MuseumsForward

To be part of the solution: Asian American museum staff's experiences in navigating museum careers

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Abstract

As museums move forward in increasing diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) and anti-racism initiatives within their institutions, so has the need for research and evaluation on the experiences of Asian American staff and their paths into the museum field. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how Asian American-identifying staff came to and are sustaining their full-time careers in museums. The literature review researched the ways in which the model minority myth influences and shapes the academic and professional experiences of Asian Americans. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 23 participants who self-identified as Asian American, attended middle and high school in the United States, and have been employed full-time in the museum field for at least three years. The results showed four common themes in the barriers and systems of support they experienced when entering their museum career and throughout it: 1.) education ceilings and financial difficulties; 2.) racial isolation and relationships; 3.) racialized expectations; and 4.) racialized tokenism and buffering. The data showed the participants' roles and lack thereof in DEAI initiatives, mentoring emerging museum professionals, and the dismantling of systemic barriers gatekeeping the field from moving forward in diversity and inclusion. Participants also reflected on common Asian American experiences, namely the model minority myth, varying approximations to Whiteness, racial identity denial, and possible solutions to these barriers. This research includes implications for practice in DEAI, anti-racism, Asian American community engagement, and the museum's role in the development of emerging museum professionals.

Keywords

Asian American; museum staff; critical race theory; DEAI; anti-racism

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Introduction

The Model Minority Myth

White sociologist William Petersen (1966) coined the term "model minority" referring to minorities who achieved high levels of success in U.S. society. This term most often described Asian Americans who he perceived attained greater educational and financial success compared to other immigrant groups. Petersen named a cultural emphasis on hard work and centering family in making life decisions as key factors allowing them to overcome racial discrimination. Asian Americans repeatedly are identified by their tendency to excel in academic science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses in comparison to their non-Asian peers (Cheryan & Monin, 2005).

A study conducted by Chou and Feagin (2015) prompted 151 White college students to place different racial and ethnic groups into "White" or "Not White" categories. The overwhelming majority of students sorted all the Asian American groups under "Not White." The dominant White group defined the model minority myth and placed Asian Americans second to them in the racial hierarchy and simultaneously named other groups of color as "problem minorities." While the myth placed Asian Americans in close approximation to Whiteness, Chou and Feagin's study affirmed that they are not White and cannot obtain or use White privilege.

Many Asian Americans experienced the denial of their racial reality because of microaggressions reaffirming the belief that they do not experience racism of any form (Poon, 2011). Poon later named invisibility as a common microaggressions that Asian Americans undergraduate students experienced. The outdated assumption of a Black-White racial binary maintains the invisibility of Asian American racialized experiences and identities (Takaki, 1998). The model minority myth overshadows the reality of their wealth gap in comparison to other communities of color (De La Cruz-Viesca et al., 2015). The myth assumes Asian Americans' socioeconomic successes based on diligence and hard work but denies systemic barriers and supports per specific ethnicities. This article challenges the model minority myth by describing results from this study to understand how Asian American-

identifying staff came to and are sustaining their full-time careers in museums.

Asian American Students in Higher Education

The model minority myth is particularly harmful for Asian American students. A study conducted by Poon and Hune (2009) surveyed Asian American doctoral students' senses and experiences of belonging and marginalization in relation to their programs and peers. Participants identified moments of others projecting the myth onto them and described peers who ignored the Asian American experience because they perceived that their Asian American colleagues did not endure race-related struggles. Asian American students quickly dismissed their own racialized experiences and neglected to include them in discussions and projects regarding racism because their peers considered them "not colored enough."

In many cases, as Poon and Hune (2009) found, respondents experienced racial isolation when they could not see or connect with Asian American classmates, faculty, or staff despite the misconception that they were not considered a minority in higher education. On the other hand, those who could find support and mentorship with others of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds described positive relationships and increase in morale. When students verbalized the desire to pursue research or projects centered on the Asian American experience, they encountered little to no support from their non-Asian advisors and Orientalist approaches to their work (Hune, 1998).

In higher education, Asian American students experienced more mobility and social influences than in high school shaping their self-identification with ethnicity and how they express it due increased diversity and division and a larger exposure to topics centering race (Cheryan and Monin, 2005). However, the number of students entering and completing humanities degrees is significantly smaller in comparison to their non-Asian peers, as well as the number of Asian American graduate students in humanities.

Asian American students face many external factors discouraging their pursuit for humanities degrees and careers in favor of business and STEM centered ones (Poon, 2014). The most frequent factors are perceived discrimination, the influence of family and peers, and financial concerns. As a result, Asian and Pacific-identifying students who completed humanities undergraduate degrees made up 4.3% of

the United States' class of 2015 in this area (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2015).

Asian American in Museum Careers

The 4.3% of humanities degrees completed by Asian and Pacific-identifying students consequently correlates to the disproportionately small number of Asian American museum professionals. Asian-identifying individuals made up 6% of participating American art museums' staff, 7% of curators and educators, and 4% of museum leadership and conservators (Westermann et al., 2019). In recognition of the severely limited access and exposure to museum careers, several institutions and organizations, most notably the same foundation sponsoring the survey, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, were committed to providing paid internships for undergraduate students.

However, formal research on Asian Americans' barriers and pathways into museum careers has not been conducted. Instead, recent literature from Asian American studies deconstructed monolithic perceptions and assumptions of the Asian American experience through analyzing firsthand accounts in other institutions (Poon, 2014; Samura, 2016; Chou & Feagin, 2015).

Methodology

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how Asian American-identifying staff came to and are sustaining their full-time careers in museums. The study was framed by this research question: What barriers and systems of support are commonly experienced by Asian American museum staff as they navigate a museum career?

This research supports people, organizations and institutions whose mission is to make museum careers accessible, equitable, and inclusive to an increasingly diverse American population of intersectional experiences. Identifying and understanding the barriers and systems of support experienced by Asian American museum staff is imperative for museum organizations and institutions to do intentional and sustainable DEAI work for their current employees and developing future generations of Asian American museum workers.

Study Design

This study used a phenomenological design which named commonalities experienced firsthand by multiple individuals of a similar phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Semi-structured interviews with Asian American-identifying museum professionals were conducted to collect qualitative data of their experiences in formal academic and professional development in the context of their ethnic and racial identities as perceived by them and their peers.

To develop the interview guide, the researcher referred to studies and interviews conducted by scholars interrogating social and systemic inequities and the conceptualizations of racial and ethnic identities by Asian American students and workers in the United States. This study's interview guide drew from research completed by scholars Poon (2011, 2014), Samura (2016), and Chou & Feagin (2015), who utilized critical race theory (CRT), a methodology used to overcome a history of marginalization in literature, affirmative action, and dominant narratives by naming social and racial inequities through participants' ownership of their racialized experiences.

For the purposes of this study, the term "Asian American" describes individuals living in and were formally educated in the United States for a majority of or all their life, have Asian heritage, and self-identify with the term. Utilizing this identity without understanding its complex nuances may perpetuate a harmful and monolithic conceptualization of a diverse demographic (Poon and Hune, 2009). This study emphasizes *self-identifying* to prioritize the participants' ownership of their lived experiences framed by their identity as an Asian American as opposed to imposing the identity onto them by the researcher.

Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited through online affinity groups primarily found on social media and snowball sampling:

- Instagram
    - @bambooandglass – Bamboo & Glass
    - @angryasianamericans – Angry Asian Americans
- Facebook
    - Museum Hue Community
    - Women and Gender Minorities in Museum Work
    - Chicago Emerging Museum Professionals

- Puget Sound Emerging Museum Professionals
- Collections Stewardship – AAM Emerging Museum Professionals
- Bay Area Emerging Museum Professionals (BAEMP)

Participants

Criteria for participation in this study were self-identification as Asian American, full- time work status in a museum for at least 3 years, and attendance at middle and high schools in the United States. Questions regarding their name, pronouns, age, location, ethnic and racial identities, and job title were optional. A total of 23 participants were interviewed.

Table 1

Characteristics of interview subjects (N=23).

Characteristic	Frequency
Pronouns	
She/her	17
She/they	2
He/him	3
They/them	1
Age in Years	
22-29	6
30-39	10
40-49	2
50-59	3
60-71	2
Racial/Ethnic Identity	
Chinese American	5
Filipinx American	3
Indian American	1
Japanese American	2
Korean American	2
Taiwanese American	2
Mixed/Multiple ethnicities or races	8
Japanese-Chinese	1
Filipinx-Chinese	1
Filipinx-Japanese-Indonesian	1
Japanese-Italian	1

Japanese-White/Hapa	2
Korean-White	1
Unspecified	1
Location of Employment	
Midwest	1
Northeast	7
Pacific Northwest	8
South	2
West Coast	5

Participants were asked to describe their career paths, beginning from high school to their current job. If necessary, they were prompted to further describe certain moments and peoples they mentioned, such as internships, volunteer opportunities, mentors, colleagues, key encounters, and more. Nine participants double majored and received 2 Bachelors of Arts. 2 participants hold 2 Masters of Arts.

Table 2

Participants' academic backgrounds (N=23).

Degree	Frequency
Bachelor of Arts	29
Art History	9
Anthropology/Visual Anthropology	6
History	1
*	1
Bachelor of Science	4
Biology	2
Environmental Sciences	2
Master of Arts	1919
Museum Studies/Museology/Museum Education	9
Art History	3
**	1
Master of Science	2
Conservation	1
Invertebrate Zoology	1
PhD., Contemporary Art History	1
Currently in Graduate School	6

**Education, Classical Studies, Communications, Women & Gender Studies, Film, Merchandising, Digital Retail, American Ethnic Studies, English, Archaeology, Spanish, and Comparative Literature*

***Informal Science Education, School Administration, Education, Civil Analytics, Management, Arts Administration, Anthropology, Education Leadership*

Table 3

Participants' prior work experience (N=23).

Work experience	Frequency
Volunteer	14
Internships	19
Fellowships	4
Identified Mentors	
Faculty	9
Management/Supervisors	20
Colleagues/Coworkers/Classmates	9

Participants were asked questions reflecting on moments of gatekeeping and moments of empowerment in pursuing their museum careers (see Appendix A for the interview guide). They were prompted to reflect on academic and professional developments in relation to their identity as Asian Americans. They were asked to compare their experiences to those of their non-Asian American colleagues or coworkers. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their past and positionalities. These questions centered on their current involvement or visions of mentoring or empowering Asian American emerging museum professionals.

Data Analysis Procedures

This study collected qualitative data and quantitative demographic data through semi- structured interviews of open-ended questions. Interviews were facilitated through recorded video calls. These recordings were transcribed and analyzed. Only the researcher had access to video recordings and transcripts and conducted the analysis to maintain the participants' confidentiality. Sections of the interview transcript were categorized in correspondence to the questions asked,

and common themes were determined based on the frequency of mentions by the participants.

Results

To name the barriers and supports experienced by Asian American museum staff as they navigated their museum careers, participants reflected on their experiences in formal education, beginning with high school, to their current positions. From these interviews, four common themes emerged: 1) education ceilings and financial difficulties; 2) racial isolation and relationships; 3) racialized expectations; and 4) racialized tokenism and buffering.

Education Ceilings and Financial Difficulties

Participants named post-graduate education as barrier into entry-level positions and a ceiling preventing them from qualifying for promotions, raises, and more responsibilities with commensurate compensation. Financing their higher education varied from inconvenient to a major struggle. A Hapa/Mixed-race American associate director felt pressured to get a master's degree in order to compete with other candidates:

> "I was applying for jobs. I would get interviewed, and people would be like, 'Oh, you know what? We're going to take someone who has a master's degree. We're going take someone who's got a Ph.D.' That really was my motivation for going to graduate school because I didn't feel like I was going to be able to advance. I have mixed feelings about that... The salaries in the museum field really aren't commensurate with the experience that they require. A master's degree, a PhD, is very expensive. It took me a long time to pay off my student loans."

Similarly, another Mixed Asian American experienced disqualification at the end of the hiring process from their lack of a master's degree for an entry-level position:

> "I don't have a master's degree, nor do I have any interest in getting it because I want to be a rebel in saying that I don't need it. I'm not saying that it's not important... I feel like I've been turned away from jobs because I don't have a masters, even though I'm

> qualified for it. For example, I had applied for a job in a museum [on the West Coast]... But they had picked a person because they have a masters. I was like, 'Oh, that hurts for not having a master for an entry-level position.' I've been thrown away a lot because of that..."

More museum administration are reassessing this requirement and removing the graduate degree from job postings to commensurate the qualifications of the position's responsibilities. For example, a Chinese American manager of education and public programs reflected on requiring graduate degrees when hiring for entry-level positions, such as assistants:

> "My boss and I both agree that a graduate degree really was not necessary, so we hired people straight out of college. We felt like that was more appropriate for the kind of work those assistant roles. But oftentimes, people in those assistant roles in museums need to have graduate degrees. I think it's completely pointless... It's definitely a structural barrier. Education is a structural barrier, and I think it certainly limits who we have in the field."

For most participants, their parents' opinions and financial capacities in funding their education contributed to entering and persisting in the museum field. For those whose parents could finance most or all of their higher education, participants expressed gratitude and experienced less stress in trying different opportunities:

> "I'm lucky financial barriers were not one for me because my parents, even though I didn't really understand when I was younger, especially like in early undergrad... Now I get it, the fact that my parents were like, 'OK, she's doing this, but we're going to keep paying for it.' That was huge."

One participant, the only one working at a Asian Pacific American museum, was advised to not pursue post-graduate education or certification in museum studies. This Chinese American community programs specialist recalled speaking with the museum's executive director:

> "[My director] said, 'No, you're already here. You're doing your work. You're learning all that you are learning, so I don't think you should get a certificate [in

> museum studies].' But we do see many museum workers getting master's degrees. Not very often do I feel like I should have [applied to grad school]."

She named deep community ties around the museum and within the workplace. With the reassurance and confidence from her executive director about her value and commitment to the museum's operations and the community they served, she did not feel pressure to invest in a post-graduate certificate or degree.

Racial Isolation and Relationships

Many participants discussed being the only Asian American in their institutions. All participants expected this lack of representation prior to entering their careers and, as a result, often refrained from advocating for their communities and themselves in the museum. During the rise in visibility and frequency of anti-Asian violence in the United States, a Korean American museum educator stated,

> "I feel like I don't know how to bring up Asian American issues in a professional context, especially being the only Asian person there. It feels like I'm a little self-conscious to bring it up because I know that it's logically messed up to think, 'Oh, it doesn't really matter.' But at the same time, it's weird being the only person to bring it up."

Participants with the same or similar thoughts felt uncomfortable drawing attention to themselves despite times of racialized crises and isolation leading to heightened anxiety and fear. When asked about what advice he would provide, this participant shared,

> "This might be cynical, but just get ready. You're probably going to be the only Asian person there in the entire room. I would say it's going to be a weird experience. I wouldn't sugarcoat it, in a sense, where it's like…As much as [museums] want to be these idealistic, race-neutral spaces, they're not. You can't say that, especially in 2021. Nothing is neutral…If you are passionate about it, I think you should empower yourself to stay, but at the same time recognize you're fighting an uphill battle."

Participants who noted the same experiences expressed similar advice to emerging Asian American museum professionals or those interested in entering this field.

Participants with relationships and trust with non-Asian American coworkers of color maintained mutual peer mentorship and support. In a conversation with her Black colleague, the only other person of color in their institution, a Taiwanese American museum educator realized how race may not have been an explicit barrier in the hiring process but a daily harm built over time:

> "Generationally, we're in the same place and trying to learn how to have a voice now because we've learned over the decades to absorb everything. You absorb without knowing that you're absorbing your own oppression and how that affects you trying to further your museum practice within that... Just absorbing and suppressing, all this other stuff in regard to race only to now be really trying to learn in this moment to be more empowered about it rather than passive in order to make everybody else feel OK."

These relationships between participants and their colleagues of color often developed when White managers assigned them to work together on diversity-related tasks and projects. A Taiwanese American associate registrar recalled being assigned with her Black-presenting coworker to select marketing materials featuring people for the museum's dining space:

> "There was someone who became a really good friend of mine who is biracial. Her mom is Black, her father is White, and she reads as Black. Somehow, we, the two of us, were always tapped for things having to do with anything diversity or multiculturalism...This is so mundane and ridiculous. Somebody had requested someone who could choose some new posters for the cafeteria. Somehow, we got to do that. In the moment, it was like, 'OK, we'll just do that.' And then I was like, 'This is so weird. Why is it the two of us?' First of all, it was like no one could just go and pick some new posters to put in the cafeteria. What is the big deal? Then was like, 'OK, you know, we're good doers and we'll do this.' That was a whole strange thing where it was like, 'Is it because we're not White?"

Although the task was simple, White management intended for them to select visuals recognizable to her and her Black-presenting peer. In another case, a Multiracial Asian American assistant curator reflected on the racialized gatekeeping her Black colleague endured at an Asian art museum in comparison to White staff of the same positions:

> "They're very confused about [being a Black person working at an Asian art museum]. They get a lot of questions from people who are confused about that because I do think there's this weird dichotomy about how people of color have to answer why we're working with certain types of material culture when a lot of my White colleagues don't have to answer that. It's never an issue. Even in conferences, when I was doing more of the African American or African diaspora stuff, more than half of the people are White. They're not at this point. There's still not enough Black people being able or allowed to enter some of the circles that still are historically very White studying their culture. I know a couple of people who are really doing great work to break down those barriers, but my White colleagues have never been asked why they're studying that kind of material or culture or art. I do think it's a hard one, and I have struggled with that, too."

Participants with similar stories were conscious of the barriers and microaggressions experienced by their non-Asian American coworkers of color within and outside their institutions.

Racialized Expectations

Participants noted that museum leadership faced intensive internal questioning and reckoning of how they served their communities, staff, and peers of color during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, rise in Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and higher visibility and frequency of anti-Asian violence. In response to these tensions, they formed committees and taskforces to develop and engage in DEAI or anti-racism initiatives and projects. A Filipino American anthropology collections manager described her dedication to DEI work within her museum and predicted slow change:

> "We started a DEI initiative to start addressing inequities in our policy, in our hiring, and our extremely terrible retention of BIPOC staff. [Our city] is a White city, and

> the museum is a White museum. We have BIPOC, but they turn over quickly. I think that probably is the culture. I want to be part of the solution. Maybe I can't change the minds of the people at the top from where I'm at, but the people I work with through the committee I'm on…How can I slowly get kind of pushy? People don't like that. But how can I slowly nudge people forward? It's a tricky balance."

Participants on DEAI or DEI committees articulated the unspoken expectation of educating their White peers and leading projects, especially if they were one of the few or only people of color in their institutions. Although the missions and visions of these committees are optimistic, participants of these groups remained cautious about the limited possibilities and labor.

Many felt obligated to join institutional DEAI groups because they were the racial minority but not without internalized conflict. A Taiwanese American head of museum education debated the roles and responsibilities she was burdened with as the only person of color in the room:

> "There I am again and feeling like I have to be in these groups because who else is going to be? Who is going to be there? But then finding myself in the position of having to speak for all minorities, which is ridiculous, as we know…I don't know [the experiences of] somebody who is Black…How can I possibly speak for them? Why are you asking me? I can't even speak for all Asian Americans… Navigating those spaces, navigating those situations and trying to talk about things that even I, myself, had so much learning to do, and then feeling that pressure of having to represent somehow. I'm not just representing all Asian Americans and all Asians but everybody here who is not White. It's impossible. I'd say that more recently, there's such a change in the conversations. I do see having the benefit of decades in the field of seeing change happening right there. The conversations that happen now…There's no way with anybody having that led to this level. And so now I am on the DEAI committee or working group or whatever they call themselves…But it's a completely different conversation where it's a lot of calling in, a lot of pushing. And even then, it's painful but very

> different...There's listening that's happening for better or for worse. Museums, at some point...I feel like it must be you can't ignore this anymore. A better understanding of intersectionality, of multiple identities."

She shared how the approach to institutional DEAI work changed over the past few decades. Similarly, multiple participants on DEAI-related committees and task forces expressed the need for more intersectional and diverse anti-racism education for themselves and their peers.

A Taiwanese American senior associate registrar declined the invitation to join the anti- racism council formed after the rise in BLM protests in the summer of 2020. She cited self- preservation and reflected on the moment her supervisors questioned her refusal:

> "We had listening sessions after BLM, and we created a staff advisory council and anti-racism council. It was almost a little awkward because I didn't enjoy any of those councils. I knew I was leaving my position, but I was asked by my superiors why I didn't join it. There's always this expectation that's put on you if you are the odd one out. Because I am a woman of color, there was almost this expectation that I would be the one who was doing the work. This happened at weekly meetings where, like during BLM, during the Georgia attacks, I was the one that was tapped to speak because of the fact that I am a woman of color. While I do think that it is productive to have these conversations, especially with someone that's willing to speak a little bit more explicitly about it, I just think thata lot of the times, it's really exhausting because it feels like the burden is always placed on me."

Similarly, a Japanese American digital learning manager described refusing to join in their DEAI committee. Her peers criticized her for what they perceived as disinterest and uncaringness for racial and social justice issues:

> "I'm not going to be participating in [the DEAI committee] because I don't want to be a martyr anymore. However, then Asians and Asian Americans, not even just White people, but by other people of color, often still don't matter if there is social justice. They're often seen under suspicion. Their silence is

> often misinterpreted as not being woke...If I am choosing to not participate in this space, it's because I believe it's being ineffective. I don't like that because I won't be seen in that work. That judgment of not caring will be made, and it's totally unfair to me."

She concluded that effective anti-racism and DEAI work in these spaces are incapable of sustainable impact and change for their institutions and herself. A Filipino American museum educator shared his observations of how racialized burdens are often disregarded in the workplace by White management and administration:

> "There's definitely been emotional labor tied to the experience of being a Brown person, being an Asian person, being first generation entering into a space with largely White leadership who don't carry those same experiences. They don't realize the kinds of traumas or the types of oppressions that afflict people like me on a day-to-day basis and how those things influence a workday."

One participant shared a moment of empathy and mentorship to an undergraduate Chinese intern candidate about family-enforced expectations interfering with her availability:

> "I expressed that I was concerned that she wouldn't be able to get as much out of this internship as she wanted with only being able to commit five hours a week. She said this is what she really wanted to do because she loved the idea of working at the museum. She wanted to work on a project as a scientific artist, which was something that we really boasted as a blend of art and science at our lab. I was like, 'I would love to have you for it.' She ended up opening up and saying that her classes were really intense because she was in this really rigorous STEM program. It was funny because I didn't want to push her to talk about it. She actually just started spilling out of all those back stories saying, 'I don't even like what I'm doing in school. This is what I want. I want to be an artist, and half of my classes... I don't even know what's happening.' She was very distraught in this moment, and I could tell that she was in that same spot I was. She was desperate for that something. I think, once I heard her talk about this,

> what it was like to have her parents breathing down her neck, putting this pressure on her, I told her what happened to me and how I had let go of that expectation. I thought specifically and very selfishly, 'What do I want?' I told her, 'You have to be selfish about it. You have to let go of this expectation from your parents that you are going to be a doctor, be a nurse or an engineer. You have to think about yourself because you know so much about expectation and that culture of life, that all Asian people become doctors and lawyers and engineers or whatever.'"

This participant credited her personal experiences with family pressures in higher education and career choice in successfully connecting with the intern. By recognizing this paralleled barrier and experience between Asian and Asian American youth, she provided support and guidance through genuine empathy.

Participants working with communities who shared racial and ethnic identities with them leveraged their racialized expectations. A Filipino American museum educator responsible for community programming and mentorship of some youth described his work as contributing to the uplifting of Asian Americans in the museum field from young ages through mentorship and role modeling:

> "Because a lot of the kids that I work with are [local], quite a few of them are also Asian American. It's been this growing connection between mentorship and identity that has happened. That's one way that I have continued to try and advance and grow my involvement and contributions to helping to uplift other Asian Americans in this field. Another way of doing that is because it's informal education. It allows me to partner with folks in the community, artists, scientists, makers and all that kind of stuff. So when possible, I try to select people of color, first generation people, queer people. I have had the wonderful experience of bringing on friends and strangers even who are Asian American to share not just a cool shit they do but who they are. It has felt nice to be able to grow this network through this work."

He brought diverse representation through individuals of his network to best enhance the learning of the diverse youth he mentored. Like him, participants who worked or found themselves in mentorship

positions with younger Asian American peers supported and advised them like the mentors they wish they had to support themselves at their ages.

Racialized Tokenism and Buffering

Participants named moments of tokenism and expressed discomfort and frustration with those who made them feel vulnerable. Most often, they were older White people in positions of administration, management, or sponsorship. When introduced by a curator to their board and other stakeholders at an event, a Multiracial Asian American curatorial assistant recognized being tokenized to showcase the museum's increased diversity and inclusion:

> "I was being introduced by the curator as the minority-owned woman business as a way to show how progressive the government was being in hiring people of color to do their work. And I was like, 'It doesn't work when it's like just me. It's not like you're supporting a small woman-owned Asian American business. You're just talking about me. When you introduced me, it was weird. Everybody that you're introducing me to is literally only seeing the Asian American woman that we so graciously decided to hire for this work.'"

This participant repeatedly experienced being tasked with tribal consultation which was outside of her job description, responsibilities, and expertise. In reflecting the reasons for this pattern, she said,

> "I would be put into tribal consultations as, I think, a buffer to be the one non- White government representative in a room full of people who are very much upset at the government for good reason. I think there was some kind of tokenization that was happening... I didn't anticipate that because I was not in an area where I think a lot of people are having to deal with things that might impact me, like put in situations where it's convenient. 'It's really nice that we have you here to be a face for certain cultural interactions that we don't really want to be in. The ethnically ambiguous person can be in this meeting, so it's not like an attack on the White people in the room feeling unshielded at the moment.'"

She and other participants were assigned to work with communities of color and indigeneity noted being unqualified to facilitate these spaces and being used as buffers to protect their White coworkers or superiors responsible for this work.

A Japanese-White (*Hapa*) American used this positionality to their advantage when conducting focus groups to inform the development of an exhibition about race:

> "I ran all those focus groups, and the reason I ran them was because everyone was like, 'You're ethnically ambiguous. You can go talk to a mixed group of folks. They're not quite sure if you're an insider or not, and you won't be seen as a White authoritarian figure coming in to ask this. You can slip into these mixed-race groups and foster a conversation.' And I think that was true. I think my White coworkers probably would have had a much different conversation in those groups than I did, even though the groups were mixed. There were Black and Hispanic and Asian, all mixed together. And we did that on purpose. We would have gotten very different data if we'd done ethnic specific groups, but the point of the exhibition was really to get people thinking about other ethnicities, as well as their own."

In contrast to the previous participant, her team was transparent in the purpose for assigning her to lead the focus groups. The team understood the performative behavior evoked when a White facilitator interrogated and observed participants of color for research and development versus the presence of a racially ambiguous facilitator. In this experience, she felt empowered that only she could bring the most impact to the project.

The findings of this study gathered from participants' personal narratives and reflections and demonstrated many variations and intensities of systemic barriers and supports experienced by Asian American museum staff throughout their careers in this field. The data named four experiential themes of barriers and systems of support: 1) education ceilings and financial difficulties; 2) racial isolation and relationships; 3) racialized expectations; and 4) racialized tokenism and buffering.

Discussion

First, participants experienced promotional and salary ceilings determined by the completion of post-graduate education. Participants hiring entry-level staff and interns questioned this qualification and removed it from their job postings with the understanding that this would increase the diversity of their institution and the museum field at large. Their financial struggles varied from inconvenient to critical, contradicting the assumption that Asian Americans are the wealthiest of minorities when, in reality, they have the largest wealth gap (De La Cruz- Viesca et al., 2015). Participants who received financial, emotional, or both kinds of support from their parents expressed gratitude and more flexibility in garnering more experience from unpaid or low waged museum work. Participants responsible for hiring staff and interns identified this significant barrier preventing their museums from diversifying staff and interns. However, one participant noted belonging and reassurance from her mentor, the executive director of her museum, who advised her to not pursue post-graduate education, claimed that all she needed to learn about serving her community occurred through their institution. These varying experiences and advice are evidence of shifts in how museums at the institutional and interpersonal levels are reevaluating the minimum requirement of graduate degrees and years of experience.

Second, participants experienced racial isolation when they were the only or one of the few Asian American staff at their museums. Similarly, in Poon's study on Asian American students' experiences with racial microaggressions (2011) and her later study with Hune about Asian American doctoral students' experiences (2009), participants named the feelings of racial isolation and developed relationships with other colleagues of color. Chou and Feagin's (2015) respondents reported that White coworkers better understood the appropriation of Black culture and history but did not apply the same understanding to their Asian and Asian American colleagues. This study's participants experienced parallels after the murder of George Floyd and the formation of DEAI committees and taskforces but noted silence from their White coworkers and superiors regarding anti-Asian violence.

Third, participants noticed racialized expectations that assumed their duty to participate, contribute or lead DEAI committees and working with communities of color. The less staff of color present, the more they felt obligated to contribute despite doing more emotional labor and education than their White colleagues. Some participants refused to join DEAI committees because they surmised that the approach and mission of these groups would not result in long- lasting impacts for the institution, its staff and the communities they served. Chou and

Feagin's (2015) participants hesitated in participating in social and racial activism for their fear of retaliation and disproval by White peers. These actions contradict the assumptions of the model minority myth which assumes they will side with their White peers' anti-racist visions without naming the specific harms. From Manzano, Poon, and Na's (2017) study on Asian American undergraduate students' experiences in leadership and activism, their participants noted how universities openly celebrated their commitment to diversity and inclusion but failed to follow through on racial discrimination reports. This study's participants shared similar feelings in their museums and DEAI committees that they participated in or observed.

When participants worked with familiar communities and shared similar or the same racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and locational identities and experiences, they conveyed more fulfillment and connection with them through community engagement, mentorship, or both. In Poon and Hune's (2009) study on Asian American doctoral students' racialized experiences, the presence of Asian American faculty advisors did not guarantee empowering relationships, but participants shared positive experiences, confidence and personal connections with them. Participants conscientious of role modeling and mentoring emerging Asian American museum professionals did so as educators to their communities or supervisors to other staff and interns.

Lastly, as the buffer between other communities of color and White staff, participants experienced positive and negative impacts on their perceptions of how management valued them and for what reasons. Racial ambiguity is characteristic of the Asian American experience, especially when juxtaposed to other communities of color and White people because, "...they are neither wholly accepted into white privilege nor fully subjected to institutional discrimination" (Ho, 2015, p. 12). Participants felt tokenized when their racial ambiguity buffered White colleagues from communities of color or in tribal consultation without their consent or expertise. These tasks were outside of their job descriptions, they were not trained to perform them or they were inequitably compensated or not compensated at all. Chou and Feagin (2015) articulated that the dominant White group maintained a position of power to rate and assign groups of color to form a racial hierarchy. As a result, being second to Whiteness in the racial hierarchy puts Asian Americans in the position of the racial buffer between White people and other peoples of color. In this study, White management and supervisors delegated these tasks, and participants' positive and negative experiences in working with communities of color were largely determined by their choice to participate and lead.

Limitations

Many Asian American studies scholars agree that the monolithic term "Asian American" obscures the immense diversity of Asian-descent peoples in the United States (Espiritu, 1992; De La Cruz-Viesca, 2015; Chou and Feagin, 2015; Ho, 2015; Poon and Hune, 2009). One of the aims of this study was to emphasize this through highlighting the diverse experiences of participants in relation to racial and ethnic identities and being identified and self-identifying as Asian American.

This study interviewed 23 participants, and they do not represent the entirety of Asian American museum staff's experiences. Their collective demographic information is not proportionate or an accurate reflection of the actual population of Asian Americans in the United States. However, using CRT methodology requires in-depth interviews and analyses per participant to capture and name racialized experiences commonly overlooked in quantitative and impersonal data collection methods.

Implications

This research sought to amplify the individual and diverse experiences of Asian American museum staff through a CRT methodology that generated knowledge and validated racialized experiences typically marginalized by quantitative racial and ethnic data. This article contributes to research on the diverse Asian American experience and emphasizes the museum's responsibility to emerging professionals of color, workplace culture, and anti-racism work within the institution and for the communities it serves.

One participant asked, "When you say Asian Pacific America or Asian Americans… There's an identity crisis there. What does that mean? How are you going to tell their stories? And depending on how you count them, it's over 35, 40, 50 different ethnicities. It's not humanly possible to tell all those stories in one building…" Conducting studies on more specific Asian American ethnic groups may be the most logical next step, but one cannot neglect the many intersections of Asian America, such as multiracialism, ethnic identity, gender, location, time, mental and physical abilities, and more.

As this study demonstrated, deep and active listening and reflection revealed how Asian American staff build from personal, academic, and professional experiences to make cases for equitable compensation and becoming the mentors they wish they had. Future researchers

should consider the necessary trust between them and their participants. Part of this trust is the assurance of confidentiality and that their experiences and feelings will be used as credible data in the push for systemic change in the pipeline to museum careers.

If museums as institutions born from colonization and White supremacy fail to dismantle the racism they were founded on, they will continue to harm themselves and the peoples within and around them. Asian American museum staff, like many other museum professionals, did not enter the field with goals of making high incomes or salaries commensurate to the actual labor. Participants were acutely aware of how racial isolation, tokenism, expectations, and buffering affected them and their peers, and they were determined to be the solution in dismantling systemic harm within their institutions and the field at large. Thus, Asian American museum staff enduring the systemic barriers that attempted to deter them from entering and staying in their careers are simultaneously becoming systems of support through mentorship and their wishes for future generations of Asian American museum professionals.

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To my Asian American diaspora family, this is for us. We are here, and we belong. Our lives are rich, and our stories are brave. May we never

be part, half, or quarter of something but be wholly ourselves and find self-love and pride in that.

I was born on the lands of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Nations and am descended from Chinese immigrants of Jiaojiang, Taizhou. I occupy land stolen from the Coast Salish peoples, namely the Duwamish, Suquamish, and Muckleshoot tribes of the past and present. My growth and success are attributed to the risks and labor my grandparents and parents endured in pursuit of the freedom of choice and opportunity promised to them by White supremacy at the cost of perpetuating colonialism unto the Indigenous peoples whose land they settled on. It is our responsibility to unlearn the comforts of indulging in our approximation to Whiteness and be active accomplices in anti-racism and decolonization justice for all of us.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introduction/Getting started Please introduce yourself with your

- Name
- Pronouns
- Age
- Where you are calling from
- How you ethnically and racially identify as
- Your job title

The Path

- Starting from high school, describe your path from high school student to your current job.
  - College
    - Degree(s)/program(s)
    - Internships
    - Assistantships
  - Outside of school opportunities
    - Internships
    - Volunteer
    - Fellowships
  - Key people
    - Mentors/teachers
    - Coworkers/classmates
  - Previous museum jobs
  - Current position

The Barriers and Supports

Barrier

- What would you say were the barriers deterring you from working at museums as an emerging professional?
  - How did you respond to them?
  - Did you anticipate them?
- Are there any barriers you are currently facing in moving up or investing in professional development at work? (Promotion, raises, more responsibilities, etc.)

Support

- What were pivotal moments in which you experienced support in pursuing your job (in the museum)?
  - By what or who?
    - Mentors
    - Museum programs
    - Internships, volunteering, etc.
    - Degree(s)

- How did those moments or catalysts contribute to your pursuit? To continue to work?

Being Asian American in the Museum

- Do you think the barriers and supports that you experienced are because of your identity
- as an Asian American? Describe why or why not.
- What are moments at work in which you feel your identity as an Asian American is most visible? Most invisible?
  - Which ones were empowering because you are Asian American?
  - Which ones harmed you?
- What are similarities you notice between your path into your job compared to your non-Asian American colleagues or coworkers? Differences?

Reflection

- What is something you would have done differently?
- What is a career choice that you are most proud of?
- What is one thing you would like to see change about how museums invest in their Asian American staff? In emerging professionals?
- How are you involved in uplifting emerging Asian American museum professionals?
  - Or How could you imagine yourself uplifting emerging Asian American museum professionals?
- What advice would you give to emerging museum professionals who also identify as Asian American?
- Since we are at the end of this interview, I would like you to take a few minutes to reflect on the questions I've asked and the responses you've shared. Is there anything more you would like to say?
  - What is something you will carry with you from this interview into your own work?
    - Something you will continue to do? Something different?
  - What is something that has been on your mind recently regarding the Asian American identity and/or community and the role of museums?

Follow-up

- Once the research article is complete, would you like me to send it to you?