asian American women in regard to gendered racialized microaggressions, though some scholars have identified collective coping in strategies used by Asian American college students experiencing racial microaggressions without an intersectional lens (Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tagarodi 2014; Sanchez, Adams, Arango 2018) or coping strategies used by Asian Americans experiencing general psychological stressors, but not specifically microaggressions (Yeh and Wang 2000). Consistent with this existing literature, throughout my interviews, Black women were more likely than Asian American women to discuss collective coping strategies in response to gendered racialized microaggressions.

What makes microaggressions particularly harmful is not solely the message of racial and gendered oppression. The covert nature of microaggressions causes particular distress to women of color whose realities are doubted or diminished by perpetrators and others in retelling their stories. Black and Asian American women are thus repeatedly gaslit into questioning their own experiences of marginalization, constantly wondering if the perpetrator's comment or behavior really was racialized and gendered in the ways the target perceived them to be. Collective coping allows women of color to share the incidents with others who understand the subtlety of gendered racialized microaggressions. Others are then able to validate what targets already know to be true but are constantly expected to disregard by perpetrators: that white supremacy and patriarchy can operate in covert ways.

Though my findings revealed Black and Asian American women do experience gendered racialized microaggressions within Black and Asian American communities, it became clear that respondents were also more likely to feel validated in intraracial social spaces than in predominantly white and/or male social spaces, especially in the case of Black women. These social territories, termed *counter-spaces*, serve as social sites of relief for women of color, where “deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000:70). By sharing incidents of everyday gendered racism with other women of color in counter-spaces, the burden of an individualized incident of oppression is distributed (Davis 2019). Counter-spaces not only serve to provide a reality check to women of color who question whether their experience was, in fact, a microaggression, but also as a site of validation for the target’s emotional response (Davis 2019). I asked Andrea, a 32-year-old Black queer woman, how she coped with everyday gendered racism. She shares:

I think what worked for me was finding people to help. To basically reality check to make sure that like, no, what I'm experiencing really is what I'm experiencing. I'm not making it a big deal; it *is* a big deal. It's not okay. It can help, finding people around you who are able to support you, validate you, and take action.

Here, Andrea stresses the importance of sharing her experiences with gendered racism as a tool for validation; a “reality check” to appease her questioning of the racialized and gendered undertones of the event. As perpetrators of microaggressions often gaslight women of color into

minimizing their own experiences of oppression, sharing incidents with others who are able to recognize and confirm microaggressions legitimizes the experience as racialized and gendered for the target. Further, multiple marginalized identities, including race and gender, but also ability, nationality, and sexuality, allow opportunities for collective coping in different spaces. In reflecting on her own identity and the community in which she turns to for collective coping, Andrea further shares:

I mean, I wouldn't be anything else if I could. And I love being a woman. I love being Black. I love being queer. And I think for me, those same areas that are hard also mean there's a whole lot of community out there to find and like, I found that community in other queer women of color.

Significant here is her inclusion of queer non-white women in general, rather than strictly queer Black women, in her support community, supported by the fact that Andrea is married to Julie, a Chinese American woman who was also interviewed in this study. Amy, a straight, 32-year-old Vietnamese Pacific Islander, echoed Andrea's sentiments, identifying "allies" as those whom she called upon for collective coping:

I think what's helped the most, is just like, finding community and allies and advocates. People who stand up for you and like, just tell you, yeah, that wasn't okay. Like even if they don't say it out loud to the other person, to tell you like, yeah, I didn't think that was okay. Those small things can

mean a lot. Just, I mean, that you're not alone and the whole world isn't against you, I guess.

Amy was one of only four Asian American women who discussed any use of collective coping, and noteworthy is the lack race present in who she identifies as “community and allies and advocates” rather than explicitly identifying other Asian American and non-white women. Perhaps this reflects a lack of access to other Asian American women; Amy lives in a 90% white state (Utah), is married to a white partner, and is active in a religious community that is 85% white and only 1% Asian (Mormonism) (Pew 2017; US Census Bureau 2019). However, several of my respondents lived in areas with high Asian American populations, including Los Angeles and Atlanta, and the use of collective coping strategies with other Asian American women were still notably absent in our interviews. Thus, proximity to other Asian American women alone cannot explain this phenomenon.

In situating Asian Americans as “the model minority,” white supremacy and dominant racial framing encourage Asian Americans to deny experiences of racism in order to reap the benefits of whiteness in the US: a promise that will never be fulfilled. Thus, in an attempt to avoid disrupting white supremacy’s empty vow by “rocking the boat,” Asian Americans are less likely than Black Americans to share family and community experiences of historical racism, which contributes to the lack of a strong collective memory. Without the opportunity to create a strong collective memory that spans generations, the context of discrimination that has historically been enacted upon Asian American women in the U.S. remains weak (Chou and Feagin 2008).

In contrast, research suggests Black Americans, pulling from four centuries of racial discrimination in the US, utilize collective memory to develop group solidarities as a response to the violence of white imposed racism (DuBois 1994; Chou and Feagin 2008). Interestingly, my respondents – both Black and Asian American – did at times include white people in their discussions of collective coping, only in as much as they perceived white people were able to be allies in identifying and resisting gendered racialized microaggressions. I asked Chelsea, a 38-year-old queer Black woman, what advice she would give to other Black women who experience gendered racialized microaggressions. She shares:

I would always also say find safe spaces, or places that help calm you from those kinds of things, especially in spaces that include people that are making sense and can kind of affirm your feelings. And even, you know, spaces where there are white people who will step in, and you know, say that something is not okay, you know, surround yourself with those people. Because the more you surround yourself with people who let that kind of thing slide, the more it's gonna eat at you and it's gonna eat inside and it's, it's one of those things, it's always going to be like in your head. And it's not worth the mental turmoil to do that.

Here, Chelsea's quote recalls Ciara's earlier comment regarding the social environment within which a microaggression occurs: the witnesses of a microaggressive event, even if not directly involved in the perpetuation of it, influenced Ciara's decision in "picking her battles." Ciara specifically outlined other Black people as those she felt would back up her attempt to

address a microaggressive slight, while Chelsea includes white people who, she perceives, would intervene.

White people can be beneficial in the resistance of all forms of gendered racism in that they possess white privilege. White privilege gives white people credibility, and the unmarked nature of whiteness allows white people to possess traits without those characteristics being attributed to their whiteness. As mentioned, when Black women use proactive responding to address a microaggression with a perpetrator, they risk personifying the controlling image of the Angry Black Woman; this depicts their resistance, regardless of tone of voice, facial expression, or delivery, as anger, irrationality, and “playing the race card” (Collins 2000). Further, Asian American women who actively resist racism are framed as callous Dragon Ladies, the Asian cousin to the Angry Black Woman (Chou 2012; Hamad 2020). In contrast, white people’s active resistance and opposition to racism does not confirm a stereotype and is thus considered more seriously than if coming from a woman of color. Accordingly, Chelsea suggests that women of color consider some white people in their collective coping company, as their privilege holds value.

Collective coping offered many benefits to Black and Asian American women who experienced gendered racialized microaggressions and other forms of everyday racism beyond validation as well: humor, consolation, and in turn, healing, were all benefits noted by respondents who used collective coping strategies. Throughout our interview, Mya, a queer 24-year-old multiracial Guyanese woman, shared that she was frequently perceived as too radicalized and too critical by her peers, even by other Black women who she considered close friends. She often fluctuated between feeling empowered in her advocacy and feeling obligated

to “tone it down” in order to be palatable and to not confirm the Angry Black Woman controlling image. She shares:

I know that’s just a part of life, but it really helps me to have some folks in my life who are on the same wavelength 100% because I know that I can go to them and I’ll always be validated in a space. There are some people who I do interact with, see myself as close with, who I just know see me as too much. [...] When I left school, I was so active and so intentional about who was close to me and that transformed my life, honestly. Always having people who just see eye to eye, who are as quote, unquote radical or militant or whatever word you want to use; those friendships keep me going.

Mya’s collective coping strategies allowed her to feel validated, and further, to continue her advocacy in a manner that she describes as “unapologetic.” Though some of her close friends chided her persistent activism, Mya saw those who supported and collaborated her advocacy as life changing. In her intentionality, Mya engaged protective coping and collective coping simultaneously to create a social environment within which she felt supported and cherished: a counterspace to combat gendered racialized microaggressions. As women of color are incessantly bombarded with gendered racialized microaggressive messages from coworkers, classmates, doctors, strangers, employers, and both intra- and interracial family and peers, counter spaces were often described, as Mya stated, as a transformative, essential social spaces.

Like Mya, Vanesia describes the crucial component of community in coping with gendered racialized microaggressions:

The advice that I would give is to try to find a community, which everyone says but, it's honestly the only way that you'll be able to navigate through life, not have to look it through the white lens, and not dismiss your own accounts of racist microaggressions; there is validation within a community. In white spaces, being vocal about yourself is only okay as long as it's created with kindness... as long as it's digestible and framed in a way that is not dismissing whiteness, not dismissing white supremacy.

Vanesia points to "the white lens," drawing attention to the DuBoisian concept of double-consciousness, wherein people of color constantly see themselves through the eyes of a white supremacist society (DuBois 1994). She further notes that occupying white space requires persistent self-monitoring for women of color to portray digestibility and kindness in order to combat controlling imagery. Unfortunately, women of color -- and Black women especially -- are rarely granted credibility regardless of their digestibility and kindness in white spaces, leaving them in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't position when reacting to microaggressions. By engaging in collective coping, counter spaces are created wherein women of color may finally rest.

4.5 Discussion

Regardless of whether respondents chose to respond to gendered racist microaggressions through protective, proactive, or counter-space measures, the onus of effort always fell onto them: they felt responsible for educating others, for monitoring their tones, for changing their behaviors or spaces to avoid perpetrators, or for holding their tongues. They were also responsible for finding community within which they felt safe, which was not automatically determined simply if a space consisted primarily of other women of color. Though individual perpetrators of microaggressions, perhaps after being confronted, could theoretically change their tendency to engage in microaggressive behaviors moving forward, Black and Asian American women knew it was inevitable to encounter another, faced with a lifetime of everyday gendered racism. Regardless of how they responded, this laborious task would never be fully concluded. It is essential to consider this *additional* perpetual burden in conversation with the psychological effects that microaggressions instill onto Black and Asian American women.

The existing literature on coping and responsive strategies is limited in that it largely focuses on college students and microaggressions that occur within university spaces. Thus, coping strategies outlined in this existing research may be specific to those with higher levels of education or the resources associated with it (Houshmand, Spanierman, and De Stefano 2019). My respondents came from a variety of educational backgrounds, but my findings suggested there were more between-race differences in coping strategies than between-education level differences; instead, Black women were more likely than Asian American women to engage in proactive and collective coping strategies, while both Black and Asian American women engaged in protective coping often, reflecting the ways in which white supremacy, collective memory, and the model minority myth operate in an attempt to deny Black and Asian American

women effective coping and resistance strategies. More research is needed outside of college and education settings to further address the ways in which higher education may influence a propensity toward specific coping strategies used by Black and Asian American women.

5 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion & Implications

5.1.1 *Conclusion of Findings*

White supremacy and heteropatriarchy are dominating structural forces that ensure Black and Asian American women experience gendered racialized microaggressions from perpetrators who are both within and outside of their own gendered and racialized identities. Black and Asian American women were on the receiving end of microaggressions from other Black and Asian American women and men who implied that whiteness was superior to non-whiteness, that the respondent was not Asian or not Black “enough,” and that the respondents’ bodies were not acceptable for women of their race to have. My findings also revealed the intraracial sexualization that Asian American and Black women experience as microaggressions from other Asian American and Black women and men.

The gendered racialized microaggressions that Asian American and Black women experienced from white perpetrators were distinct from perpetrators within their own ethnic communities. Several respondents lived in predominantly white households, where white parents and siblings would engage in gendered racialized microaggressions that centralized mixed messages of colorblindness and a tokenization of their non-white identities, as well as a pressure to assimilate to white norms. Further, my findings reveal that Black and Asian American women perceive gendered racialized microaggressions that are committed by white women (such as friends, coworkers, or strangers) as especially damaging due to the complexity of the shared subjugation of womanhood. Gendered racialized microaggressions perpetrated by white women typically fall within themes I identify as: Oppression Olympics, White Saviorism, and Rigid Subscription to Controlling Images. In contrast, white men enact microaggressions centralizing

racialized sexual exotification to both Asian American and Black women, regardless of my respondents' sexual orientation.

Finally, my project reveals the determining factors that Asian American and Black women consider when responding to gendered racialized microaggressions. Respondents considered their relationship with the perpetrator, the perpetrator's race, and the social environment within which the microaggression occurred, to "pick their battles." Black and Asian American women either engaged in proactive responding, in which they addressed the microaggression with the perpetrator, or passive responding, in which they walked away from the perpetrator and/or changed their behavior, location, and company without directly addressing the perpetrator, in an attempt to avoid future microaggressive interactions. Regardless of their choice in responding, Asian American and Black women also engaged in collective coping, seeking validation from other women and specifically women of color, to combat the emotional toll that these "little murders" inflicted upon them. Still, for Black and Asian American women, calculated, protective measures can only go so far: even within non-white spaces they are constantly inundated with both subtle and blatant messages insisting their inferiority.

5.1.2 Sociological Implications

In utilizing a Critical Race Feminist analysis in this work, I centralized intersectionality and the structural factors that shape Black and Asian American women's experiences of gendered racialized microaggressions. Given that most microaggression research has focused on interpersonal interactions between individual parties, a sociological perspective that integrates the importance of macro-level influences on those interpersonal interactions has been sorely needed within microaggression discourse (Domínguez and Embrick 2020).

Critical Race Feminism, by way of Critical Race Theory, posits that racism and sexism are ordinary, and that dominant frameworks, thought, and ideologies (such as a white racial frame) determine social outcomes, often without conscious intention (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Thus, redressing microaggressions as micro, interpersonal phenomena is a moot point without considering the structural components that allow gendered racism to flourish. White supremacy, cissexism, and heteropatriarchism are all interlocking systemic forces that rely on and buttress one another to adapt, evolve, and prosper. Through gendered racialized microaggressions, these foundational components of US society defy resistance, surreptitiously thriving by gaslighting women of color.

Employing a CRF perspective in this project further allowed me to illuminate the narratives and counter-stories of Asian American and Black women's experiences with covert gendered racism. This emphasis on standpoint epistemologies ensured that the narratives of women of color (whose realities are often discounted or omitted entirely from research on Black or Asian American experiences, and research on women's experiences) were validated and constructed as truth. This is especially important in microaggression research, as the covert nature of microaggressions allows perpetrators to deny that their comment or behavior was offensive. Thus, Black and Asian American women, who have lived lifetimes of everyday racism to inform their understanding of its nuance, are left questioning their own realities and knowledge.

Further, utilizing an intersectional perspective during the course of this project allowed me to account for Asian American and Black women's experiences as unique, rather than monolithic. Though they share a collective struggle as women of color (Collins 2000), my respondents have a variety of ethnicities, sexualities, family/home structures, and nationalities

that shape their individual stories and experiences. For example, those who spoke English as a second language, those who were darker complected, those who were queer, and those who had white family members each faced specific gendered racialized microaggressions that were directly tied to these social locations. This perspective was especially important in examining the gendered racialized microaggressions that occurred within intraracial spaces, as colorism, queerphobia, internalized racism, and anti-Blackness are all rampant within non-white communities. Hamad (2020: 160) notes, “every form of oppression that exists in the Western world [...] is an oppression of white supremacy and its zealous ambition to scale the peak of human civilization and evolution.” Belonging to one marginalized group does not absolve oppressed peoples from maintaining oppression and internalizing the white racial frame.

Conclusively, this project extends microaggression research to intersectional, critical race feminist, sociological terrain through case studies of 35 Black and Asian American women. Ultimately, this project reveals the continuous influence of white racial framing and heteropatriarchism (macro) on interpersonal interactions (micro) for Black and Asian American women living in the US, and examines the nuance in experiences, resistance, and coping with gendered racism.

5.2 Limitations & Future Directions

There are limitations to this research that are important to note. Though my sample reflected a variety of educational backgrounds, the majority of my respondents were college-educated. All of the Asian American respondents in my pool had at least some college experience (N=15) and many also had at least some graduate school experience (N=8). Of the Black respondents, most also had at least some college experience (N=18), and half of all Black respondents had graduate school experience as well (N=10). Although my study was unique in

microaggression research in that it did not take place solely on a college campus and did not specifically study microaggressions that occurred on campus, higher levels of formal education were overrepresented. Gendered racialized microaggressions are not a phenomenon restricted to college educated women, and the various ages/education levels that my respondents were/had in their shared stories reflects this; microaggressions occur throughout women of colors' lives at various ages and education levels.

Additionally, my sample was overwhelmingly cisgender. Only one of my respondents identifies as a transgender woman, and future research should use an intersectional perspective to uncover the experiences of gendered racialized microaggressions that trans women of color experience, and cissexism as a macro level force that affects those experiences. There are limitations in the inclusion of all Asian Americans in my work. Though I was able to include several women who are East (Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese) and Southeast (Pilipinx, Vietnamese) Asian, my respondent pool lacked substantial South Asian (only one Indian woman), Arab, and West Asian respondents, and thus my findings do not account for the unique ways in which non-East and Southeast Asian American women may experience gendered racialized microaggressions, or the structural forces including US imperialism and islamophobia that shape those experiences.

A final limitation of my study is the lack of inclusion of cross-racialized, non-white perpetrators of microaggressions. This study examines the ways in which Asian American communities microaggress Asian American women, and the ways in which Black communities microaggress Black women but does not include experiences of interracial microaggression experiences outside of white perpetrators. Of course, Asian Americans can and do microaggress Black women, and Black communities can and do microaggress Asian American women, but

that analysis is not included in this project. This was a conscious decision to highlight the ways white supremacy and internalized racism infiltrate co-ethnic spaces, however, although anti-Blackness is discussed in relation to white supremacy throughout, a future project should specifically address non-white, interracial perpetrators of microaggressions onto various women of color.

A common critique of microaggression research is the lack of intersectional theoretical perspectives and the focus on microaggressions as interpersonal phenomena rather than as byproducts of larger structural forces. While this work provided an intersectional and macro-level analysis, further research is needed to address this critique more fully, and to extend this work beyond the confines of Black and Asian American women's experiences, including the addition of marginalized identities outside of race, gender, and sexuality.

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: Respondent Demographics****Race**

Asian American (N=15)

Black (N=20)

Biracial with one white parent (N=4)*

Sexuality

Lesbian (N=6)

Straight (N=21)

Bisexual (N=7)

Pansexual (N=1)

Gender

Cisgender (N=34)

Transgender (N=1)

Highest Education Obtained

High School (N=3)

Some College (N=4)

Bachelor's Degree (N=10)

Some Graduate/Professional (N=8)

Graduate / Professional Degree (N=10)

US Citizenship Status

US Citizen (N=29)

Non-US Citizen (N=6)

Age

18-25 (N=12)

26-35 (N=17)

36-45 (N=5)

Not reported (N=1)

*Though four of my respondents had one white biological parent, they all identified primarily as Asian American or Black and considered themselves to be women of color.

Appendix B:***Appendix B.1: The Redemption of Ham by Modesto Brocos******Appendix B.2: Don King's Hair***

Appendix C: Model of Assessment in Responding to Gendered Racist Microaggressions