

Foreigners to Diversity: East Asian International Students, Race,
and the Global Geographies of U.S. Higher Education

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that the racial subjectivities of East Asian international students from the 2010s to the 2020s have been shaped by budgetary logics in U.S. public higher education. It explores the debates in the 2010s about non-resident student enrollment, focusing on the University of California system, and international students' implication in the Stop Asian Hate and higher education labor movements in the 2020s. It then examines how racial formations that emerged from these two decades were lived at the campus scale from the perspective of international student life. In this investigation, “diversity”—or the contemporary cultural paradigm through which race knowledges have been mediated in everyday university life—serves as a tool for tracking the heterogenous race politics practiced in U.S. higher education. Engaging with institutional diversity was important for this project to bring light to the historical

amnesia diversity promotes in international students' perceptions and experiences of race and racism in the U.S. Since the 1980s, but much more pronounced following the Great Recession of 2008, U.S. universities responded to public disinvestment from higher education by turning to the global student market to rake up tuition revenue. This strategy of accumulation has been enabled by the global geographies of "new" U.S. imperialism and exploits the immigration apparatus as a technology for manipulating the flow of labor and capital. Thus, from "cash cows" milked for tuition to victims of anti-Asian violence with the Covid-19 outbreak, East Asian international students' experiences of racialization in the U.S. are embedded within the global reach of U.S. higher education to reproduce its financial future. However, the feasibility of this revenue stream was thrown into question in the 2020s with the unabashed white nationalist agenda of the Trump administration, as a part of its broader assault against public higher education in its current form. Among international students and their allies and advocates, these recent attacks simply reaffirmed the chronic challenges international students faced at the neoliberal university. By documenting these reactions, this dissertation offers insights about opportunities for solidarity that this acute moment presents to assemble a movement for a university worth fighting for.

For my parents and grandfather

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Learning about Diversity

In a YouTube video posted in April 2021, Selim, owner of the channel “Selim’s Chalk,” reflected on a mandatory online anti-discrimination training she took at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) as an international graduate student from South Korea.¹ The video was titled, “My Reflections on how American Universities Deal with Discrimination, Diversity, and PC [Political Correctness].” Given the contents, which included lessons on sex-based discrimination, gendered language, dating violence, stalking, bystander intervention, and violence prevention, Selim was most likely referring to a Title IX training. In compliance with the Illinois Preventing Sexual Violence in Higher Education Act (IPSVHE) of 2015, in February 2016, the UIUC had rolled out annual Title IX trainings required of all students and campus employees. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in any institution that receives federal funding, enforced by the Office of Civil Rights under the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). Sexual assault and harassment at university campuses became a highly visible issue in the 2010s, and under the Obama administration (2009-2017), the DOE had issued new recommendations to implement prevention education at colleges and universities. Recorded during the height of Covid-19, Selim’s video description read:

Anti-Asian racism has recently emerged as a major social issue. At U.S. universities, discrimination and diversity education can almost feel excessive. (When for students studying abroad like us, the more important issues are immigration and visa related) In this video, I share my frank feelings and opinions as a Korean international student and

¹ “Ch`ok,” pronounced like “chalk,” means instinctual awareness in Korean.

migrant in the U.S. (Selim's Chalk, 2021)²

Selim was surprised by the myriad of ways in which one's speech can be perceived as discriminatory or offensive. The opening vignette started with her saying, "One thing that stood out to me was that it is apparently sexist to say, 'pregnant woman.' Rather, you should say pregnant person or people." She proceeded to talk about her own experiences beyond the Title IX training where she "noticed that white American-born professors tend to be cautious about correcting my English as an international student. It is the first-generation immigrant professors who are more direct with me, telling me things like, 'you won't survive if your English doesn't improve.'" She did not comment on her feelings about those different interactions.

While the training itself emerged from federal and state laws about gender and sex-based discrimination in educational institutions, Selim's experience of Title IX was indistinguishable from an overall culture of political correctness she encountered in the U.S. "Honestly, before coming here, I didn't even know what PC was," she said, "I thought PC stood for 'fishy' like fish." The captions read, "I thought people were saying 'fishy' or 'phishing.'" In one 16-minute video, she seamlessly connected the Title IX training to political correctness as speech practice, to the liberal culture of higher education, and to sociocultural diversity in the U.S. and the kinds of education necessary in such national context. She observed:

Compared to Korea, the U.S. is so diverse racially and culturally. People have all kinds of different norms, so it seems like what counts as 'commonsense' is more confusing here. There has also been a long history of discrimination and exclusion in the U.S. caused by problematic behavior that people engage in unconsciously, since there are so many minority groups and cultures. I think they [the U.S.] are very hands-on about educating people on a variety of potentially problematic behavior because of those concerns. On top of that, I think it is because university environments by nature tend to be more

² The original video description and recording are in Korean, with direct quotes from the diversity training provided in English. For the purpose of this write-up, I translated the contents from Korean to English as a native Korean speaker with no professional training in translation.

progressive and value political correctness.

On her channel, Selim uploaded videos about her experiences and advice as an international social science graduate student turned data scientist in Silicon Valley. She had moved to the U.S. for the first time in 2015 to pursue a M.A./PhD program in Psychology at the UIUC. By the time that she posted about the Title IX training six years later, diversity had seeped into all corners of Selim's everyday life in the form of sensitive speech. In her view, diversity looked like white, American-born professors shying away from commenting on her English while cautiously correcting her grammar, or no one saying a word about her physical appearance since she moved to the U.S., so much as describe her hair color. Any mention of someone's race or ethnic culture, she learned, could be harmful for diversity. From Selim's perspective, diversity meant universities ensuring that not one of its students or employees, foreign or otherwise, engages in offensive behavior that may disrupt social harmony. As a migrant, an Asian, and someone who sees herself as physically weak, she appreciated arming herself with knowledge about the subtle and overt forms of discrimination she may experience. "As you know," she addressed the viewers, "anti-Asian hate crimes have lately emerged as a major social issue, and I admit that has been scary for me too," she said. Her recorded reactions to the Title IX training effectively captured the overwhelming centrality of individual behavior and conduct in the current paradigm of institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), where the university assumes the role as arbiter of political correctness.³

³ Hereafter, I use "institutional DEI," "DEI," and "institutional diversity" interchangeably to refer to diversity-coded practices, policies, and rhetoric in contemporary U.S. higher education.

On the whole, Selim professed an ambivalent relationship to DEI. While she could see its merits and thought she too benefited from it tangentially, Selim concluded that diversity ultimately did not have someone like her in mind, an outsider to U.S. national culture:

I think it is fair to say that anti-discrimination and respecting diversity is primarily about creating a more welcoming national culture for Americans, such as Asian American or African American people. Should migrants like me also be considered in creating an inclusive environment? I think that's still divisive and controversial. To be fair, a lot of people want to move to the U.S., so it makes sense that they are less tolerant towards migrants compared to Americans. (Selim's Chalk, 2021)

The extensive range of sensitivity issues her university trained its students and employees on suggested to Selim it at least took the well-being of minoritized Americans seriously. If institutional diversity was about making sure everyone feels welcome, Selim could certainly think of ways in which she did not feel included. Specifically, the two biggest impediments were the language barriers she faced and immigration regulations. Her daily struggles, including her feelings of isolation and exclusion, were informed by the fact that she was a non-native English speaker and that she was new to everything in the U.S. “Of course, as someone who chose to move here, you can’t expect everything to be exactly the way you’d like,” she admitted, “It’s the reality and I’ve accepted it. I’m just complaining. ... The real issue is that I’m not familiar with the U.S., not that anyone is intentionally trying to make me feel othered.” Despite her acquiescence, DEI seemed to suggest that those difficulties too nominally belonged in the conversation about discrimination and diversity. “The U.S. may be progressive, but it’s not so progressive that people are being taught that non-native English speakers need special consideration too. Maybe there will come a day when that will also be considered a form of discrimination, but it hasn’t happened yet.” In addition, she quipped, “the U.S. already discriminates in terms of who gets to settle down here anyway. If you choose to work in

industries that the U.S. doesn't have much of a demand for, they'll deport you any time." In the captions, she added, "through the control of visas or other temporary stay authorizations."

Perhaps in the future, she thought, the U.S. culture of diversity would advance enough to consider her experiences too. At once, Selim felt that the subtext of diversity was that East Asian and Indian students were not its intended beneficiaries, even though no one explicitly said that to her. In her closing reflections, she shared:

Asians are a minority in absolute numbers, but I don't think we are considered socially as a minority. Chinese and Korean students constitute a high percentage in the international student population. So even if there's a scholarship for minorities, in my opinion, a Korean or Chinese person is not likely to receive those benefits. ... Americans seem to have the impression that most people arriving from Korea, Japan, China, and India are highly educated and are entrepreneurial enough to survive on their own. If I had to guess, they might even feel threatened by our social position or ability and think, 'Do these groups really need more help to get ahead? They seem to do fine on their own.' But if you express that, it's racism, so no one would say that out loud.

In Selim's view, her East Asianness, on top of her foreignness, disqualified her as a proper subject of DEI, given its associations with economic and educational privilege. In a nutshell, as an educational migrant at a U.S. public flagship university, Selim's understanding of diversity in 2021 was the performance of political correctness as is considered appropriate in U.S. culture. She was willing to learn the apparently well-intentioned lessons in her newfound national context, but received mixed messages about what kinds of claims DEI allowed her to make regarding her own struggles as an international student from East Asia.

Foreigners to Diversity: East Asian International Students, Race, and the Global Geographies of U.S. Higher Education takes Selim's ambivalence toward the Title IX training—or what she described as a training on discrimination, diversity, and political correctness—as a starting point for understanding the racial formation of East Asian international students in the contemporary U.S. culture of diversity. It tracks the multiple meanings of diversity that circulate

through institutions of higher education in the 2010s and onward as they come into contact with international students from East Asia. *Foreigners to Diversity* identifies the 2008 recession, the Stop Asian Hate movement, and the 2020s higher education labor movement as key moments for uncovering what lies underneath the institutional DEI narratives that East Asian international students are told about themselves and others in the U.S.

The central claim of this dissertation is that the racial subjectivities of East Asian international students tells a story about U.S. higher education's embrace of market logics as a public good and its attempt to protect its financial future in the face of new challenges to international student recruitment in the 2020s. This story unfolds within the global geographies of U.S. higher education that constituted the reorganization of social relations and national economies in U.S. client states and set the foundations for today's global market for U.S. education. In the 2010s when universities started taking advantage of this market, diversity provided a cover for the privatization of public higher education to questionable degrees of success. In turn, international students absorbed the discontent of an unconvinced U.S. public as the very embodiments of narrowing domestic educational access. Even as universities sang the praises of international student enrollment for diversity in public higher education, international students themselves found that U.S. campuses were severely ill-equipped for their arrival. In the wake of federal attacks against student visa holders and Covid-19 in the late 2010s and early 2020s, universities again invoked diversity—or “hegemonic anti-racism” which I discuss in Chapter 2—but this time, to pacify concerns among current or prospective international students that may disrupt the accumulation of non-resident tuition revenue. In other words, institutional diversity in relation to international students during this period could be understood as universities' disavowal of right-wing attacks that pose a threat to their bottom line in the global

student market. Such proclamations of diversity, even in their appeal to international students as consumer subjects, fell flat amid a national political climate that proudly embraced anti-migrant sensibilities instead of hide and disavow it. Further, they failed to answer to various forms of support international students sought from their university to navigate the crisis, including assistance with tuition, job insecurity, harassment, and immigration-related anxieties. By the 2020s, the American Dream by way of a U.S. university degree was starting to seem like a stale promise. At once, DEI put a smoke screen over the logic of budgeting that overwhelmingly organized the institutional life of international students themselves, as administrators invested in their well-being held out hope for DEI to make good on its promise to students.

The false gospel of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

From Selim's standpoint, the gospel of institutional diversity goes something like this: (1) Diversity trainings are proof that institutions of higher education in the U.S. are doing everything they can to promote social justice; (2) What is most important is that everyone does their part and behaves with cultural sensitivity in relation to minority groups; (3) That said, some differences deserve to be treated with more cultural sensitivity than others; and (4) These others include foreign migrants, who are not part of the national culture, and East Asians and Indians, because they are model minorities and constitute a large proportion of the international student population. Selim was critical that DEI enabled the American myth of meritocracy, that anyone regardless of background can be successful as long as they work hard enough in the U.S. Yet, she could appreciate the efforts made to create a general atmosphere of equal opportunity.

The gospel of DEI nonetheless brought up a few questions for even an open-minded non-believer such as Selim. The first had to do with its suspect obsession with the politically correct conduct of everyday individuals, which she noted in the video description could “almost feel

excessive.” The second concerned the poorly defined terms through which institutional diversity determined which differences are more significant than others. As Selim reflected on the implicit disqualification of East Asian and Indian migrants as subjects of DEI, she added, “If you are from Southeast Asia or the Middle East, however, I think some of the scholarship opportunities for minorities may be available to you. I also heard that hiring committees may take your country of origin into consideration when you apply for professor jobs.” Regardless, so much of Selim’s daily experiences at a university setting involved the ubiquitous proselytizing of institutional diversity. It manifested as quarterly mandatory departmental DEI seminars, diversity statements one must submit when applying to academic jobs, required annual Title IX trainings which she perceived as a diversity training of sorts, and interactions with students, peers, and faculty. She chalked up the questions she had about this DEI fervor, with a heavy emphasis on performing political correctness, to the fact that she was foreign and still new to U.S. national culture.

I call DEI a false gospel, because it attempts to convert someone like Selim into the mores and morality of social justice and community salvation that have long been untethered from more structural solutions that used to circulate in mainstream debates about what diversity in public higher education should look like. In the latter half of the 20th century, these included discussions of affirmative action, open admissions, and higher education that is truly available for a diverse public (Ferguson, 2012, 2016; N. Mitchell, 2018; Newfield, 2008a; Takagi, 1992). It is undeniable that subtle and overt forms of interpersonal discrimination and harassment are persistent issues that harm the livelihoods and well-being of women, queer and trans people, people of color, disabled people, and many others in higher education. Indeed, institutional diversity has commonly been deployed as a branding mechanism to brush such harms under the rug, as “it allows the university to promote itself, creating a surface or illusion of happiness”

(Ahmed, 2012, p. 72). As Berrey's (2015) investigation showed, diversity or cultural sensitivity trainings and narrow representational advancements in the elite strata proliferated across private and public sectors while redistributive reforms, such as wage parity or affirmative action, were sidelined, rolled back, and delegitimized. According to Berrey (2015), "It [selective inclusion] is a mechanism of containing and co-opting racial justice, as it largely leaves untouched persistent racial inequalities and the gulf between rich and poor. This is the taming of the civil rights movement's provocative demands for integration, equality, and full citizenship" (p. 9). Selim's reflections on institutional diversity in 2021 is telling of a proselytizing project that achieved considerable success rewriting the contentious history of DEI from the mid to late 20th century to one about progressive institutions striving to accommodate the "many minority groups and cultures" in the U.S. While Mitchell (2018) spoke of a "now hegemonic common sense that diversity does or should exist to do some measure of justice by black folks," the account of DEI Selim put on display was one where Black folks are reproduced as one of many minority groups in a diverse world. In fact, Selim experienced institutional diversity as a site of failure for international students, as a non-native English speaker and a visa holder, and concluded that diversity was for Americans and Americans only. She was also aware of the implicit understanding that East Asians were exempt within the nebulous schema of DEI that was allegedly about creating an inclusive environment for all minorities. Given the ongoing erasure of anti-Blackness from mainstream DEI narratives in a Canadian context, Walcott (2019) proffered, "diversity as an idea has reached its logical end" (p. 394).

Then why talk about DEI? Taking up Mitchell's (2018) call to make use of the "critical value" of diversity, I contend that the subject formation of East Asian international students in the current DEI paradigm provides an opportunity to recover the histories that defined the terms

of what is “thinkable” in commonsense understandings about race politics today (Lawson & Elwood, 2018). Through this interrogation, DEI emerges as a well-resourced campaign of historical amnesia, intentional or not, that intimately shaped the racial subjectivities, politics, and campus lives of international students since they entered mainstream conversations about U.S. higher education in the 2010s. This campaign continues to unfold in the overlapping national and global geographies of U.S. higher education post-World War II, characterized by various iterations of global U.S. hegemony, the growing chasm between U.S. public universities and their public mission, and higher education’s attempts to safeguard its global revenue stream amid various threats to it in the 2020s. As the contemporary ideology through which race knowledges are mediated and circulated in higher education, DEI informs international students’ experiences and perceptions of race and racism in the U.S. When we follow the changing tune of DEI in relation to international students, what we find is a university that is gathering resources for its survival. However, its institutional vision, or what it is trying to survive for, is increasingly harder to grasp. Crawley (2018) wrote:

‘University’ describes a gathering of resources. But in our neoliberal world, such gathering is at the expense of the intensification of displacement and degradation through settler-colonial logics of land acquisition, the privatization of knowledge production and the adjunctification of faculties, the making customers of students, the financialization and profitability of research projects. (p. 214)

It is regarding this “current (neo)liberal version of the university” which Sabati and Wozniak (2023) provocatively concluded, “Yes, this university must die, but no, we cannot afford to let the university go gently into the good night” (p. 171). They submitted that a different university was possible. One that can be “context-specific, attend to the materialities of people and place, to the history-presents that produce current injustices, and to creating ways of redistributing resources, liberation, love, and dignity for all” (p. 175). Newfield (2008) may refer to something

like this as higher education for “human development.” This study draws attention to the nascent potential for a different university to emerge from the perspective of international student life in the 2020s.

Race and East Asian international students in the contemporary U.S.

The primary focus of this project is the racial subjectivities of East Asian international students in today’s U.S. national culture. I wanted to understand: how do East Asian international students come to see themselves and how do others see international students through the prism of “race”? In this project, race appears as both a cultural concept and a complicated social structure that operates at national and global scales. As a cultural common sense in U.S. higher education today, race denotes something that is central and unique to U.S. national culture and identity and speaks to the goodness of U.S. institutions. Scholars have traced its construct to the post-World War II period, when the U.S. empire-state absorbed anti-racism into the official lexicon of U.S. nationalism and imperialism (Dudziak, 2000; Melamed, 2006). Amid credible threats against its legitimacy from the Black freedom movement and anti-colonial movements around the world, the U.S. embraced anti-racism as official state rhetoric to buy domestic peace and justify the U.S. as an imperial power in its quest to expand the sphere of capitalism. While anti-racism as state ideology has had multiple meanings and instantiations, the fact remains that disavowing racism is, or has been until the two Trump administrations (2017-2021; 2025-present), the commonly held position of many powerful U.S. institutions, including those of higher education. The hegemonic understanding of racism today is the interpersonal expression of prejudice and bigotry based on one’s phenotype or other physical characteristics. This is the narrow definition of racism that Taylor (2016) argued was made mainstream through the successful right-wing backlash of the 1970s and 1980s, as the Nixon and Reagan administrations launched and

finetuned the politics of colorblindness. Colorblindness—or the notion that full racial equality has been achieved after the outlawing of overt race-based discrimination—justified the rollback of federal antipoverty programs that disproportionately harmed Black communities. This in turn opened the door to blame the poor living standards of all working-class people on individual failure, rather than a systemic one. In Taylor’s (2016) assessment, “Colorblindness has become the default setting for how Americans understand how race and racism work. It is repeatedly argued that the absence of racial insult means that racial discrimination is not at play” (p. 72). In *Foreigners to Diversity*, race shows up as an aspect of U.S. national culture that serves as evidence of U.S. goodness and unity for its official condemnation of racial bigotry.

Even in the “absence of racial insult,” scholars have found that East Asian international students are subject to patterns of sociocultural exclusion, workplace exploitation, and harassment (J. Lee, 2020; J. J. Lee & Cantwell, 2012; Taylor, 2016, p. 72; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). These patterns were less so associated with students’ phenotypical characteristics, but more with their cultural foreignness, English accent, stereotypes about their country of origin, and their vulnerability in the U.S. immigration apparatus as visa holders. In their influential piece, J. J. Lee and Rice (2007) diagnosed these common international student experiences as a form of “neo-racism,” borrowing from Balibar (1991). As an analytical concept, neo-racism intended to capture the growing popularity of *cultural*, rather than biological, justifications for racism observed primarily in France in the 1980s but also transnationally, albeit with great variation. Of course, there was nothing new about using cultural logics to justify racial violence, as empires have always been race-making projects by establishing hierarchies between those considered human and less than human by dominating powers (Attewell, 2024; Tadiar, 2003). National security and preserving national culture have historically been a part of the racial vocabulary of

the U.S. empire (Jung, 2022). However, Balibar (1991) attempted to name a version of “racism without race” that tried to mask those hierarchies behind horizontal notions of cultural *difference* and by rendering racism as a *natural* response of the “masses” to encountering difference (p. 23). Such rhetorical devices, Balibar (1991) noted, were often deployed in the realm of immigration in France to make public animosity toward migrants seem inevitable. Neo-racism availed scholars of international student well-being a theoretical framework to recover race as a global structure and ideology, against the hegemonic definition of race in U.S. national culture as a phenotype-based demographic category.

Race also operated as a culturally familiar script that gives intangible structures and social relations a tangible form in certain bodies and peoples. Specifically, Wu (2018) argued that representations of East Asian international students in U.S. media rendered them as personifications of the overwhelming market logics that dictate U.S. higher education today. The everyday grievances that arise in the campus community amid the commodification of education were dislodged unto the international student figure. The East Asian—and most conspicuously, Chinese—international student self-isolates from their peers and instructors and often engages in academic dishonesty to get good grades at all costs. This figure evokes the transhistorical racialization of Asians as inscrutable and deceitful. *Foreigners to Diversity* finetunes this analysis by employing the Marxist concept of commodity fetishization and recasting it in the global context of neoliberal U.S. imperialism.

Scholars have long argued that institutions shape people’s sense of self and meaning-making (Billo & Mountz, 2016; Longhurst, 2003; Sharp, 2020). “As more or less stable patterns in, and mechanisms for, organizing social and political life,” institutions make “subjects” of people by (re)producing personally meaningful ways in which individuals make sense of their

experiences and how they relate to others within overlapping structures of power (Ashutosh, 2020; Kuus, 2020, p. 120; Probyn, 2003). Universities are one of such places, and DEI has been a powerful language for constructing university subjects (Abelmann, 2009). Trying to understand the subjectivities of international students in U.S. culture brought me down an unexpected path to confront the unrelenting rift between public universities and their public mission and the “retreat of race” in the U.S. (Takagi, 1992). This was happening at the same time as U.S. intervention overseas spawned national economies such as South Korea that feed the global U.S. hegemony. Korean statecraft after the Korean War (1950-1953) organized domestic social relations according to developmental and civilizational notions of progress and U.S.-centric cosmopolitanism (Koo, 2022a; J. S.-Y. Park, 2009; S. J. Park & Abelmann, 2004). Without accounting for these global histories, it was impossible to make sense of the way international students experienced and were figured in the current DEI paradigm.

This project is indebted to different bodies of work that is concerned with higher education as a site of educational migration. First, it engages with the literature on East Asian international students’ experiences and perceptions of race in the U.S. (Kwon et al., 2019a; J. J. Lee & Cantwell, 2012; Z. S. Ritter, 2016; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2019; Yao et al., 2019). More and more scholars have also started documenting the motivations of East Asian international students to pursue a higher education degree in the U.S. (Fong, 2011; Jo, 2024; S. Kim, 2023; Koo, 2022a; Ma, 2020b). The drive for educational emigration to the U.S. continues to be informed by complex national and global contexts that give rise to Western-centric cosmopolitan aspirations, desires to get ahead in the neoliberal economies of their countries of origin, and what Koo (2022) called the emergence of a global middle class. On the other side of the equation, critical university studies shed light on the motivations of U.S. universities to

recruit and admit international students who pay non-resident tuition rates in the context of the privatization of public higher education (N. Mitchell, 2018; Newfield, 2008a; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). While this body of work tends to mention international student migration only in passing, it provides important context for U.S. domestic histories that inform contemporary racial subjectivities of East Asian international students. Lastly, this dissertation also engages with Asian American studies and its attempts to account for Asian-raced subjectivities that fall outside its activist disciplinary agenda but nonetheless provide crucial insights into U.S. racial politics (Cheng, 2023; Ninh, 2022; Wu, 2018). Working at the intersection of these various bodies of scholarship, I join the likes of Boggs (2013) and Thomas (2024) to explore East Asian international student experiences against the backdrop of race as a global structure and the contemporary politics of U.S. higher education.

Structure

Foreigners to Diversity: East Asian International Students, Race, and the Global Geographies of U.S. Higher Education is composed of three chapters. Together, they tell a story about the deteriorating legitimacy of public higher education in the eyes of the U.S. public, institutional attempts to recuperate it amid different iterations of right-wing advancements, and the role that East Asian international students unwittingly take on in such attempts, informed by their own motivations and desires. This dissertation also brings attention to the changing culture of diversity, as it implicates and is experienced by international students, from the 2010s and 2020s as the hegemonic language through which race and racial politics have been narrated in higher education.

Chapter 1 “‘Foreign’ Capital in U.S. Higher Ed: Nonresident Student Enrollment Debates” locates the racialization of East Asian international students as unwelcome foreigners

in the educational life of the nation within the global geographies of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2012). Borrowing Marxist interpretations of racism an expression of commodity fetishization, it situates the scapegoating of international students within the domestic conflicts that the “new” U.S. imperialism entailed (Gindin & Panitch, 2012). To lay the groundwork for subsequent chapters, Chapter 1 explicates the overlapping histories of the privatization of U.S. higher education, the utilities of foreign students to U.S. institutions, and the reorganization of national economies abroad that motivated students to emigrate to the U.S. for education. I take the University of California (UC) system as an example to examine the economic crash of 2008 as one defining moment in the creation of the international student as a racial figure. As state governments withdrew funding from public higher education, universities looked toward the global student market, particularly at the undergraduate level, as a promising source of tuition revenue. By the late 2010s, the federal government by and large started throwing its weight behind this strategy, naming education as a major U.S. export that more universities and colleges should be supported to monetize globally. At the same time, the narrowing doors of educational access in the U.S. stoked public discontent about the visibly growing number of majority non-white foreign students on university campuses. Many state lawmakers responded to their constituents by vocally bemoaning the increase in international student enrollment at the UCs for fear of displacing their counterparts with established state residency. Under such scrutiny, the UCs tried to justify its enrollment decisions by invoking “diversity,” but ultimately failed to appease concerns about international students crowding out in-state college-hopefuls. At the same time, the U.S., in collaboration with its client states, had successfully created a longstanding appetite overseas for U.S. education that universities in the

2000s could capitalize on as they confronted revenue shortfall. I unpack these connections by spotlighting the history of educational migration from South Korea to the U.S.

Chapter 2 “Hegemonic Anti-Racism and Its Limits: Stop Asian Hate and the Higher Education Labor Movement” sheds light on the diverse racial politics of East Asian international students in the 2020s through their participation in the Stop Asian Hate and the higher education labor movement. This chapter suggests that these two movements, juxtaposed against one another, demonstrated the limits of the hegemonic paradigm of anti-racism in issuing an adequate response to international students’ multifaceted vulnerabilities during this time. Leaning on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony by way of Stuart Hall (1986), I use “hegemonic anti-racism” to refer to the overemphasis of interpersonal bigotry in the contemporary commonsense about anti-racism, following critical accounts of racial liberalism in the U.S. since World War II (Dudziak, 2000; Lowe, 1996; Melamed, 2006). As international student presence became more palpable at university campuses across the U.S. in the 2010s, incidents of racism against international students caught the attention of higher education media, administrators, and scholars. Researchers sought to better understand international students’ experiences with race and racism. This body of work revealed that many non-white international students reported that their everyday lives in a new national environment were impacted by what they perceived as subtle or overt racism. Additionally, many international students themselves held on to preconceived notions about others based on racist beliefs. Thus, educators underscored the importance of educating international students about race in the U.S. through intentional programming or curricular requirements (Braskamp & Glass, 2012; Z. Ritter, 2012). At once, this body of research also revealed that many international students had a hard time or even

resisted locating themselves in U.S. race relations, racial discourse, and the project of anti-racism that many universities touted as their institutional mission.

Chapter 2 names these ambient sensibilities of hesitation as a “structure of feeling” (R. Williams, 1971). Rather than register it as a problem that needs to be fixed, I engage it as something to be productively understood through a critical examination of the contemporary national paradigm of anti-racism. In the 2020s, the Stop Asian Hate movement erupted across the country as the outbreak of Covid-19 revitalized anti-Asian racism and triggered racially motivated attacks against people of Asian descent in the U.S. Many Asian international students visibly participated in the Stop Asian Hate movement alongside their domestic counterparts calling for racial justice. Several media outlets read these developments as a moment of collective racial awakening. I provide a slightly different reading and propose that this moment shed light on the limits of hegemonic anti-racism, when juxtaposed against international students’ needs and demands that came to the fore during the same time through the higher education labor movement. The higher education industry rightfully raised alarm about the fears that incidents of racist violence stoked among international students. In particular, it emphasized the negative impacts of racism on international student recruitment and consequently on university finances. At the same time, international student employees organized around intensifying concerns of financial hardship and job insecurity in light of Covid-19. These efforts built on prior campaigns in the higher education labor movement that connected workplace issues to critiques of the immigration system, conceptualizing immigration as a technology of economic control. On the flip side, these advances betrayed the shortcomings of hegemonic anti-racism to account for the common difficulties international students faced in the 2020s.

Chapter 3 “The Logic of Budgeting and the International Student Life: A Case Study at Global University (GU)” explores how institutions of higher education reproduce the logic of budgeting at the scale of the campus by shaping student life through university offices and centers that directly interface with international students. I suggest that international student life since the late 2000s at one public flagship university, which I call the Global University (GU), has primarily been shaped by the students’ utility to the university as a source of non-resident tuition revenue. Employing institutional ethnography as method, this chapter traces the history of the formation and reorganization of three offices at GU. I read the campus as a local archive that tells a story about how universities have produced subjectivities that align with U.S. institutional interests through transnational educational migration. Thus, the orchestration of international student life on campus provides a snapshot of the mechanics of how universities reproduce certain ways of identifying and relating while letting others wither. For instance, GU’s infrastructure around international student life post-World War II was developed to utilize these educational migrants as citizen diplomats to facilitate U.S. global hegemony. As such, it created opportunities for international students to interact with non-university community members in the region to foster civilian goodwill. In recent years, the GU curtailed the reproduction of this imagined geography of international student sociality, instead directing its attention toward nurturing current students’ attachment to the GU, rather than the region, as prospective donors. To that end, it established a new international student support center, which represented international students in administrative discussions about different minority constituency groups that the university serves.

Chapter 3 also tackles one notable development in the aftermath of Covid-19 when the GU campus community started to recognize international students as students deserving of

institutional support. In previous years, staff whose job was to serve international students felt they were often met with disinterest or hesitation in their attempts to collaborate with campus partners. Sometimes, the resistance from campus partners had to do with the tensions that bled beyond university walls about whom U.S. public higher education is meant for. In other words, campus realities, both the campus climate as well as international students' own experiences, did not reflect GU's external communications in the 2010s which celebrated the growing number of international students on campus as a sign of progressive change in a globalizing world.

However, the Trump administration's brazen animosity toward international students precipitated a cultural shift on campus, where more administrators and faculty started taking interest in the structural conditions that made international students vulnerable to right-wing political attacks. Staff at international student serving offices welcomed the growing awareness on campus that conferred more legitimacy to their work. That said, it remains to be seen whether these attitudinal shifts would prompt the critique of the structural conditions that far predate the Trump era to become more mainstream, rather than treat them as an exception.

**“Foreign” Capital in U.S. Higher Ed:
Nonresident Student Enrollment Debates**

In the fall of 2009, the University of California (UC) Board of Regents approved a 32% increase to undergraduate resident or in-state tuition. Dizzying tuition hikes were coupled with massive layoffs, program cuts, and other cost-saving measures that ushered in drastic changes to the university (Gordon, 2009). For years, protests erupted up and down the UC campuses, characterized by marches, walk-outs, building occupations, and police violence against student protestors demanding a different pathway forward. This crisis at the UCs reflected the devastation felt in U.S. higher education more broadly following the Great Recession of 2008 triggered by the crash of the U.S. housing market. As state governments severely cut back funding for public higher education, universities such as the University of California turned to student tuition as the primary source of revenue. In 2011-2012, for the first time in the UC system, student tuition and fees surpassed state funding as the largest source of its core funds (Budget 2015-2016, 2014, p. 28). In addition to raising in-state tuition, this meant admitting more out-of-state or nonresident students who paid two to three times the price to attend the University of California. This trend had a distinctly global bent, with international undergraduate enrollment at public research universities nationwide increasing by 133% between 2007 and 2012, while domestic out-of-state enrollment stayed relatively stable (Khanna, 2021).

Through this 2008 crisis emerged the controversial figure of the international student as the embodiment of foreign capital and a budget item in the university's ledger. On the one hand, for state legislators and many of their constituents, these transnationally mobile students represented foreign agents narrowing educational access in the U.S., making the American

Dream increasingly seem out of reach. In the 2010/2011 academic year, 22% of all international students came from China, 14% from India, 10% from South Korea (hereafter “Korea”), 4% from Canada, and 3% from Taiwan (Leading Places of Origin, n.d.). With more than a third of students hailing from East Asia, and most notably China, this Asian-raced figure was in part a recycled version of readily available racist and nativist trope of Yellow Peril, a longstanding fearmongering stereotype of Asian foreigners invading the U.S. and the American way of life (Dong, 2017; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). The racialization of this student population reflected broader anxieties about the “Asian ‘takeover’” of U.S. institutions since the 1990s as Asian capital investment in North America increased and became more visible (Ong, 1999, p. 174). This panic was especially pronounced given that decades of European influence had not stirred similar angst in the U.S. Former Californian governor and UC Berkeley alum Jerry Brown’s (1975-1983; 2011-2019) blunt statement during a UC Board of Regents meeting in 2015 encapsulated the fixation on international students:

It just feels that whatever used to belong to the normal people of California ... it’s not available anymore ... And so you got your foreign students and you got your 4.0 folks, but just the kind of ordinary, normal students, you know, that got good grades but weren’t at the top of the heap there – they’re getting frozen out. (Rivard, 2015)

Having entered UC Berkeley in 1960, former governor Brown included himself, his two sisters, and his nieces and grand-nieces in the group of “normal” people who used to be able to attend the UCs with no difficulty. Rivard (2015) was quick to note, “It might not be fair to deem the Brown family ‘normal.’ Jerry Brown’s father, Pat, was governor the year Jerry enrolled at Berkeley. And after Jerry Brown graduated, he attended Yale Law School.” His family background aside, however, Brown’s concerns about foreign students displacing “normal” Californians reflected public discontent about the growing presence of international students on U.S. campuses. Such narratives heavily shaped international students’ campus experiences,

eclipsing the heterogeneous life journeys and support needs among them. They also informed students’ social lives as they try to unencumber themselves from racial stereotypes by distancing themselves from their peers (Kim, 2023). On the other hand, however, universities argued that nonresident student enrollment was simply necessary to keep public institutions alive given the reduction of state appropriations following the 2008 crisis. At once, they tried to assuage the skeptical public by insisting that this strategy only furthered universities’ contribution to the public by helping to maintain, or even expand, access for low-income in-state students that would be financially impossible otherwise. In addition, in their view, out-of-state students fostered a diverse and thus better learning environment for in-state students in the global 21st century.

This chapter places the tensions around nonresident student enrollment in the global geographies of “accumulation by dispossession,” a hallmark of what Harvey (2003, 2012) dubbed the “new” imperialism of the U.S. By naming “accumulation by dispossession,” Harvey attempted to capture “[t]he corporatization and privatization of hitherto public assets (such as universities), to say nothing of the wave of privatization (of water and public utilities of all kinds) that has swept the world, [which] indicate a new wave of ‘enclosing the commons’” (p. 148). At the turn of the 20th century, Harvey famously observed that a “new” form of U.S. imperialism may be taking shape as the U.S. turned to financial speculation as the primary mode of accumulation in the 1970s and away from industrial production. What made this iteration of imperialism novel was the renewed intensification of accumulation by dispossession as the U.S. expanded neoliberalism as the new global economic order to maintain its hegemony. Many critical scholars of neoliberalism have emphasized the continued importance of the state, and the U.S. empire-state in particular, in promoting capitalist interests by leveraging “its monopoly of

violence and definitions of legality” (Gindin & Panitch, 2012; Harvey, 2012, p. 224; Sassen, 2002). Accumulation by dispossession on a global scale required weaker economies, particularly in East and Southeast Asia as well as Latin America where productivity was high, to lower their barriers for international and notably U.S. capital investment, opening them up to the volatile whims of foreign finance capital. To that end, the U.S. state liberally utilized international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Through the 1980s and 1990s, the IMF implemented structural adjustment programs (SAPs) across Africa, Asias, and the Americas as a condition for providing loans to nations undergoing severe economic crises. Harvey (2003) explained:

Debt crises within particular countries (two-thirds of IMF members experienced a financial crisis after 1980, some more than twice) could be used, however, to reorganize the internal social relations of production in each country where they occurred in such a way as to favour the further penetration of external capitals. Domestic financial regimes, domestic product markets, and thriving domestic firms were, in this way, prised open for takeover by American, Japanese, or European companies. (p. 67).

SAP measures included the familiar tenets of neoliberalism: privatization, deregulation, and austerity. As such, they tended to devastate public infrastructures and social safety nets, erode worker rights and labor power, and exacerbate socioeconomic inequality. In the internal U.S., accumulation by dispossession in the educational infrastructure has manifested in ever-increasing tuition rates that drive students into debt, enlisting them in the predatory credit system (Newfield, 2016; Scarritt, 2026). Instead of a public good, university education came to function as a site of profit for the financial sector. In a striking study at one public university, Scarritt (2026) found that the majority of undergraduates surveyed over the preceding 10 years defended tuition over making college free. The unaffordability of public education taught today’s students to embrace the neoliberal doctrine that it was ultimately the scarcity of a degree that made their education valuable, not the knowledge or skills gained through it. From this perspective, tuition would help

maintain the existing order within the precarious economy students graduated into and guarantee them a superior place in the hierarchy by limiting others’ access to public education.

Chapter 1 sketches the overlapping histories of the ushering in of market logics in U.S. higher education, the utilities of foreign students to U.S. institutions, and the reorganization of national economies abroad that motivated students to emigrate to the U.S. for education. Together, these histories reveal a transnational pattern of accumulation by dispossession amid the changing shape of the global U.S. hegemony. I suggest that the controversial figure of the East Asian international student distracts from this bigger picture. In their ambitious book about the central role of the U.S. empire-state in making and managing contemporary global capitalism, Gindin and Panitch (2012) argued that:

[T]he fissures the crisis [of 2007-2008] produced did not take the form of conflicts between capitalist states, but of social conflict within them. The significance of the fact that the political fault-lines of global capitalism run within states rather than between them is, we suggest, replete with implications for the American empire’s capacity to sustain global capitalism in the twenty-first century. (p. 21)

I read the ongoing nonresident enrollment debates as a U.S. domestic expression of the intra-state conflicts Gindin and Panitch (2012) described. Thus, this chapter sets aside the question of whether or not nonresident students are beneficial or detrimental to universities’ public mission or how much nonresident student enrollment is good and how much is bad. Instead, it traces how East Asian international students have come to symbolize foreign capital, coveted by universities and met with suspicion by the general public, in a moment of crisis in U.S. higher education. This will help set the stage for later chapters which discuss East Asian international students’ perceptions and experiences of race, racism, and institutional diversity in the U.S. from the 2010s and onward.

The rising tide of market logics in public higher education

Scholarly consensus is that the growth of nonresident students at public universities is one of many symptoms of their growing subservience to market logics, as education became a commodity that could be bought or sold. At the dawn of the 21st century, the body of literature now known as critical university studies problematized sweeping structural changes that institutions of higher education underwent within the currents of neoliberalism. To name a few, these included: rapid tuition increases, growing partnerships with corporations and other private interests, the adoption of business-style accounting and management, the expansion of fee-generating degree programs, and the precaritization of academic labor (Newfield, 2008; Readings, 1996; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). The impacts were especially pronounced among public universities which used to rely significantly on federal and state funding. Research, teaching, and administrative priorities were reshaped to cater to private interests upon which the universities’ checkbooks depended. According to Readings (1996), this signaled the deterioration of the relevance of the nation-state to higher education. Modern U.S. universities such as the Johns Hopkins University, a private university in Baltimore, Maryland founded in 1897, designed themselves after the 19th century German Humboldtian model of higher education, where universities’ main objective was to produce national civic subjects with a mastery over reason. This mission was no longer to be found in the 1990s university, Readings (1996) argued, as private capital from industry and student tuition came to weaken the import of the nation-state to higher education.

While the rising tide of market logics in higher education took public and private universities alike, we only need to go back to the mid-20th century to see the declining so-called national educative mission among public institutions. In the postwar period, a confluence of factors—the legacy of the New Deal, the vast number of veterans returning from World War II,

the emergence of the U.S. as a global superpower, and its rivalry with communist powers—gave rise to what Williams (2006) called the “welfare state university.” Contrasting today’s exorbitant tuition rates and student debt to college prices of the 1960s, Williams (2006) submitted that there has since been a “shift in the idea of higher education from a public entitlement to a private service” (p. 159). What was meant to be a public asset for education and research was enclosed and repurposed as a site of accumulation for banks through student debt and for corporations through research partnerships (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). A consequence of the decades-long reduction of state funding to universities, this shift was accomplished in lock step with broader attacks in the U.S. against welfare programs and the continuous introduction of austerity measures. While the neo-conservative “Reagan Revolution” was notably successful in advancing the anti-poor, anti-labor agenda, neoliberal reforms were implemented through the consensus of the conservative and liberal political establishment. The wave of protests across the UCs following the 2008 recession were culminations of the long-term trend of privatization and austerity in higher education. Many were convinced that universities have failed on their postwar promise to sustain the American middle class and provide pathways for social mobility. This sentiment was in part expressed in sensationalized panic about foreign students on U.S. campuses.

While the “welfare state university” may seem like a shiny alternative from today’s vantage point, it would be more accurate to call the postwar university the “warfare-welfare state university” (Stein, 2022). Federal funding that made possible what is often called the “golden era” of public higher education came with strings attached—to assist the imperial ambitions of the U.S. against the backdrop of Cold War rivalry. From the sciences to the humanities, money flowed to universities to innovate military and intelligence technologies, develop historical

knowledges that validate U.S. legitimacy as a global superpower, and create disciplines to specialize in global regions of interest to the U.S. In the name of patriotism and national security, critiques of the U.S. state, of the utilization of the university as a military apparatus, and of authority in general were viciously suppressed in the academy (Chomsky et al., 1996). In 1960, California adopted the California Master Plan for Higher Education, with the leadership of the famed former UC President Clark Kerr. The plan continued to inform UC governance in the 2010s, as seen in the following statement from the UC Board of Regents in 2017 explaining their decision to put a limit on nonresident student enrollment rates: “As a public, land-grant institution, the University of California takes pride in its commitment to prioritizing the enrollment of California residents, consistent with the California Master Plan for Higher Education” (Regents Policy 2109, 2017). Many critical of the neoliberal university today often refer to the Master Plan as a nostalgic ideal of what higher education could be: universal and free. In reality, however, the Master Plan was widely criticized during the 1960s and 1970s as it enshrined de facto racial discrimination in a hierarchical three-tier schema composed of community colleges, the California State University (CSU) system, and the UCs (Higgins, 2023). While the Master Plan was admirable for its ambition to make postsecondary education accessible to all Californians, it failed to account for race and class inequities baked into the K-12 system. Thus, it ended up further entrenching pre-existing exclusions, rather than reverting them. Furthermore, the Master Plan and its chief architect Clark Kerr were met with fierce student opposition for conceiving universities first and foremost as a tool for generating research and a workforce in service of U.S. state and capital amid the Cold War. UC leadership suppressed student protests that criticized the school’s failure to promote racial justice or to prioritize education for human development. Thus, the prosperity of the postwar university and

the “American Dream” it promised were confined by the bounds of U.S. national and industry interests. Ironically, in 1967, Kerr was abruptly dismissed by the newly elected governor Ronald Reagan from his position as the UC President for being too soft on student protestors.

The transformation of higher education from an aspirational public good to a private commodity was accompanied by the rollback of race-conscious affirmative action and the codification of the “diversity rationale” within attempts to protect or dismantle affirmative action (Kees, 2024). The uprisings of the Civil Rights era had won affirmative action policies that accepted systemic racism as the national status quo and aimed to correct its impacts through affirmative measures. In the realm of university admissions, however, affirmative action was soon undermined in *Board of Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978). The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Allan Bakke, a white male applicant to the UC Davis medical school who charged the UCs of “reverse discrimination” for setting a quota for minority applicants. In his infamous majority opinion striking down the admissions quota at UC Davis, Justice Lewis E. Powell outlined the new parameters of legally permissible affirmative action. The Powell opinion disallowed affirmative action as a remedial tool for structural racism. Affirmative action could only be justified based on universities’ holistic judgment about “the educational benefits that flow from an ethnically diverse student body” (*Regents of Univ. Of California v. Bakke*, 1978). This influential case codified a concept of “diversity” that demoted race to one of many factors that universities can consider in their selection process, absolving the institutional responsibility to address societal racial discrimination. In the following decades, Powell’s “diversity rationale” became the grounds upon which the battle of affirmative action was fought. In *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the U.S. supreme court officially embraced the Powell opinion in order to defend race-conscious admissions policies at the University of

Michigan Law School. While considered a win for affirmative action, this also signaled the successful marginalization of remedial justice in affirmative action debates, in favor of diversity as an ambiguously defined value that has institutional benefits. Thus, Newfield (2008) contended that, from the *Board of Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* to *Grutter v. Bollinger*, “diversity reflected the *managerial authority* of elite decision makers, not a social group’s right to restrict that elite’s power of discrimination [emphasis added]” (p. 113). However, the decades-long consensus around the narrow definition of diversity was recently challenged in the *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023). In striking down affirmative action and overruling *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the U.S. Supreme Court argued that the educational benefits of diversity were dubious and thus insufficient as a justification for considering race in any form in the admissions process (Kees, 2024).

Echoes of the “diversity rationale” of affirmative action could be heard in debates about nonresident enrollment at the UCs. In May of 2017, concerns over nonresident undergraduates displacing Californian students continued to intensify and finally bubbled over (Gordon, 2010, 2012; Gordon & Rivera, 2014). The UC Board of Regents voted to approve Regents Policy 2109: Policy on Nonresident Student Enrollment, with the following justification:

It is a fundamental tenet of the University that the vast majority of undergraduate spaces on every UC campus should be reserved for California residents. At the same time, the University values highly the *diversity of experience, cultures, and backgrounds that nonresidents provide* and sees their presence on every UC campus as an important part of the learning experience for California students [emphasis added]. (Regents Policy 2109, 2017)

Policy 2109 put a cap on nonresident enrollment at all nine UC campuses offering undergraduate degrees. At five campuses—UC Davis, UC Merced, UC Santa Cruz, UC Santa Barbara, and UC Riverside, nonresident undergraduate enrollment, domestic and international combined, were to be capped at 18%. At the rest of the four campuses where nonresident enrollment already

exceeded 18%—UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, UCLA, and UC San Diego, nonresident enrollment rates were to remain the same as that of 2017-2018. The UC Board of Regents decided to adopt this policy in response to California’s Budget Act of 2016, signed by then governor Jerry Brown. The Budget Act stipulated that the state would allocate an additional \$18.5 million to the UC system for the explicit purpose of growing resident undergraduate enrollment, under the condition that the UCs would limit nonresident enrollment. Regents Policy 2109 was the first of its kind in the UCs to cap out-of-state enrollment. In an audit in 2016, the State of California charged the UCs of giving preferential treatment to nonresident over resident applicants to rake in nonresident tuition (UC Admissions and Financial Decisions, 2016). The audit report, scathingly titled “University of California: Its Admissions and Financial Decisions Have Disadvantaged California Resident Students,” recommended that the UC Office of the President (UCOP) track the use of state funds and nonresident supplemental tuition on each campus more closely to see what cost-saving measures other than admitting more nonresident students can be implemented.

The UCs bristled at the report’s findings and issued its own report titled “Straight Talk on Hot-Button Issues” to counter the conclusions of the audit (Public Affairs, 2016). Regardless, Policy 2109 was soon in effect. These developments to limit nonresident enrollment at the UCs reflected broader conversations among publicly funded institutions of higher education in the U.S. Other state systems such as in Texas, Maryland, North Carolina, and Florida have established some version of an out-of-state student enrollment cap. The cap differs and has evolved over time based on institutional characteristics including the location, prestige, and local student population. In their recommendation to the Regents to adopt Policy 2109, the UC Office of the President expanded on the educational value of diversity of nonresident student

enrollment. “In an increasingly global society and economy,” the Office assessed, “it is critical that students from the nation’s largest state – and one poised at the edge of the Pacific Rim – feel comfortable living and learning with people from a broad range of backgrounds” (UC Office of the President, 2017, pp. 2–3). In this sweeping statement, the Office located nonresident student admissions in the bigger project of developing Californians into human capital to serve U.S. interests in the economic sphere of the Pacific Rim. While Policy 2109 pertained to domestic and international out-of-state students alike, the global reach of the UCs’ imagination was informed by the fact that California consistently hosted the greatest number of international students among all U.S. states between the academic years of 2008/2009 and 2024/2025 (OD Fast Facts 2010-2024, 2025; OD Fast Facts 2025, 2025). In 2017/2018, five of the top twenty U.S. institutions where international students were enrolled belonged to the UC system.

The tug-of-war between the state and the university regarding nonresident enrollment shed new light on Newfield’s (2008) observation that diversity was ultimately about the “managerial authority of elite decision makers” (p. 113). In addition to the demands for globalization, the memo from the President’s Office emphasized that nonresident students brought in crucial tuition monies that “support[] the University’s diversity efforts by enabling students from historically underrepresented socioeconomic groups to attend UC (UC Office of the President, 2017, p. 3). In other words, educational access was no longer a public responsibility, but depended on the business acumen of entrepreneurial universities to attract student consumers and on the universities’ good will to put funds away to enroll low-income students of color. Educational parity had become a goal that could be entertained budget permitting, rather than something fundamental to the mission of a public university. At the UCs, underrepresented minority student enrollment had already been severely compromised since

1998 when California Proposition 209 went into effect (Bleemer, 2022). Against this backdrop, the UC President’s Office stated, educational equity relied on keeping nonresident student enrollment at “moderate levels,” ambiguously defined by the University and other relevant decision makers (UC Office of the President, 2017). However, in 2025, the state legislature recommended that the UCs put a pause on its efforts to decrease nonresident student enrollment. Amid state budget deficits and the instability of federal funding to higher education, the state deemed tuition from nonresident students an invaluable source of revenue (Petek, 2026). This seems to suggest that nonresident student tuition is not only a part of the university’s calculus, but the state’s as well when taking stock of the reserves available to sustain California’s postsecondary education.

I borrow the Marxist concept of fetishization to explain the 2010s fixation on “foreign” students to address concerns about narrowing educational access in the U.S. According to Marx, fetishization is a mode of thought that mistakes the social relations that give objects their value as value that is intrinsic to the object itself. As a result, fetishization, also known as objectification, eclipses the amalgamation of capitalist relations through which things are commodified—or, made into something can be bought or sold. A necessary step of turning an object into a commodity is to give it a price through what Marx called “abstraction.” The actual work that goes into producing something, characterized by individualized variations in skill, speed, and other factors among workers—also known as “concrete” labor—would have to be translated into measurable, standardized units according to “socially necessary labor time,” or “the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society” (Marx, 1992, as cited in Day, 2016, p. 12). As such, the ontological separation and

transformation of “concrete” to “abstract” labor are features essential to capitalism.

Harry Chang suggested that the fetishistic relationship between commodity and value parallels that between racial difference and class, concluding that “[r]acial formation has to do with the concrete shape of abstractly conceived class formation” (Liem and Montague, 1985, p. 44). In other words, objectification pegs political economic positionings of different groups to their racial features, giving social validity to the multiple extractive relations that capitalism requires such as slavery in the U.S. It is this social validity, Chang argued, that makes race and racism a high-stakes institutionalized relation to preserve for white workers and the petty bourgeois. This relation appears to guarantee that they will not be subject to the social denigration and political economic status the enslaved and colonized experience in the capitalist system. Anti-capitalist traditions in North America have also contributed to absolving the racial violence of capitalism while reproducing white settler colonial nationalisms (Day, 2016). Day (2016) argued that Asians have historically been racialized as abstract labor—as personifications of the very logic of capitalism that alienates people from their own work and the fruits of their labor through the violent process of abstraction. These racial formations around alien, abstract labor reinforce the Canadian and U.S. settler nationalist myth that (mis)represents whiteness and white labor as natural, indigenous, and human in contrast to Asian labor. According to Day (2016), this myth flourished with the romantic aesthetic movement of the nineteenth century characterized by anti-materialist nostalgia for the pre-industrial days. Romantic anti-capitalism justified the expropriation of Asian labor by demonizing them as the destructiveness of capitalism itself and thus functioned as an “ideological framework for settler colonialism to respond to economic and technological crises by imagining whiteness through indigenizing tropes of purity and organic connection to land that function to distort and deflect responsibility

for capitalist modernity” (Day, 2016, p. 36). The figure of the East Asian international student attested to the enduring racialization of Asians as the very embodiments of pernicious capitalist logics, emboldening the familiar script of Yellow Peril attacking the American ways of life (Wu, 2018).

As personifications of “foreign” capital, the international student figure in the 2010s absorbed public resentment about the broken economic and educational system, while obscuring the complex social relations that have accelerated accumulation by dispossession in the internal U.S. The right-wing, White supremacist backlash against international students that reared its head under the Trump administration (2017-2021; 2025-present) draws its plausibility from the fiction of distinct “domestic” and “foreign” spheres, where foreign influences keep encroaching on the life of the nation. However, this geographical imagination distracts from the realities of neoliberal U.S. imperialism where U.S. global dominance has indeed been maintained by powerful U.S. institutions plundering its public (Gindin & Panitch, 2012). Amid growing doubts about their legitimacy in the 2010s, the state legislature and the UCs had tried to perform their commitment to Californians by assuming the role as responsible moderators of incoming foreign capital. In this way, the nonresident student was a convenient figure decision makers could point to to diffuse public discontent, and those racialized as “foreign” bore the burden in their everyday lives.

Utilities of foreign students in the U.S.

[T]he life conditions, choices, and expressions of Asian Americans have been significantly determined by the US. state through the apparatus of immigration laws and policies. ... It is to underscore that both in the period from 1850 to World War II and in the period after 1965, immigration has been a crucial *locus* through which US. interests have recruited and regulated both labor and capital from Asia. It is also to maintain that there has been an important continuity between the considerable distortion of social relations in Asian countries affected by US. imperialist war and occupation and the emigration of Asian labor to the United States throughout the last century. (Lowe, 1996, p. 7)

International students at U.S. universities, officially called “foreign students” until the 1960s, serve as a useful proxy for how the character of the U.S. empire has changed over time since World War II. Notably, since the 1970s, East Asia has consistently been represented in the top sending countries of student migrants (O’Mara, 2012). From their prescribed role as diplomatic agents of American democracy and proselytizers of free market ideology in the 1960s, international students in the 21st century came to be valued as “skilled” migrant labor for the tech industry as well as “foreign” capital for U.S. higher education. Thus, Kramer (2010) argued that the rise and fall of different international student policies and programs have always been about U.S. strategies for geopolitical dominance. Further, O’Mara (2012) suggested that the use of international students reveal the role of universities as parastatal agents.

This section highlights the involvement of the U.S. state in managing the mobility of international students as consumer subjects, conceptualizing immigration as a state-controlled apparatus to accumulate capital for U.S. institutions. As Chapter 2 will discuss, the Trump administration’s overt xenophobia toward international students in recent years have prompted various actors to craft their defense of international student migration by condemning racial bigotry or by elevating students’ economic contributions through tuition payment. I suggest that such rhetorical strategies sidestep the historical function of immigration as a race-making project which has made the differential distribution of rights and freedom seem just in the name of national sovereignty and security. Overall, the U.S. immigration regime has historically considered students as an exceptionally desirable migrant group, exempting them from racist restrictions set by the *1875 Page Act*, the *1882 Chinese Exclusion Act*, and the *Immigration Act of 1924*. At once, their exceptional treatment underscored the contingency of their status, vulnerable to the whims of the U.S. visa regime (Boggs, 2013). As the rest of the dissertation

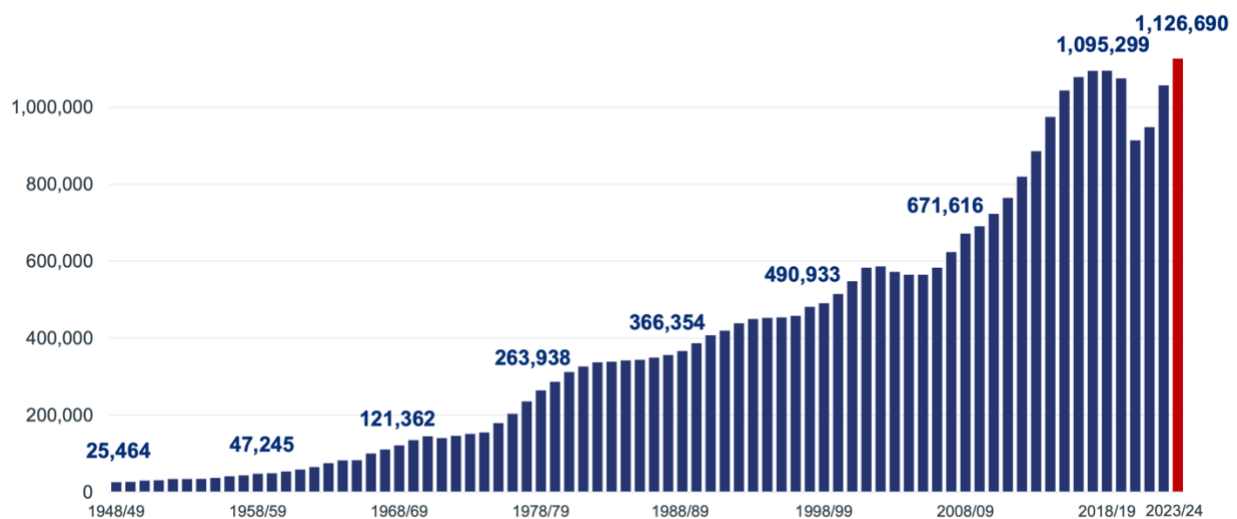
illuminates, their precarity as migrants was deeply pertinent to many international students’ experiences of race, racism, and institutional diversity in the U.S. today. Tracing the state’s involvement in international student migration exposes immigration as a structure of discrimination that the U.S. empire-state is authorized to manipulate at will to fulfill its needs for capital accumulation, whether it be under liberal or conservative administrations. Grasping this nature of immigration can help us make sense of the extent to which the Trump administration has been able to threaten and wield violence over international students today. It also draws attention to the limits of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) paradigm in formulating an adequate response to these contemporary attacks.

With its emergence as a global superpower after World War II, the U.S. state took a coordinated approach toward international student migration as a tool of cultural and economic imperialism. From its minimal number in the 1940s, almost 60,000 international students were in the U.S in 1960 (See Figure 1). In the wake of the Cold War, bringing international students to U.S. university campuses was a part of President Harry Truman’s “Campaign of Truth,” a foreign policy launched in 1950 to manufacture buy-in for U.S.-led capitalism against communist regimes under the name of spreading “democracy.” In addition to radio, television, and other media propaganda, the U.S. State Department expected international students, many of whom were recruited from the domestic elite, to act as pro-U.S. cultural agents to Americanize their home countries upon return (Bu, 2003). However, racial discrimination was a salient part of many international students’ experiences of their host country, either targeted toward themselves or as witnesses of U.S. society at large. International students’ impressions of American democracy and its “racial limits” became a source of major concern among international education advocates, especially in the 1960s as college campuses with the rest of the U.S.

erupted in mass demonstrations against racial segregation (Kramer, 2009, p. 803). These dynamics were a part of what came to form the politics of “Cold War civil rights” (Dudziak, 2000). Further, students were drafted as economic agents to learn about Western technologies and models of modernization and industrialization as well as neoliberal ideologies to implement them throughout the Third World. In one striking example, the U.S. State Department funded the 1955 “Chile Project” administered by the University of Chicago to combat socialist ideologies that the State Department believed was gaining traction in Chile. The project treated Chile as a laboratory of the neo-classical economic theory of human capital which over-emphasized individual competitiveness and de-emphasized social forces in conceiving a sound economy. This project of disseminating “free-market” thinking, Boggs (2013) argued, laid the foundations for draconian privatization measures and cuts to social spending implemented in Chile after the 1973 coup led by General Augusto Pinochet’s and backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) under President Nixon.

Figure 1

Number of International Students in the U.S., 1948/49-2023/24



Note: Reproduced from IIE: Institute of International Education. (2024, November 18). *Open*

Doors 2024 Annual Data Release [Video recording], 14:23. <https://opendoorsdata.org/open-doors-2024-annual-data-release/>

By the late 20th century, the perceived utilities of international students to the U.S. reflected the market-centric milieu under the Reagan (1981-1989) and Bush (1989-1993) administrations and the turn away from postwar university expansion. The Higher Education Act of 1985 sought to strengthen the link between universities and U.S. businesses involved internationally. Although the financial benefits were negligible, declining state funding to public universities prompted universities to start orienting toward international students as a source of revenue during this time (Boggs, 2013; Kramer, 2009; O’Mara, 2012). Notably, this period saw a boom in the number of international students pursuing business and management degrees, alongside the general growth of such programs in the U.S. in both undergraduate and graduate levels. As international student enrollment in the humanities and social sciences decreased, business programs came to rival the popularity of engineering and science degrees that has remained consistent since the 1960s. This trend was informed by the global expansion of U.S. businesses and American management models that students from abroad sought to be trained in.

With the arrival of the dot com boom, international students were coveted as human capital for the tech industry, facilitated by immigration regulatory changes regarding temporary work authorizations for the STEM workforce. On April 19, 2000, former President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) published an Executive Memorandum to establish a cohesive national international education policy, indicating a renewed interest in the utility of international students (*International Education Policy*, 2000). In addition to “spread[ing] United States values and influence” and developing “effective global competence to United States students and others” (S. Con. Res. 7, 2001), expanding the STEM workforce emerged as an important motivation for

international student recruitment (Spellings Report, 2006; NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2006). This was fueled by intense lobbying efforts by tech industry leaders since the 1990s. Tech giants such as Microsoft led the push to expand the H-1B “specialty occupation” guestworker program and in 2008, to extend the Optional Practical Training (OPT) work authorization period from 12 to 36 months for international students obtaining STEM degrees at U.S. universities (See Bound et al., 2018). Granted, the 9/11 attacks in 2001 halted the federal government’s orientation toward international students as desirable migrants, as national security took over public discourse. While surveillance and control on migrants intensified in its aftermath, international student enrollment rates had bounced back to previous levels by 2006 (O’Mara, 2012). In essence, universities came to function as a gateway for the tech industry to produce a migrant workforce, whose stay in the U.S. is heavily controlled and monitored by the U.S. immigration system and the employer. These changes to the visa regime must be understood alongside the high percentage of international students pursuing STEM undergraduate and graduate degrees, with 56% of students in 2023-24 specializing in STEM fields (IIE: Institute of International Education, 2024c).

By the 2020s, federal policy officially recognized international students’ value as consumers. The U.S. alongside the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are referred to as the “big four” destination countries in the global student market (Ross, 2025). While leading among the four in its share of international students, the U.S. had stood out among them for its more decentralized approach to international student recruitment (Bozheva, 2020; Geddie, 2015). Australia, followed by the U.K., have aggressively pursued national educational strategies since the 1990s to encourage international student migration. For example, Tony Blair announced the Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education (PMI) in 1999 and revamped it in 2006 to

attract more international students to the U.K. and improve the global reputation of U.K. universities through coordinated collaboration across governmental agencies, NGOs, and institutions of higher education. Canada soon followed suit, exemplified by the 2014 launch of its first national International Education Strategy and its second in 2019. In both instances, international students were charged higher tuition as public funding was pulled back from higher education. In the U.K., this change happened in 1979 under the Thatcher administration, and in Canada, it became a prevalent practice in the 1990s. In previous decades, Canadian universities had either been resistant or reticent about using international student recruitment as a revenue-generating strategy (Geddie, 2015). In contrast, the national strategy announced in the 2010s was made possible by their advocacy through the networking organization, Universities Canada (UC), with the explicit intention of competing in the global student market. Bozheva (2020) described these developments to be “supra-neoliberal,” as non-state actors initiate state involvement and strike up partnerships with the state to further privatize higher education amid declining public investment. National strategies were very similar among the big four with the exception of the U.S., with the specter of global competition functioning as a driving factor. At least in the case of Canada, policymakers rarely considered the U.S. as an adequate point of comparison, given its dominance in attracting international students compared to Canada (Geddie, 2015). In the mid-2010s, rising far-right nationalism in the U.K. targeted international students as a part of its broader agenda to reduce the number of migrants in the country (Mandhai, 2016). In Geddie’s (2015) interpretation, and I believe correctly, this is “less []a refutation of international students as a competitive issue, and more [] an illustration of the prominence of immigration as a swing political issue” by appealing to national security (p. 245).

A few developments in the U.S. in the late 2010s signaled a gradual shift toward

federally coordinated international student recruitment, in step with the rest of the big four. As early as 2005, the U.S. Commercial Service, an international trade promotion arm under the U.S. Department of Commerce, elevated intra-state higher education coalitions, also known as state consortia in places such as Indiana, California, Washington, Illinois, and Iowa, as an export commodity on its website (Goralski & Tootonchi, 2015). In 2019, the Department of Commerce launched “USA: A Study Destination,” a government brand to market various states in the U.S. as viable study destinations for potential international students. The website features advertisement videos of 30 states ranging from California and New York to Missouri and Tennessee. In addition, the International Trade Administration recommends utilizing intra-state higher education coalitions, also known as Study State consortia, to make community colleges more attractive and accessible to international students (International Trade Administration, 2023). In 2022-23, community colleges in California hosted the most number of international students by far at 12,866 students, accounting for 24% of all international students enrolled at U.S. community colleges (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2023a). Examples of equivalent government-sponsored branding include: Study UK, Imagine au/in Canada, and Study Australia.

In 2021, the U.S. State Department and Department of Education under President Joe Biden (2021-2025) released a Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education. The statement publicly disavowed the previous Trump Administration’s (2017-2021) hostile orientation toward international students after the outbreak of Covid-19. Echoing Kramer’s (2009) assertion that international students have functioned as objects of U.S. national interests on a global scale, the statement read:

While the United States remains the top host nation of international students in the world ... other countries, including our closest partners and allies, are now aggressively

competing with the United States to host those students. This competition—especially from nations that are not our allies and do not share our values—represents a direct challenge to U.S. leadership ... on the global stage.

It is imperative that the United States continue to lead the world and remain the destination of choice for talented international students, researchers, scholars, and educators.

Two years later in 2023, the U.S. Department of Commerce listed international education as one of its top seven priorities in the National Export Strategy (NES) for the first time, enshrining education as a specialized American commodity. The strategy report stressed the importance of ensuring that the U.S. continues to take lead in the international education market, citing education-related expenses, including travel and rent, as the ninth biggest form of service export. Accordingly, the U.S. State Department, Departments of Commerce, Education, Homeland Security, Defense, and USAID were to spread awareness among educational institutions of all levels and state and local governments that education is a U.S. export (Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee, 2023). To ensure that a diversity of U.S. educational institutions are active in the export market, the government announced plans to provide grants for program development and partner with governments in emerging markets to promote these programs. NAFSA, the largest international educator’s association in the U.S., celebrated this step towards a federally led campaign for international student recruitment (NAFSA, 2024). Rather than react passively to existing overseas demand for U.S. higher education, universities and colleges themselves also hire local brokers and recruiters, develop promotional materials and strategies, introduce new educational products to attract different student-consumer populations, and work with each other and governmental entities across borders to create a global student market (Kim, 2023). The active role of U.S. institutions in *producing* a supply of international students by commodifying public education tends to go unnoticed in today’s conventional wisdom about international student enrollment. Nonetheless, the recent history of international students in the

U.S. shows the continued importance of the state in creating and regulating the flow of labor and capital through the immigration apparatus.

The culture of “new” imperialism

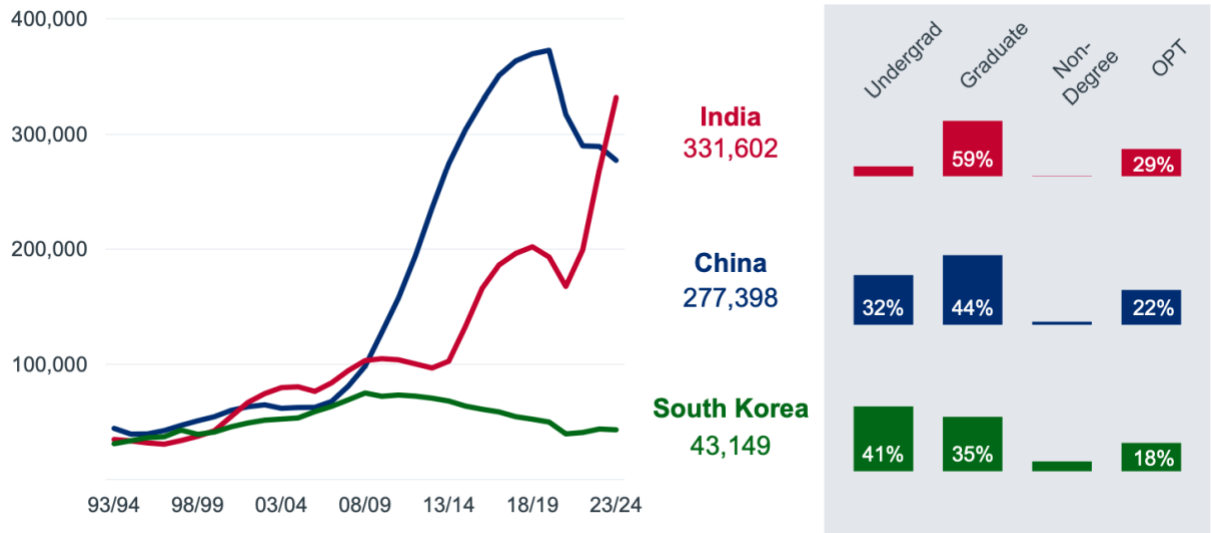
Research on the neoliberal turn in U.S. higher education has prompted many scholars to examine the decline of the student as a national civic subject in favor of a global consumer or professional subject (K. Mitchell, 2007; Readings, 1996). From the perspective of international student migration, however, the global consumer or professional subject is distinctly “American,” as Americanization functions as cultural capital and English fluency as linguistic capital in the global neoliberal economic order. By Americanization, I refer to a narrow idea of U.S. society and its values filtered through U.S. cultural imperialism rather than to an earnest representation of American culture. Based on her research on the Chinese wealthy, Ong (1999) stressed the increasing flexibility of citizenship, which had traditionally been tied to the nation, as neoliberal capitalism led to the formation of a global elite class. At the same time, she underscored that the growing influence of Asian capital in the U.S. did not translate immediately to the social legitimacy of the Asian wealthy, stirring nativist backlash in the U.S. In her study about discursive practices on international education in Korea in the 2000s, Rhee (2009) identified international student migration as a site of a newly developing form of imperialism in the 21st century which entailed “the formation of a transnational class of professionals, who can live and travel globally while freely conversing with their colleagues in English” (p. 59). In that vein, scholars have shown that the global hierarchies of culture, language, and peoples play a significant role in the motivations of international students to pursue education in the U.S. Rather than acting as purely rational economic actors, students were drawn by the American promise of the “good life” symbolizing the freedom to self-actualize as a modern (Western) subject, as well

as the desire to accumulate cultural capital as entrepreneurial agents. These complex motivations led students to take a chance at obtaining a Western degree, at times at the expense of accruing individual or family debt and experiencing financial hardship to pay for the high costs of tuition and living (Boggs, 2013; Fong, 2011; Shackle, 2026; S. Thomas, 2024; V. Wong & Sohi, 2025). Dong (2017) found that disillusionment with the U.S. led some international Chinese students to change their critical stance toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and embrace nationalist sentiments and take on a patriotic identity. In juxtaposition, others channeled their disillusionment by joining on Black Lives Matter or Occupy protests as migrants in the U.S. Having been exposed to intellectual writings they previously didn’t have access to, some went on to form networks and publication platforms to make critical knowledges about China and global affairs available to a broader Chinese audience.

I proffer that East Asian international students’ contemporary racial subjectivities—formed through their encounters with racist bigotry, the immigration regime, and institutional diversity—can only be fully understood within these cultural dimensions of international student migration. To that end, this section focuses on how U.S. imperialism has restructured social relations in Korea since the latter half of the 20th century in the sphere of education. Of all international students in 2023/2024, 29% hail from India, 25% from China, and 4% from South Korea (IIE: Institute of International Education, 2024; see Figure 2). Among these top three leading places of origin, Korea stands out for sending the highest number of students compared to its national population. As a U.S. client state, Korea provides a useful snapshot of some of the cultural technologies at work in international student migration as a site of “new” imperialism.

Figure 2

International Students in the U.S. by Top Countries of Origin, 1993/94-2023/24



Note: Reproduced from IIE: Institute of International Education. (2024, November 18). *Open Doors 2024 Annual Data Release* [Video recording], 20:41. <https://opendoorsdata.org/opendoors-2024-annual-data-release/>

International student migration from Korea to the U.S. shares a history with the development of English education in Korea. English education is a crucial mode through which Korean imperial subjectivities have been reproduced in Korea since the Korean War that divided the peninsula in half into the North and the South. It was a part of the Korean state to integrate into U.S.-led global capitalism, first based on the developmentalist model and later by implementing neoliberal reforms. The aspiration to become an “advanced” nation under U.S. tutelage has historically been a central feature of Korean nation-building. It required subjects who accept their own “racialized humanity,” to use Tadiar’s (2011, p. 492) words, and the accordant global hierarchies of personhood that justified the U.S. imperial order. U.S.-informed globalist race ideologies gained purchase in the undivided Korean peninsula in the late 19th Century (Ha, 2012). With Western imperial powers’ increasing interest in the peninsula and the immanence of Japanese invasion, the Korean elite uncritically imported and circulated Western

ideologies of white supremacy and global racial hierarchies as a part of their vision to modernize the nation and protect its sovereignty. Subscribing to Western liberal notions of civilizational progress, they looked to the U.S. as a superior model nation and better imperial ally given Japan’s long history as Korea’s aggressor. These sentiments rose in popularity with Japan’s eventual occupation of Korea (1910-1945) and the role of the U.S. as a liberating force. With the eventual establishment of a U.S.-supported government in today’s South Korea, the statist project of national advancement has also meant enlisting in the U.S.-serving global racial order. Ha (2012) argued that the violence against Black, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern migrants in Korea today, despite the adoption of multiculturalism as official state policy, are contemporary resonances of Western ideologies of race that deeply shaped Korean national identity and trajectory since the late 19th century.

As an index of national progress, the history of English education in Korea since U.S. military intervention during the Korean War (1950-1953) betrays the ideological centrality of the global hierarchies of race to its nation-building. Conformity to these hierarchies continues to be materially reinforced through the stratification of educational opportunities and job prospects based on English proficiency (J. S.-Y. Park, 2009; S. J. Park & Abelmann, 2004). The expectation that lay Koreans, not just the elite, shall become familiar with English was introduced when American forces landed on the Korean peninsula in 1945 after Japan’s defeat and withdrawal from Korea. In *Proclamation No. 1*, where General MacArthur declared U.S. military control over the Southern Korean territory, he also instituted English as the official language of its reign (1945-1948). “For all purposes during the military control, English will be the official language,” the Proclamation read, “In event of any ambiguity or diversity of interpretation or definition between any English and Korean or Japanese text, the English text

shall prevail” (*Proclamation No. 1*, 1945). Considered the “enemy’s language” by the Japanese empire, English classes were banned in Korea later in the Japanese colonial regime (1910-1945). However, U.S. intervention in Korea rang in English as the new imperial language, as U.S. military leaders recognized a need for an expanded cadre of Korean elite adept with American modes of governance (Yoon, 2012). Soon after, the U.S. government and the newly established South Korean state embarked on a mission to institute English education more systematically. Until the 1970s, Korea underwent rapid state-directed industrialization under a series of dictatorships. English fluency according to American linguistic norms was deemed a cultural marker of modernization and developmental progress by Korean and U.S. state actors alike (C. H. Lee, 2017). In 1973, English was added as a mandatory subject in the middle and high school national curricula. These changes did not come as a surprise to everyday Koreans who acutely experienced English as a skill directly connected to one’s odds of survival as they lived amid the presence of the U.S. military (Lie, 1998). The joint state project between Korea and the U.S. to incorporate English into Korea’s national education system included placing Americans in Korean schools, universities, and state agencies to teach English, rear Korean English teachers, and advise on the Korean education system, while sending Korean teachers and government officials to the U.S. to train (Jo, 2024). U.S. universities were integral to this project, such as the University of Michigan where Korea-bound Americans learned to teach English as a foreign language and today’s Vanderbilt University which ran bootcamps for Korean educators (T. Cho et al., 2017; Garrison & Members of the George Peabody College Staff in Korea, 1961; US Peace Corps, 1962). As an important pillar of the U.S. model of global development, represented by modernization theorists such as Walt Rostow, similar forms of educational aid were deployed across Africa, Asias, and Americas (Kamola, 2019).

In the 1990s, a period of economic liberalization in Korea, English carried the ideological weight of the state’s “globalization” project. In 1992, Kim Young Sam (1992-1997), the first civilian president since military dictator Park Chung Hee’s (1963-1979) tenure, was elected to office after decades of democratization struggles culminating in mass protests nationwide under the brutal reign of Chun Doo Hwan (1980-1988). Kim Young Sam instated *seggyehwa* (globalization) as the national slogan and elevated English education as a key priority. He laid the groundwork for subsequent administrations to stratify and privatize the education system focused on English (Byean, 2015). The global aspirations of the Kim Young Sam government came to devastating fruition after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997/1998. When foreign capital fueling the growing Korean economy concertedly fled from Asian countries, the Korean state borrowed bailout loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exchange for accepting the World Bank’s sweeping neoliberal restructuring program. As a result, unemployment more than tripled and demands for labor flexibility led to extensive layoffs and expansion of temporary positions. Ironically, these reforms along with the virtue of self-entrepreneurship were promoted as Korea’s path toward a new, democratic Korea in contrast to Korea under authoritarian rule (Lim & Jang, 2006; Song, 2007).

At the same time, the Korean government and businesses amplified English as the determining factor for accessing jobs, demanding that job seekers illustrate their readiness as “global citizens,” used interchangeably with “global human capital.” National educational reforms of the 1990s ushered in a period of divestment from the egalitarian model of education toward grooming a cadre of transnational elites (Choi, 2022; Shin, 2016). For example, a big proponent of trade liberalization and sworn in after the 2007 U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, the Lee Myung Bak Administration (2008-2013) vowed to make Korea an “advanced first-tier

nation (*seonjin-illyu-gukga*)” by integrating it further into the global economy. This vision included an ambitious proposal to expand the importance of English in the public school system, with the reasoning that “[a]mong non-English-speaking countries, those using English are richer than other nations” (Hankyoreh, 2008). Core to this plan was teaching major subjects such as math, science, and national history in English. Ultimately, this English education proposal was abandoned because of severe public opposition that it would intensify the private education industry and the demand for pre-college study abroads, exacerbating existing educational bifurcation. Indeed, already in 1997, nearly 70% of the children in Seoul, where half of the population resides, were utilizing private English education (S. J. Park & Abelmann, 2004). During this period, the private English education industry underwent a qualitative transformation, as major media companies and mega corporations entered the education business as a profitable venture. New “products” were developed through partnerships with provincial governments and universities, such as English certificates and English immersion camps (Shin, 2016). Despite the widespread awareness that English functions as a mode of social stratification, many Koreans felt coerced to invest in obtaining this linguistic capital to survive in a precarious economy (J. S.-Y. Park, 2011).

As English served as an index for deepening domestic class divisions in Korea, its reproduction was also interlinked with the *global* hierarchies of race and culture. Choi (2022) and Jang (2018) observed this in Korean students’ and employers’ perception of the Philippines as a desirable, but inauthentic site of English study abroad compared to English-speaking Western countries, and Song P. Cho (2012), in the demands made of Korean American men teaching English in Korea to prove their authenticity as English speakers. Expectations of “native” English betray how the global hierarchies of race unequally administer the accumulation

of linguistic capital amid the paradoxical promise that a better future awaits at the end of the never-ending pursuit of “authentic” English. Tadiar (2011) calls this affect, “a closing in, a caged feeling that is at once the recognition of one’s stymied, stunted freedom and the proof of one’s immanent, transcendent freedom,” one of the “colonial condition” (p. 482).

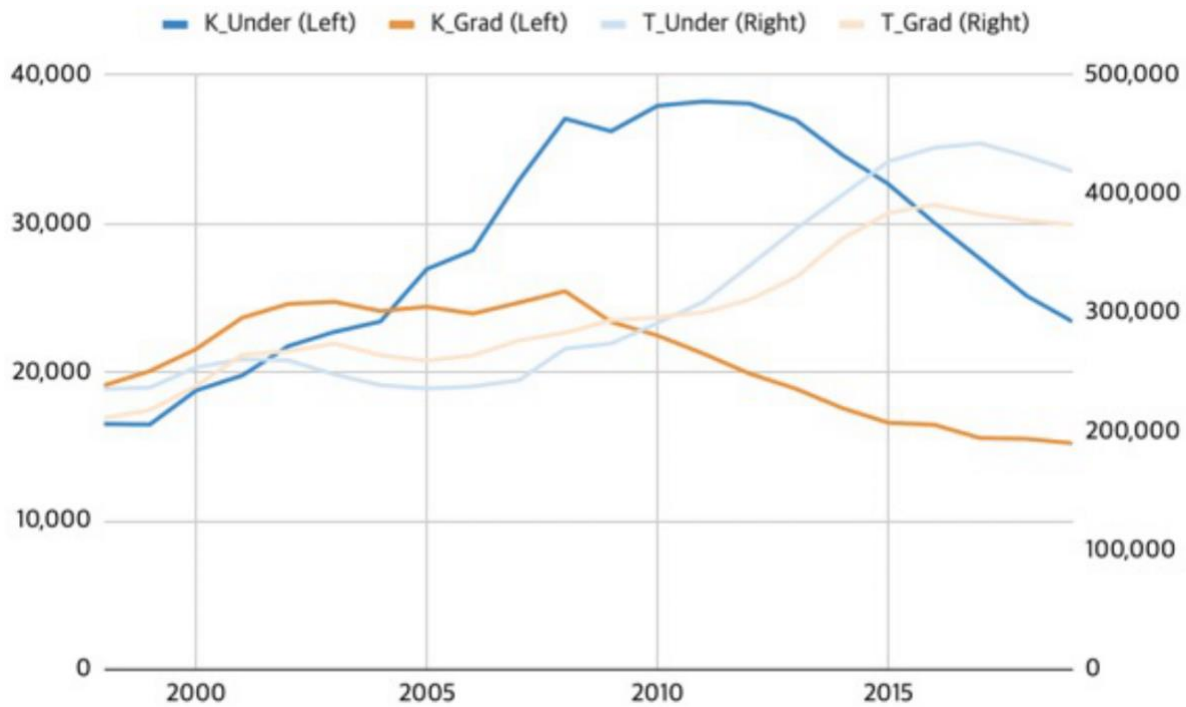
Korean students enrolling at U.S. universities today constitute one part of the educational migration that took off in the 1990s and flourished in the 2000s as an extension of Korea’s English education market and an entrepreneurial strategy for middle-class reproduction (Kang & Abelman, 2011; Koo, 2022b). In addition to pursuing higher education, thousands of migrants embarked on temporary study abroads before college (S. J. Park & Abelman, 2004; Shin, 2016). In 2005, Korean families spent more than \$5 billion on pre-college study abroads to all English-speaking countries, including expenses incurred by accompanying family members (Bae et al., 2005). While the arrival of Korean students at U.S. campuses dates back as early as the late 19th Century, this population reached its peak in the late 2000s as a result of the ballooning English education market and the retreat of state control over the Korean study abroad population in the late 1980s⁴ (Jo, 2024, p. 103). Notably, for the first time since the 1960s, the number of undergraduate students surpassed graduate students in 2005 (Jo, 2024, p. 108). These changes were intertwined with growing interest among U.S. universities to enroll foreign students in an undergraduate level as public funding became more scarce. Unlike the general international student population which continued to increase after the 2010s, however, the number of Korean students in the U.S. has waned (See Figure 3). According to Jo (2024) and Koo (2022), this was due to changing perceptions in Korea about pursuing an undergraduate degree in the U.S. as no longer a reliable pathway for social mobility and elite and middle-class

⁴ See Jo (2024) p. 79-88 to read more about the diverse ways in which the authoritarian Korean state exerted control over Koreans studying abroad.

reproduction.

Figure 3

Changes in Number of International Students in US Higher Education, 1998–2019



Note: “K_Under” and “K_Grad” respectively indicates the number of Korean undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in U.S. institutions (left axis). “T_Under” and “T_Grad” respectively indicates the number of all international undergraduate and graduate students in the U.S. (right axis). Reproduced from *The Rise and Fall of Korean International Students in American Higher Education, 1945-2020: Local Motivations, Global Trajectories* [Doctoral dissertation] (p. 242) by H. J. Jo, 2024. University of Chicago.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the global geographies of accumulation by dispossession to contextualize the discussion of East Asian international students’ contemporary racial subjectivities in subsequent chapters. Public outcries in the 2010s about the influx of “foreign” students at public

universities demonstrated that domestic discontent about narrowing educational access was expressed through familiar racial scripts, replacing a much-needed awareness about the historical making of the neoliberal university. Wishy washy invocations of “diversity” in the nonresident enrollment debates function as artifacts of this historical amnesia, if not contributing to it. In recent years, far-right White nationalist attacks against international students in the U.S. have prompted some international education advocates to condemn racial bigotry and call for a return to embracing diversity as an American value. However, the development of U.S. federal policy toward foreign students since the postwar era demonstrates that the immigration system has historically functioned as a tool of control and conditional inclusion that the state has monopoly over. This discriminatory function of immigration in regulating the flow of labor and capital have shaped international students’ experiences of race and racism in the U.S., even before the Trump administration took the White House in 2017. As public access to U.S. higher education became more and more tenuous, the neoliberal transformation of other national economies produced student migrants seeking to pursue education in the U.S. As the development of the English education market in South Korea demonstrated, the global hierarchies of race and culture created a long-standing appetite for U.S. higher education as a mode of domestic class stratification. Thus, U.S. institutions continue to benefit from geographical unevenness at a global scale, especially as a crutch during times of economic crisis.

Hegemonic Anti-Racism and Its Limits:

Stop Asian Hate and the Higher Education Labor Movement

On October 25, 2012, a two-part opinion series titled “Foreign Students and Tolerance” was published in Inside Higher Ed, one of the most widely read news outlets that focus on issues in higher education. The series discussed how international students in U.S. universities are both victims and perpetrators of racial prejudice. The subtitle of part one read: “[C]olleges have responsibilities to prevent the racist incidents [against] and isolation [of international students] that have been reported recently”; and part two started with: “Colleges should confront the reality that many who enroll from abroad have ill-informed and racist attitudes about some minority groups” (Braskamp & Glass, 2012; Z. Ritter, 2012). Both engaged with an Inside Higher Ed article published ten days prior, on October 15, titled “‘I’m Not Racist, But’: Tensions Simmer Between American and International Students” (Redden, 2012). The article spotlighted public displays of racism against Asian international students at three campuses—Kansas State, Ohio State, and Michigan State University. Citing Lee & Rice (2007), the reporter contextualized these events in a widely observed, but little discussed pattern of discrimination against international students whose increasing presence on U.S. campuses have stoked racial tension on college campuses and their local communities. Notwithstanding public and private incidents of racial discrimination against Asian international students, Redden (2012) wrote, “There’s reason to be concerned about how well these new international students are being integrated on U.S. campuses: a study published this summer found that nearly 40 percent of international students reported having no close American friends.” The quote included a hyperlink to another Inside Higher Ed article published earlier in the same year, titled “Friendless in America: New Study

Finds Many Foreign Students Lack American Friends,” that highlighted a study by Gareis (2012) (Jaschik, 2012). The same study also revealed that international students from East Asia in particular most often reported having no American friends at all. These media reports betrayed a common concern in higher education in the 2010s regarding international students’ integration into campus life, the domestic population’s reaction to their presence, and the potential of cross-cultural conflict and hostility, including racial tensions.

Addressing this sentiment, Braskamp and Glass (2012) and Ritter (2012) recommended that universities facilitate more socializing opportunities between international and domestic students and mandate more diversity-related courses of international students. The Global Siblings Program at UCLA, the iBuddy program at the University of South Florida, and the Unite UW at the University of Washington are a few examples of initiatives that attempt to facilitate such interactions today. Ritter (2012) stressed the urgency of tackling international students’ racist beliefs as follows:

With this growing population of international students, colleges and universities should be creating policies and programs to lessen balkanization and racial discrimination ... If we are to truly create global and tolerant citizens that will be the future leaders and teachers of tomorrow, we must create more college diversity courses, not shy away from teaching American history, culture, and government to international students, and create safe spaces on campus to discuss international-domestic student relations.

In Ritter’s view, diversity courses, along with extracurricular programming, were crucial to educating international students on U.S. culture and values of tolerance, which would promote harmony on campus and beyond as international students become “future leaders.” Creating a racially harmonious campus was not only the right thing to do, Ritter added, but also a financially sound decision for universities:

They [international students] are often status-driven, seeking an educational advantage over their peers back home. Therefore, if they do not feel they are welcomed at a university, if they face racial discrimination, or if they are not being provided with the amenities they expect, they will apply to a different university or tell their friends in their home country about their lackluster experience in America. This could affect the reputation of the university abroad, and could hurt public universities that may not be able to provide the student services and individual attention that private universities can.

As I explore later, such monetary appeals are quite typical when university leaders and higher education pundits underscore the importance of protecting international students from racism.

Fast forward five years, however, the inauguration of the Trump administration in 2017 made clear that racism against international students could no longer be considered a matter of misguided individual beliefs, but as that of U.S. state policy. This development came to a head in 2020 with the Covid-19 lockdown, the Stop Asian Hate movement, the mass mobilization for Black lives, and the federal administration's various attempts to expulse international students from the U.S. How did international students respond to the evolving national landscape of race politics? This chapter offers a preliminary picture of international students' political engagements at the dawn of the 2020s by highlighting their involvement that garnered media attention in two concurrent struggles: the Stop Asian Hate movement and the higher education labor movement.

I suggest that students' engagement with these movements, considered side-by-side, threw into sharp relief the limits of hegemonic anti-racism to formulate an adequate response to international students' vulnerabilities in light of Covid-19, including the federal attacks which have only intensified since. Further, the narrow focus on racist bigotry fell short of cultivating a political agenda that could be responsive to contemporaneous mobilizations for Black lives against policing. Reactions from the higher education industry to international students' entanglements with the Stop Asian Hate movement underscored the logic of capital accumulation

that guided their engagement with racism toward this student population. As a result, student needs deemed irrelevant to universities' ability to generate future tuition revenue fell to the wayside. This chapter draws attention to alternative relationships of solidarity that international students forged to respond to their multifaceted vulnerabilities during this time. For the purposes of this chapter, I define hegemonic anti-racism as the contemporary commonsense where the *eradication of interpersonal bigotry* is overemphasized in the conceptualization of racial justice. This has been institutionalized since the 1980s in the form of proliferating diversity and cultural sensitivity trainings in corporate settings and as curricular requirements in schools and college classrooms (Berrey, 2015). By calling it hegemonic anti-racism, I intend to name a cultural phenomenon where mainstream discussions of race matters are mostly restricted to individual (mis)conduct and creating welcoming environments.

This chapter takes inspiration from Hall's (1986) reading of Gramsci to examine the contemporary culture of anti-racism as a historical product and hegemonic ideology rather than a moral principle against racism as is often treated in common parlance. This approach is also informed by literature thus far that has shown that international students often disidentify with race discourse in the U.S., which I register as a "structure of feeling" borrowing Williams (1971) (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017a; Fei, 2024; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Ham, 2023; Urban & Orbe, 2007; Yu, 2025). If we follow Gramsci's thesis that hegemonic formations emerge through a "system of alliances" between groups with varying interests, what system of alliances mobilized hegemonic anti-racism, and what other forms of anti-racist alliances took shape in the 2020s (Hall, 1986, p. 16)? By way of an answer, I first turn to the Stop Asian Hate movement. In addition to popular support for Stop Asian Hate among Asian international students, institutions including state and federal governments and universities loudly decried the widespread anti-Asian bigotry that

Covid-19 brought to the surface. At the same time, the higher education labor movement mobilized against travel bans, threats of expulsion against international students, and the loss of job security during Covid-19. International students' participation in these concurrent formations demonstrated the multiplicity of their racial identities and politics. This chapter expounds on their recent manifestations to enrich our understanding of the stakes and potential of these various anti-racist alliances.

Anti-racism and the postwar “liberal race hegemony”

While anti-racism as an idea may not be time-bound, the institutional culture of anti-racism in U.S. higher education is certainly a product of its time. In this section, I historicize contemporary universities' commonplace denunciations of racism in what Melamed (2006) called the “liberal race hegemony” which consolidated after World War II in the U.S. In Hall's (1986) reading of Gramsci, “hegemony” is constituted through “the coordination of the interests of a dominant group with the general interests of other groups and the life of the state as a whole” (p. 14-15). Understood this way, the formation of hegemony requires forging strategic alliances, “win[ning] the consent” of diverse subordinate groups without resorting to force only, and ultimately *constructing* unity across differences (Hall, 1986, p. 16). The economic structure, alongside historical and social conditions, may determine the horizon of hegemonic formations possible, without guaranteeing a certain hegemonic outcome. Anti-racism's evolution in the postwar U.S. as a commonsense moral and social good illustrates that its ubiquity in higher education was not simply a consequence of grassroots opposition against racism. It is also due to its malleability to serve the interests of state and capital and placate challenges to their power and legitimacy in moments of crisis.

Today, anti-racism falls under the broader organizational and cultural project of promoting “diversity.” The concept of “diversity” proliferated across sectors in the late 1980s, including in schools and universities, corporations, various levels of government, places of worship, and nonprofit organizations, taking place as a normative common good with widespread institutional support (Berrey, 2015). Since then, diversity has proven to be an amorphous agenda, guided by contesting, and at times, conflicting aims, priorities, and definitions. In higher education, diversity encompasses a wide range of initiatives, including admissions, faculty hiring, curriculum, and research funding, pertaining to issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, citizenship status, and other axes of difference.⁵ Consequently, the subject, or the intended beneficiary, of diversity has also become a moving target. This expansive character of diversity, scholars found, often obscures the limited structural change undertaken under its purview with symbolic gestures and unclear goalposts (Ahmed, 2012; Berrey, 2015; J. Thomas, 2020).

The U.S. embraced anti-racism as an official stance of the state as it rose to prominence as a global superpower after World War II (1939-1945) into the Cold War. The anti-racist and anti-colonial movements of the 1960s across the world, including in the U.S., gained powerful visibility and established itself as a political force to be reckoned with for Western and U.S. imperial powers. These mass movements fiercely challenged the unjust exploitation and oppression of racialized and colonized peoples that rely on ideologies of explicit white supremacy that organize people based on phenotype into hierarchies of intellect and

⁵ As I write this, institutional politics around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is changing rapidly. The re-elected Trump administration has stopped funding research projects it found remotely connected to DEI and is threatening to withdraw funding from universities unless they repeal DEI-related programs. Some universities have capitulated to these demands already. The far-right is aggressively appropriating DEI to problematize what they call “reverse racism” against white male individuals and accuse those speaking out against Israel’s genocidal violence against Palestinians of anti-semitism and thus punishable under hate crime laws.

civilizational sophistication. White supremacy in this form became all the more untenable for the U.S. imperial venture as its military aggressively intervened overseas after World War II to expand its geopolitical control in the face of an international popular communist vision and its rivalry with the Soviet Union. The U.S. justified its brutal involvement and repression of revolutionary forces in its own country and abroad such as Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Chile, Cuba, El Salvador, and Afghanistan in the name of spreading democracy, freedom, and the good life. It declared a global crusade against the evil grasp of communism, conflating it with totalitarianism, and ensured that U.S.-friendly national elites seize power in the Global South. This came at the expense of countless lives of civilians, revolutionaries, and foot soldiers of the U.S. imperial state and its collaborators (Man, 2018). According to Harvey (2003), empires such as Britain and France whose heyday waned after World War II had leaned on racism to justify its colonial conquest. In contrast, the postwar American empire hid behind abstract universalism, proselytizing values of democracy and equality, to disavow its imperial formation amid global demands for decolonization, self-determination, and the dismantling of white supremacy. U.S. internal policies of racial discrimination presented a crisis of legitimacy for its global leadership, which the Soviets took advantage of in their propaganda to reveal the hypocrisy of the U.S. empire-building project (Dudziak, 2000; Man, 2018; Melamed, 2006). Against this backdrop, “[a]ntiracism becomes a nationally recognized social value and, for the first time, gets absorbed into U.S. governmentality. Importantly, postwar liberal racial formation sutures an ‘official’ antiracism to U.S. nationalism itself” (Melamed, 2006, p. 2). In short, embracing anti-racism as a state ideology was not only a national, but a global affair.

U.S. higher education played an important role in incorporating anti-racism into the lexicon of defending and furthering elite interests in the face of serious challenges to white

supremacy. In the 1960s and 1970s amid the Cold War, the U.S. state invested in expanding academic institutions' capacity to meet its need for military operations research including training knowledge workers for that purpose (Higgins, 2023). This meant that mass student uprisings against minority exclusion and U.S. warmongering had to be managed as a matter of state affairs (Ferguson, 2012, 2016). The civil rights movement victory of affirmative action was one such concession to quell dissent and democratize higher education. However, as affirmative action continued to be debated in court, for instance, via *Regents of California v. Bakke* in 1978 regarding admissions at the University of California, *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003 with the University of Michigan, its justification has shifted from rectifying the racial inequalities of educational access and social mobility to heralding the ambiguous value of “diversity” as an ingredient of academic excellence (Berrey, 2015; Takagi, 1992). However, in light of *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* in 2023, even this hollowed out version of diversity was rendered an obsolete defense for affirmative action. The U.S. Supreme Court deemed the diversity rationale to violate Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that originally gave birth to affirmative action policies that mitigate de facto race-based discrimination.

In addition to securing a sense of national unity, anti-racism served a crucial function in bolstering imperial legitimacy. As a part of the Cold War expansion of higher education, universities recruited elite foreign students from newly independent countries as vehicles of soft power who, upon their return, were expected to reshape their nations to reproduce a U.S.-led capitalist global order (Bu, 2003). In turn, these students were integrated into their local host communities as evidence to the domestic U.S. public of the benevolence and superiority of the U.S. in the world (Ferguson, 2012). However, diplomacy ventures to win international students over to the American ways of life did not always bear their intended outcome, and at times,

produced the reverse. According to Bu (2003), international educators even before the 1950s fretted over the wariness among international students toward American democracy as first-hand witnesses and victims of the harsh realities of racial discrimination in the U.S. In her study of Taiwanese international student activists in the 1960s and 1970s, Cheng (2023) found that student migrants, as a part of the greater campus community, joined in on anti-war and Black power movements. As newcomers to the U.S., they developed a critique of the U.S. imperial-racial state despite its official embrace of anti-racism.

Starting in the 1980s, universities could no longer rely on government funding for its survival as an extension of the imperial security apparatus against threats to U.S. global dominance. Adapting to post-Cold War formations and the global ascendance of neoliberal governance, universities innovated imaginaries of the world as one global market rather than composed of discrete nation-states organized according to Cold War geopolitics. These transformations appealed to private donors and philanthropic organizations then steeped in the language of globalization and accelerated the pursuit of internationalization strategies such as the recruitment of tuition-paying international students and opening satellite campuses abroad (Kamola, 2019). The popularization of “global citizenship” in higher education can be understood as a part of this invention, which conveniently celebrates transnational mobilities and exchanges through which capital is accumulated (Dimpfl & Smith, 2019; K. Mitchell, 2007). Accordingly, diversity evolved to encompass the praise of elite-serving multinationalism, devoid of a substantive politics especially by sidestepping class (Buckner et al., 2021; K. Mitchell, 1993). Hegemonic anti-racism in the U.S. today was formed through these overlapping histories, where race matters in common parlance are restricted to interpersonal bigotry, as one of many axes of cultural difference that should be treated with respect and sensitivity. Even still, anti-

racism persists as a crucial site of contestation to imagine racial justice otherwise amid the attempts for its “elite capture” (Táíwò, 2022). It is this complex web of anti-racist and diversity discourse that international students found themselves in upon arriving at U.S. campuses.

Disidentification with U.S. race discourse as a structure of feeling

International students have become subjects of much scholarly attention since the late 2000s, a pivotal time for international recruitment and admission strategies in the U.S. higher education industry. Abdullah et al. (2014) found that 65% of journal articles about international students published since the 1980s were between 2006 and 2013. As the presence of international students on campus quickly became palpable, majority of studies aimed to assess students’ general well-being and campus experience (Krsmanovic, 2020). The 2020s marked another flashpoint for research on international students. The Covid-19 outbreak and the rise of Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements ushered in a sense of urgency to better understand international students’ relationship to race and racism specifically (King, 2023). Research thus far has consistently shown that racism shapes non-white international students’ lives in the U.S. At the same time, many feel estranged from national race relations and that readily available narratives about racial identity are discordant with their sense of self and life experiences. I suggest that it is instructive to understand these dissonances, not formally articulated as a collective condition or structural critique yet a resonant sensibility nonetheless, as a “structure of feeling.” According to Williams (1978), a structure of feeling encompasses:

[M]eanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable, over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. (p. 132)

Taken as is, rather than a problem that needs to be solved, international students' documented ambivalence toward U.S. race discourse can be a productive entry point for examining mainstream understandings of race today.

Early research on international students was preoccupied with identifying individual characteristics that lead to positive or negative campus experiences. In contrast, recent work has focused on unveiling systemic issues such as discrimination or lack of university support that hinder student well-being. This turn redirected the implicit burden of assimilation unduly placed on individuals to addressing structural barriers in the host country and institution that create hardships for students (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2019). Common struggles among international students included social isolation, anxiety, and immigration-related limits to job opportunities which caused economic precarity in the present and uncertainties for the future. Such difficulties revealed xenophobic sociocultural norms and assumptions and the dearth of knowledge and resources among university personnel to adequately meet student need. In particular, non-white international students and students from non-Western countries disproportionately reported being discriminated against or misunderstood (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). While universities celebrate international student presence to boost their reputation of valuing diversity, students' everyday experiences threw a wrench into this narrative (Buckner et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2019b). This disparity, scholars noted, exposes the institutions' failure to fulfill their promise of diversity and multiculturalism (Rose-Redwood, 2010; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2019). In light of these shortcomings, researchers explored how students affirm and exercise their agency to navigate systemic challenges (Baxter, 2019; S. Kim, 2024; Nguyet Nguyen & Robertson, 2022). These strategies included forging and relying on local and transnational community networks and pushing back against assumptions

imposed on them through subtle and explicit forms of protest. The struggles students faced and the strategies they developed in response varied depending on their countries of origin and race among other factors (Asante et al., 2016; Baxter, 2019; Yu, 2025).

Upon encountering foreign racial dynamics in the U.S., many international students of color developed a new sense of identity in relation to national race relations. Significantly, students distanced themselves from what they considered to be a domestic paradigm of race which constantly seemed to demand engagement (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017a; Fei, 2024; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Ham, 2023; Urban & Orbe, 2007; Yu, 2025). African students in one midwestern U.S. university, for example, felt pressured to conform to locally legible expressions of Blackness (Asante et al., 2016). In turn, they conceived of their Africanness by differentiating themselves from their African American peers and rejecting the expectations of Blackness imposed on them. Fries-Britt et al. (2014) proposed that there are roughly three types of student responses to being exposed to U.S. racial categories and ideologies, all of which heavily informed by the non-U.S. national contexts students grew up in. Most common was disengagement—students circumscribing themselves as outsiders; the second was the recognition that race and racism unavoidably had to be contended with in their life in the U.S.; and the third, rarest response was what Fries-Britt et al. (2014) called “integrative awareness” where the student confidently located themselves in U.S. race relations and committed to the advancement of racial justice in their new country of residence (Fei, 2024). The notable absence of students who belong in the third category can be explained by the reality numerous studies have shown: that the racial commonsense of the U.S. often does not speak to the lived experiences of the migrants in question (Althen, 2009; Asante et al., 2016; Bardhan & Zhang, 2017a; Baxter, 2019; D. Mitchell Jr. et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2019; Yu, 2025).

Much research on international students' racial awareness has been motivated by the perceived need to foster goodwill among different racial groups on campus as a pathway to racial justice. For example, Ritter (2016) proffered that students' racial attitudes not only matter for their own well-being, but concern questions of racial solidarity. This sentiment reflected broader conversations in university settings, found in expectations among university administrators and Asian American students themselves that Asian international students would form meaningful relationships with Asian Americans with relative ease based on a sense of racial affinity (Kwon et al., 2019b). However, in the absence of frequent interaction with other racial minority groups, Fujioka (1999) and Ritter (2016) discovered that racial stereotypes perpetuated through the media largely shaped international students' perception. It is with education, more direct contact, and input from other American peers that students formed opinions that diverge from narratives circulated through mass media. Thus, Ritter (2016) argued that it is imperative for universities to educate international students on multiculturalism to mitigate emerging interracial conflicts. In sum, current literature on international students and race recommends appreciating these migrants as foreign nationals and instructing them about the U.S. culture of race through required programming and coursework, creating living and learning environments that increase interactions between domestic and international students, and providing more training for university personnel about the diverse struggles and backgrounds of international students. Researchers also increasingly emphasize the importance of transnationalizing race education to account for students' experiences and prior knowledge of racialization formed outside the U.S.

Despite the common assumption that non-white international students will and should identify with the U.S. anti-racist agenda, international students' repeated disidentification deserves more attention. Bardhan and Zhang (2017) argued that students' resistance, albeit

individualized, is a form of decolonial refusal that provincializes the U.S., protests pressures to assimilate, and challenges dominant national race ideologies shaped by histories of (settler) colonialism. These shared feelings of misalignment is a real but unarticulated phenomenon—in other words, a “structure of feeling”:

[A] social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations. (R. Williams, 1978, p. 132)

What forms of racial politics may bear fruit from, or in spite of, these ambient sensibilities? To answer this question, I examine two political formations in the 2020s that elicited media attention for international student involvement: the Stop Asian Hate movement and the higher education labor movement. These case studies elucidate the plurality of anti-racist politics and the different systems of alliances mobilizing them.

Stop Asian Hate and hegemonic anti-racism

The Stop Asian Hate movement in the U.S. emerged in 2021 as the Covid-19 epidemic swept across the globe and anti-Asian sentiments took on renewed life, attributing the virus to Asian and especially Chinese bodies. The movement at once highlighted the persisting severity of anti-Asian bigotry and racial prejudice as a powerful mobilizing force in U.S. anti-racist politics. The police state and privatizing public universities’ engagement with the Stop Asian Hate movement reveals why and how elite-serving institutions participate in the reproduction of hegemonic anti-racism. Recognizing the resonance of the movement among the Asian international student population, higher education industry experts openly warned that racism against these students may negatively impact U.S. universities’ bottom-line by harming their competitiveness in the

global student market. Thus, Stop Asian Hate yet again brought to light higher education's orientation toward international students first and foremost as consumers.

The White House under then President Trump (2017-2021) habitually referred to Covid-19 as “kung-flu” or the “Chinese virus.” Stop Asian Hate became a rallying cry to protest racist framings of this public health crisis and the specter of growing interpersonal physical violence against Asians as a result of xenophobic health discourse. The killing of Asian massage workers in Atlanta, GA in 2021 added fuel to this movement, as did the mass shootings in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay in California in 2023. As a response, Stop Asian Hate gave cohesion to these incidents, connecting them to the longer history of racial animosity against Asians in the U.S. which birthed tropes such as Yellow Peril and the hypersexualized and submissive Asian woman. As one of the most visible instances of international student engagement with Stop Asian Hate, students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) organized two protests in June 2022 in the aftermath of an attack against a Chinese PhD student near campus. While similar incidents of violence have happened at universities all across the nation, and countless rallies were held to decry anti-Asian hate, what happened at UW was distinct in that it was the only instance where international students were spotlighted in the media for leading Stop Asian Hate marches (Mohieldin, 2022). Among those rallying in support were staff members of the UW International Student Services (ISS), an office whose primary responsibility is to ensure that the University and its international students comply with federal immigration regulations. The director of ISS, Samantha McCabe, testified that multiple students have recently approached ISS with similar experiences of violence (Mohieldin, 2022). The actions accompanied a petition with four demands to the University about this “Asian Hate Crime”: (1) to publicly respond to the incident via campus-wide safety alerts and social media; (2) for the UW Police Department (UWPD) to

conduct further investigations; (3) penalize perpetrators following university protocols if they turn out to be students at the UW; and (4) mandate trainings about race as with Title IX. Citing the “nationwide surge in crimes against the Asian community,” the petition positions the campaign at UW within the fight to ensure “millions of people in the APIDA group in the U.S. ... feel safe, understood, cared for, and respected...because this is their home too, which they believe in, rely on, and have been devoted to” (Cao, 2022). To the protesters’ dismay, University and Madison Police did not find the assault to be racially motivated, but the UW issued a statement on June 21 reporting on the measures taken by law enforcement against perpetrators and reaffirming its commitment to “keep[] our community safe,” and especially those of Asian, Pacific Islander and Desi American (APIDA) and Asian identities (Scholz, 2022).

Asian international students participated in the Stop Asian Hate movement as victims of racism within U.S. race relations. Other examples of public international student engagement with Stop Asian Hate, such as the production of a short film titled “Your Bias Hurts Me” in 2021 by two graduate students at the University of Buffalo (See Robinson, 2021) or a similar documentary underway by a graduate student at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) (See He, 2022), also suggested the potential of a shared racial feeling among Asian international students and their American counterparts as an outgrowth of this movement. Along these lines, an article in *Inside Higher Education*, one of the two most influential news outlets on U.S. higher education, reporting on the protests at UW referred to Covid-19 as a “period of collective racial trauma” for Asians (Weissman, 2022). These developments indicate that within Fries-Britt et al.’s (2014) “Learning Race in a U.S. Context (LRUSC)” framework, Stop Asian Hate may function as a crucial event that propels the Asian international student population into “integrative awareness.”

It would be premature to conclude, however, that this promising moment of “integrative awareness” would translate to racial justice or solidarity. On one hand, it was an opportunity for international students to affirm their affinity with the broader Asian community in the U.S. On the other, the racial camaraderie formed through Stop Asian Hate was largely at odds with concurrent mobilizations for Black lives challenging the criminal justice system. It would be more fitting to interpret international student involvement in the Stop Asian Hate movement as a moment when *hegemonic* anti-racism had stronger resonance in Asian international students’ lives. Movement wins constituted directing institutional resources to tracking and encouraging people to report instances of verbal or physical attacks to numerically substantiate the magnitude of racial discrimination against Asians. This was the founding mission of the nation’s largest anti-Asian racism reporting center and a leading voice in the Stop Asian Hate movement, Stop AAPI Hate. As a coalition between the Asian American Studies Department at the San Francisco State University (SFSU), AAPI Equity Alliance, and Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), the group received \$10 million from the Californian legislature in 2021 to support their work as a part of the \$156.5 million Asian and Pacific Islander (API) Equity Budget. In the following years, with Stop AAPI Hate’s advocacy, the Californian state passed Senate Bill 1161 and 434 to survey harassment taking place on public transit. On a federal level, the Biden administration (2021-2025) instated the Covid-19 Hate Crimes Act in 2021 which established expanding law enforcement and criminalization as the policy solution to the problem of bigotry. While celebrating the federal government’s willingness to take action, Stop AAPI Hate expressed reservations about the legislation’s focus on criminal law enforcement which does not “address the overwhelming majority of incidents reported to [Stop AAPI Hate’s] site which are not hate

crimes, but serious hate acts” nor “the root causes of systemic racism and oppression” (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021).

Scholars have argued that the Stop Asian Hate movement mainly mobilized around the framework of “hate incidents” and “hate crimes,” replicating a “crime wave discourse” that flames public anxiety around growing crime rates and rampant criminals (Nopper, 2021; J. Wong & Liu, 2022). Historically, this discourse has functioned as a fearmongering tactic to expand the criminal justice system, piggybacking on the enduring anti-Black narrative that Black people and spaces are responsible for crime, degeneracy, and other social maladies while obscuring the structural conditions produced by the state. Illustratively, Kim (2022) compared the reception of the Covid-19 Hate Crimes Act to the “Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Systemic Racist Police Violence Against People of African Descent in the United States” released in 2021 and the George Floyd Justice in Policing bill that failed to pass the Senate the same year. This juxtaposition unveiled the state’s deep investment in institutional formations that render Black people disproportionately “vulnerab[le] to premature death,” while insisting on its anti-racist innocence by way of denouncing anti-Asian bigotry (Gilmore, 2007). In this respect, the Stop Asian Hate discourse availed the state an opportunity to pronounce its commitment to a version of anti-racism that obscures the racial logics of structural violence beyond discrimination. Thus, Kandaswamy et al. (2023) underscored the importance of examining peoples’ relationship to the state to accurately account for race as a structure that differentially distributes resources and life chances. In an attempt at recuperation, Lo (2023) and Nishimura (2024) highlighted the U.S. imperial state’s role in trapping Southeast Asians in a vicious cycle of violence—through military invasion of their homelands, aggressive recruitment into the U.S.

military with promises of belonging and financial stability, criminalization in the U.S., and ultimate deportation—naming the state as a culprit of anti-Asian violence.

The Stop Asian Hate movement also reaffirmed that the logic of capital accumulation informed the higher education industry's stance toward the impacts of racism on international students. Higher industry experts stressed the detrimental effect racism has on international student recruitment and the university budget (Blumenthal, 2021; Fischer, 2021a, 2021b). For example, a 2021 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled “After Anti-Asian Incidents, Colleges Seek to Reassure Fearful International Students” stated that:

Now the surge in anti-Asian racism — building throughout the pandemic and culminating in the recent mass shootings in Atlanta, which killed six women of Asian descent — could compound international enrollment challenges. Colleges are concerned that the rise in anti-Asian discrimination and violence could make international students, 70 percent of whom are from Asian countries, think twice about coming to the United States. (Fischer, 2021a)

The article cited interviews with multiple university administrators who directly named anti-Asian racism as a source of threat to U.S.'s dominating status in the global student market. For example:

“Safety, safety, safety,” is how Jun Wang, assistant provost for strategic initiatives and international recruitment at the University of California at Riverside, describes recent conversations with applicants from abroad. They worry whether they will be welcome in America, he said. “Students and their families are scared.”

Administrators in similar positions worried that recent high-profile incidents of anti-Asian violence exacerbated the perception among prospective international students that the U.S. was a dangerous country.

Consumer-oriented anti-racism is a hallmark of what Melamed (2006) dubbed “neoliberal multiculturalism” to name how Western state and capital started leveraging values of

multiculturalism in the 1990s to assuage resistance to transnationally mobile capital, exemplified in fears about specifically Asian firms and wealth, compared to European sources, taking over the U.S. or Canada (K. Mitchell, 1993; Ong, 1999). As a mode of racial governance, neoliberal multiculturalism celebrates racial, gender, or sexual diversity that facilitates the accumulation of capital while excusing violence against those who attempt to slow it down (Bacchetta et al., 2015; Reddy, 2011). Those targeted for violence often fall within the identity categories heralded as “diverse”—Black and Brown, gender non-conforming, or otherwise minoritized—but rarely receive protection from the state for their “diversity.” Rather, these same communities find that “diversity” is weaponized against them when considered to be standing in the way of state and capital (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 2018). For instance, Bacchetta et al. (2015) demonstrated that policing, criminalization, and gentrification of poor, predominantly non-white neighborhoods are frequently justified in the name of protecting (white and economically privileged) queer people from communities racialized as culturally backwards and thus queerphobic. The higher education industry’s anxieties about the financial consequences of racism against international students betrayed the racial politics of safeguarding the continuous accumulation of capital.

The higher ed labor movement and immigration as a workplace issue

As universities across the country publicly affirmed Stop Asian Hate, Covid-19 wreaked havoc in international students’ lives in other ways. Lynch et al. (2023) and Martirosyan et al. (2022) found that financial hardship, travel-related worries, and volatile visa policies were some of the biggest sources of stress among international students during this time. Let us return to the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) where the assault of a Chinese PhD student in 2022 had triggered a Stop Asian Hate march on campus led by international students. In November 2020, the Associated Students of Madison (ASM), the student governance body at the UW, introduced

a legislation demanding that the University compensate telecommuting international student workers for their labor (Mitnick, 2020). ASM had learned that the UW did not pay international student hourly employees working remotely from abroad given the severe restrictions to traveling. With the Teaching Assistants Association (TAA), the graduate workers' union at the UW, students and workers accused UW of “wage theft,” demanded back pay for impacted workers, problematized UW’s decision to compensate some international student hourly employees but not others, and questioned their purported inability to continue hiring international students (Musso, 2020).

TAA representatives connected these developments to other “discriminatory” treatment of international students, such as the \$100 international student fee they are required to pay every semester (Vento, 2020). The UW had introduced the international student fee in 2015, in addition to raising the undergraduate international student tuition by \$1000 more than their domestic out-of-state counterparts. The rationale was: “Since September 11, 2001, the Federal government has substantially increased the requirements on universities to monitor international students. The cost of handling international applications and enrollees is substantially higher than for domestic students.” With heightened anxieties about national security post-9/11, the U.S. government disproportionately increased the scrutiny on international students as potential terrorists and mandated university officials to track and report on these migrants’ whereabouts and academic and employment status, among other information (Boggs, 2013). The fee proposal cited Ohio State, Purdue, and the University of Illinois as examples of public institutions that have already implemented this charging schema (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin system, 2015). One international graduate worker pointed out the irony of these fees: “I pay not only for my own surveillance but also for the International Student Services Office, an essential service

for which the university should pay” (“Discriminatory International Student Fee,” 2019). TAA argued that UW treats international students inequitably, compounded by the students’ limited access to social security, scholarships, and work opportunities imposed by immigration law. Ultimately, in January 2021, the UW agreed to pay international student workers their overdue wages and to continue hiring telecommuting international students (Gretzinger, 2020).

Graduate student worker unions such as the TAA at the UW first started forming in the 1960s. TAA and graduate teaching assistants at the University of California Berkeley were one of the first graduate workers to unionize, the latter growing out of the Free Speech Movement on campus which criticized the university’s suppression of student assembly and protest amid anti-war and civil rights movements garnering mass participation (Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005). Universities often employ enrolled graduate students as teaching assistants (TAs), research assistants (RAs), and staff or administrative assistants (SAs). Scholars associate the expansion of this category of workers with universities’ attempts to save labor costs and casualize academic work by replacing work formerly performed by tenured faculty with lower paid and less secure job positions such as graduate workers and part-time, contingent faculty (Freeman, 2000; Kroeger et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2006). Graduate worker unions have consistently waged a critique against the “corporatization” of higher education, run according to market logics of minimizing expenses while generating revenue by colluding with the military and private companies (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2002). Many saw unionization as a response to these changes. Across time, graduate workers united primarily around poor compensation, lack of job security, better benefits, and overwork (Singh et al., 2006). Less economic concerns impacting workplace conditions, such as harassment, affirmative action, and shared governance, were also mobilizing factors, informed by social issues galvanizing the broader public at a given time (Stubaus, 2025).

In 2024, 38% of all graduate student workers across public and private institutions were unionized. The number of unionized graduate workers had increased dramatically by 133% since 2012 from approximately 64,400 to 150,000 employees in recognized collective bargaining units. An overwhelming majority of unionizing graduate workers were in private institutions, following the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) *Columbia University* decision in 2016 which ruled that graduate and undergraduate student workers in private institutions qualify as employees for the purposes of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and thus have the legal right to unionize (364 NLRB No. 90, 2016). For student workers at public universities, it is the state, not the NLRB, that adjudicates whether they are entitled to bargaining rights. Strikingly, 75% of the growth in unionization in the last decade happened between 2021 and 2023, which Herbert et al., (2024) attribute to a more labor-friendly make-up of NLRB, outcomes of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and the subsiding initial shock related to the outbreak of Covid-19.

The precarity of international student employees came into dramatic focus in the higher education labor movement as the global pandemic unfolded (Boggs, 2020; Cate, 2022; Jiang, 2021; Stubaus, 2025). Travel restrictions created general uncertainty for many prospective and enrolled student workers, in addition to the federal administration's targeting of Chinese scholars as potential spies and threats to deport international students in the U.S. citing the shift to remote instruction. Individually and with the support of their unions, international workers across the country demanded that universities uphold employment and admissions offers, accommodate remote work, waive student fees, and otherwise mitigate the direct harm to international students' employment conditions caused by changes in federal immigration regulations. Even prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, however, graduate worker unions such as the TAA at UW, Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) at University of Illinois at Chicago, Harvard Graduate Students'

Union (HGSU) at Harvard University, and UAW 4121 at the University of Washington had successfully organized around issues that disproportionately impact international and undocumented workers. Such efforts included the reduction of international student fees, guaranteeing job security in the case of immigration-related emergencies, and fighting the 2017 travel ban instated by President Trump (*2017 Travel Ban Bargaining*, 2017; Chatterjee, 2019; Isaac, 2022). International graduate students experience unique challenges in the workplace shaped by linguistic barriers, sociocultural misunderstandings and isolation, unfamiliarity with U.S. institutions and support systems, discrimination, restrictions to off-campus employment, visa-related instability, limited access to scholarships, grants, and social security, and relationship to the university as their visa sponsor (Chatterjee, 2019). These factors make international graduate workers particularly reliant on their faculty supervisor and other departmental authority figures who oversee both their employment and academic progress. The university has near monopoly over international graduate students' economic livelihood, as these students can only pursue off-campus job opportunities under very limited conditions, and immigration status, since it controls whether a student is allowed to continue in the program that guarantees their stay in the U.S. These power dynamics have prevented many international students from seeking recourse for harassment, discrimination, intimidation, retaliation, and exploitation from their supervisor and accept that such mistreatment is a price they need to pay as student migrants (Cantwell et al., 2018; J. J. Lee & Cantwell, 2012).

Universities have demonstrated a pattern of taking advantage of international workers' visa-related fears and precarities as a union-busting tactic. Union organizers reported that universities purposefully share misleading information to international workers during key moments of mobilization, such as unionization drives, contract negotiations, and strike

authorization votes, to intimidate them from partaking in union activities (Bittle, 2017; Boggs, 2020; Cate, 2022). For example, in 2017, Provost Holden Thorpe at the Washington University in St. Louis sent an email to students with FAQs about the graduate student unionization campaign on campus. In a matter-of-fact manner, the email suggested that visa-holders could put their status at risk by engaging in union activities such as a strike, as the university would be required to report them to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) “if a student fails to maintain status.” As Bittle (2017) noted, such statements are misleading, as it is under the university’s jurisdiction to decide whether or not a student is properly maintaining their status within the gray legal area of strike participation. Columbia University, University of Oregon, University of California Santa Cruz, and UCLA used similar strategies of spreading misinformation to discourage international students from participating in labor actions. In January 2010, the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) made the highly controversial decision to exclude international students from the TAA bargaining unit based on the same dubious grounds (Williams June, 2010). One year later in March 2011, all public sector workers in Wisconsin, including graduate students at the UW represented by the TAA, were stripped of their rights to collectively bargain under Wisconsin Act 10. In their unionization efforts, international students’ transnational mobility did not make them desirable diversity subjects in the spirit of neoliberal multiculturalism. Instead, it was a weakness that universities could exploit as a mechanism of control.

Through the higher education labor movement, international students connected workplace rights to the immigration and border regime as a structure that creates power dynamics primed for exploitation and normalizes the unequal access to rights and resources. With the understanding that immigration is fundamentally a race-making project, this emerging

“politics of alignments” betrays international students’ role in shaping race politics in the U.S. (Visweswaran, 1997). Recounting the history of diasporic South Asian communities’ racial formation in the U.S., Visweswaran (1997) observed the flexibility with which South Asians have negotiated their insertion into U.S. race relations to expediently navigate the historical circumstances they are confronted with. In the earlier part of the 20th Century, only those who are “white” were eligible for U.S. citizenship. In the eyes of the legal system, who belongs in this racial group was highly inconsistent and ill-defined. To obtain citizenship, South Asians argued for their whiteness to varying degrees of success and distanced themselves from the Asian category. In contrast, in the latter half of the 20th Century during the post-civil rights era, South Asians sought and achieved inclusion in the Asian and Pacific Islander census category to claim affirmative action benefits. Visweswaran’s (1997) study shows that minority communities such as diasporic South Asians whose racial positioning are often in flux are not passive bystanders in their racial formation. Rather, they make strategic choices regarding which groups to align with to advantageously construct their sociopolitical standing within changing historical contexts. What political possibilities will open up as the higher education labor movement takes on immigration as a workplace issue rather than shy away from it? What alliances between migrant justice and labor movements will take shape?

Hegemonic anti-racism assures hopeful believers that racism will eventually disappear if the committed can identify and rectify one unchecked racist assumption at a time. However, its narrow conceptualization of race as a marker of cultural difference and of racism as a product of individual ignorance fail to help make sense of the ways in which international students were mired in the fraught racial politics of the early 2020s. As a promising alternative, Owens and Boggs (2016) provided a model of designing an introductory course about the U.S. for

international students without essentializing or homogenizing the U.S. or reproducing pressures on international students to assimilate. Such courses tend to focus on teaching students everyday slang, mannerisms, food, values, and other U.S. cultural norms. Arguably, what gets taught might say more about what America thinks of itself, rather than the actual Americans whose relationship to these stated norms widely vary. Approaching this course from an American studies angle, Owens and Boggs (2016) prompted international students to deconstruct their own preconceptions of the U.S. to unearth how global power relations have shaped the country and students' lives in and outside of the U.S. Their approach encourages international students to critically engage with U.S. racial politics based on students' lived experiences without reaffirming the nationalist myth that anti-racism and multiculturalism are distinct facets of American culture that students must learn. Considering the international student population on U.S. campuses, university administrators in recent years have started encouraging instructors to make courses more "inclusive" by, for instance, refraining from using metaphors or examples from the U.S. (Ninh, 2022). However, Ninh (2022) raised that such suggestions are impossible to apply in classes like hers on literature about U.S. race relations, without compromising students' learning outcomes. Such attempts at inclusion are limiting and misguided, she contended, as long as universities continue to recruit students as fungible capital with little regard for their future educational experiences. In other words, pedagogy alone could not "fix" the conundrums of today's neoliberal university. As Stuart Hall (2021) proffered in his 1980 essay, "Teaching Race," "[i]nstead of thinking that the questions of race are some sort of moral duty, ... one has to remember that the issue of race provides one of the most important ways of understanding how this society actually works and how it has arrived where it is" (p. 135). At its best, learning about

race could equip international students with the tools to grasp the political economic architecture of their experiences of migration, alienation, and racialization, and even attempt to transform it.

Conclusion

This chapter explored Asian international students' participation in Stop Asian Hate and the higher education labor movement to illuminate the plurality of international students' racial politics in the 2020s. Research thus far has shown that many international students tend to distance themselves from national race relations, while being fully aware of the negative impacts of racism on their everyday lives. I offered that we think of the dissonance international students feel as a structure of feeling to critically examine commonsense understandings of race in the U.S. today (R. Williams, 1978). The Stop Asian Hate movement was one recent example in which hegemonic anti-racism struck a chord with Asian international students. Yet, denunciations of anti-Asian racism did little to facilitate an organized response to address students' financial and visa-related struggles during this time. Instead, international students mobilized as a part of the higher education labor movement, identifying immigration-related surveillance, restrictions on their employment, overreliance on university authority figures, threats to their right to protest, and other conditions of their stay in the U.S. as discriminatory workplace issues. These charges rejected the taken-for-granted notion that borders and the immigration system justify unequal curtailments to their freedom to work, study, and organize. Such developments in the 2020s provide useful examples of how hegemonic anti-racism continues to be contested on the ground, as international students navigate changing race politics in the U.S.

The Logic of Budgeting and International Student Life:

A Case Study at the Global University (GU)

This chapter takes place at one public flagship university in the Western United States (US), which I will call the ‘Global University (GU).’ It asks: what can we learn about international student subjectivity when we observe its formation at the scale of campus life? In the 2010s, international undergraduate recruitment and admissions became one piece of a broad range of strategies that GU implemented to generate university revenue. GU had a familiar public relations strategy for this neoliberal mode of accumulation, which was to invoke “diversity.” It emphasized that international students helped create a diverse educational environment fit for a globalizing world, while supporting its commitment to enroll low-income in-state students. Diversity stood for the university’s ability to deliver quality education and create a harmonious learning environment for resident and non-resident students alike. In addition, the GU reorganized its campus infrastructure in the entrepreneurial spirit of managing and cultivating its global student clientele. In 2010, the GU created a separate office to fulfill the regulatory requirements pertaining to migrants specifically on *student* visas, opposed to all visa types as was done previously. In 2018, it opened a new center on campus dedicated to international student affairs, alongside other identity-based student centers, partly with the funds raised from alumni and parents of prospective students during recruitment-related overseas travel. In the latter half of the 20th century, the U.S. recruited international students largely at the graduate level for their perceived utility as foreign agents of U.S. diplomacy and human capital (O’Mara, 2012). By contrast, for the past two decades, publicly funded universities aggressively sought foreign students for budgetary reasons, expanding the population of tuition-paying students at the

undergraduate level. The bureaucratic changes since the 2010s at GU demonstrated how the shifting logics of governance at the national scale shaped student lives at the campus level. Having become reliant on non-resident tuition to salvage its financial future, the GU navigated perceived threats and opportunities regarding this revenue stream through marketing as well as internal administrative changes.

Despite these efforts, campus realities turned out to be much more complicated. The tensions at GU that emerged in response to a growing international student population reflected concerns at other university campuses about international student integration. The adjustment pains were especially felt among faculty and staff instructing and assisting students. One long-time staff member at the Office of International Student Services shared:

Now we have all these students, but they have unique needs that [international] graduate students didn't have. They're 18-year-olds who've never been to the United States before and are coming from their home countries and don't really have a lot of experience with the US education system. So there was a lot of cultural adjustments that were happening on campus for both faculty and staff and support services offices. ... I think there was just this learning curve for all of campus to kind of say—wait a minute, we've never dealt with this situation before.

Not only that, but the public's resentments toward international student presence at the GU reverberated in the campus community as well. Staff members who worked directly with international students and tended to be more familiar with the difficulties they faced regularly encountered campus partners who were unconvinced that more resources should be allocated to international students. Some thought that the disruptions to university life to incorporate these revenue-generating students were already significant enough.

This chapter argues that the logic of budgeting shapes and constricts international student life today, as seen in both the making and the daily operations of university offices that serve international students. To be sure, Covid-19 and the unabashed anti-migrant agenda of the Trump

administration triggered palpable attitudinal changes toward international students at the GU. Staff at offices interfacing international students sensed that the broader campus community finally started recognizing the lack of structural support for the common issues international students encountered. Administrators and faculty at academic departments proactively reached out asking how they can help. Offices serving international students welcomed the growing interest in international students and their well-being and no longer felt isolated in their efforts to support international students. In 2020, the GU officially included international students in its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Blueprint. Nonetheless, these cultural shifts did little to mitigate international students' financial hardship, visa-related concerns, and post-graduation anxieties that became acute in the 2020s, but have been a chronic problem. Indeed, tackling these enduring issues would require confronting the budgetary logics—the privatization of public higher education and its utilization of immigration—that delineate the very conditions of contemporary international student life. These conditions far predated the Trump era.

Methodologically, this chapter employs institutional ethnography to understand the campus lives of international students through the perspective of everyday administrators (see Billo & Mountz, 2016 on institutional ethnography). Between April 2024 and January 2026, I conducted semi-structured 60-minute interviews with nine individuals at the GU (see *Table 1*). The first person I interviewed was an international admissions specialist at the GU Office of Admissions, introduced to me through a friend who happened to work in the Admissions Office at the time. After that, I interviewed staff members at the Office of International Student Services (OISS), the Institute of International Leadership and Exchange (IILE), and the International Campus Resource Center (ICRC), all of which are directly involved with international student life. I cold-emailed the representatives, who all generously responded to my interview request. I

also interviewed a staff member at Diversity and Leadership Center (DLC) which serves students of color at the GU, and a faculty member deeply involved with the DLC. I cold-emailed the faculty member, who was also gracious enough to talk with me and went out of her way to introduce me to the staff at DLC. In addition, I pursued interviews with three graduate student union organizers at the GU given the union's public activities regarding international student issues. The three organizers were selected for their time active at the GU. Together, they were able to speak to union activities concerning international student workers from 2004 to 2022. I was able to get in touch through close mutual acquaintances given my personal involvement in the labor movement. The bulk of this chapter draws on interviews I conducted with OISS, IILE, and ICRC, but I was only able to tell this story because of the conversations I had with my other interlocutors who provided background context and their unique perspectives on international student life based on their organizational affiliations. In addition, I reviewed university records at the GU archives, to confirm what was shared during interviews or to get a bigger picture of what was happening at the GU. I examined records from the GU Board of Regents, Division of Student Life, President's Office, Office of the Provost, and the Office of International Services most of which fell between 1990s and the mid-2010s. More recent records from the late 2010s and onward were not yet available in the archives. To preserve anonymity for my interviewees, I decided to use a pseudonym, the Global University (GU), for my study site. I have made minor fabrications to identifiable information about my interlocutors and the school to the extent that they do not compromise the validity of my analysis. Given my intent to hide the identity of the school, I had to refrain from pulling direct quotes or referencing specific documents that would reveal its identity.

Table 1*List of interviewees*

Organizational affiliation (pseudonym)	Acronym	Role	Tenure at organization	Name (pseudonym)
Institute of International Leadership and Exchange	IILE	Staff	2005-2021	Diane
GU International Campus Resource Center	ICRC	Staff	2018-present	Jie
GU Office of International Student Services	OISS	Staff	2010-present	Bonnie
GU Diversity and Leadership Center	DLC	Staff	2001-present	Felipe
GU Office of Admissions	n/a	Staff	2020-2024	n/a
Graduate student union	n/a	Union organizer	2004-2018	Susan
Graduate student union	n/a	Union organizer	2015-2023	n/a
Graduate student union	n/a	Union organizer	2018-2022	Hyejun
GU	n/a	Faculty affiliated with DLC	2011-present	Lupe

About Global University

One of fifty public flagship universities in the US, the Global University comprises multiple campuses across the state which is attended by approximately 60,000 students. This study focuses on the GU main campus (hereafter referred to simply as ‘GU’), where nearly 82% of the students are enrolled. In 2022, about 18% of the student population at GU were international students, a narrow majority of whom were pursuing undergraduate degrees. A significantly higher percentage of international students attend GU compared to the national average in U.S. postsecondary education, which was around 6% in 2022 (IIE: Institute of International Education, 2023). However, GU is by no means an outlier. By raw numbers, GU placed within

the top 20 U.S. colleges and universities enrolling international students, and by percentage, it ranked in the top 50 colleges and universities (IIE: Institute of International Education, 2023). In lock step with trends seen in many other public universities in the 2010s, international *undergraduate* enrollment ballooned by almost five times the decade prior at GU. According to GU administrators, this initial growth happened with no special recruitment effort or changes in admissions practices on the part of the university. However, in the context of decreasing state funding, this was a huge boon for the university, and GU made sure to take advantage of it, as one administrator involved in international admissions described to me:

It was back in I think 2008 ... there were some significant budget cuts happening in the state, and that meant the university's budget was also reduced. ... At that same period, we were being requested from the President's Office, from an enrollment standpoint, *to start admitting more international students*, to increase our international student enrollment. Because at the undergraduate level, we had a very small international student enrollment back then. ... We had a lot of applications, but we were only admitting about 15% of the students that were applying. And so it was like, 'Well, let's start admitting more international students. [emphasis added]

This instruction from leadership was in line with the university's 5-year plan, presented to the GU Board of Regents in 2010 by the GU Budget Office, to increase non-resident first-year undergraduate enrollment by 30-35% between 2011 and 2015 while holding the number of resident first-year undergraduates steady. While the domestic market for out-of-state students was limited, its international counterpart was just beginning to develop and full of potential (Bound et al., 2020). The GU Division of Enrollment at the time presented this analysis, urging leadership to take advantage of this untapped market by allocating a budget for recruiting international students targeting Asia in particular. The eventual non-resident enrollment growth seen during this time at GU was pronounced among students from abroad, and from China in particular, reflecting trends nationwide among public universities. The Division of Enrollment also alerted senior administrators that more and more public flagship universities were joining

CommonApp, a platform that allows prospective students to apply to multiple schools with one shared application, as a strategy for reaching more non-resident students. The GU finally opted into this platform in 2022.

As the widest circulating newspaper in the state would repeatedly report, these changes at GU stirred much controversy among college hopefuls and their families with established residency about their shrinking opportunities to attend GU to make space for out-of-state and especially foreign students. State representatives claimed that they would get stopped in the neighborhood by concerned constituents that qualified students were being rejected by GU, disadvantaged by their residency status. GU administrators spoke of being approached by elected officials and parents about whether residents can pay at a non-resident tuition rate to get a leg up in undergraduate admissions, a suggestion that one official admitted held some sway in her mind. To the spreading discontent about the shifting geographies served by GU's instructional function, GU launched a familiar public relations campaign that tuition from non-resident enrollment subsidized resident enrollment, especially for low-income students. One senior administrator definitively wrote in a 2009 GU alumni publication that critiques of the growing reliance on private sources of funding and the university's deteriorating public mission were misguided and misleading. As such, the GU helped normalize the ironic marriage between deepening privatization and educational equity as the only solution to save the educative mission of public higher education, as seen in other similar institutions.

International undergraduate enrollment was only one item in the laundry list of revenue-generating or budget-saving avenues GU pursued during this time. Under the banner of the "Innovative University Model," GU's wish list of strategies to achieve "world-class value" involved: providing greater latitude for the GU Board of Regents rather than the state to set

tuition rates, the ability to charge differential undergraduate tuition depending on their major, expanding online and other profitable programs targeting new student markets, striking partnerships with businesses and foreign government entities, reducing state oversight on GU's spending and investments, and replacing instructional and administrative labor with e-service technologies. Of the various private sources of funding pursued across the higher education industry, only tuition has proven to result in net profit (Newfield, 2021). Confronted with double-digit tuition hikes, mass layoffs, pay freezes, and other austerity measures impacting their livelihoods, students, staff, and faculty organized union and club meetings, demonstrated on campus, lobbied at the state legislature, and leveraged established protocols for shared governance to demand a different way forward. While seemingly disparate from the world of international student life, these histories were all connected in the eyes of university administration, organized by the primary logic of *budgeting*. Nearly two decades later since the spike in international undergraduate enrollment, this logic continues to shape and constrain how infrastructures at GU interface with international students today.

The campus as an archive of international student subjectivity

History leaves material traces—legacies that we can see, touch, and interact with. I examine the campus, with its various offices and centers, as a *place* through which we can track how institutions of higher education have historically oriented toward foreign students (see the conceptualization of place by Massey, 1995). The section demonstrates that the catalog of campus offices can be read as a local archive of institutional subjects amid the changing configurations of U.S. imperialism and global capitalism. In other words, the offices established on campus betray the history of producing and reproducing individual and collective identities, relationships, and other aspects of social life that align with the structural interests of state,

capital, and universities. Thus, the catalog of university offices today provides a contemporary snapshot of the complex and winding history of how universities have categorized and organized the people that make up the institution. The work that university administrations do to produce and reproduce campus life can look like sunseting some offices while creating new ones, moving an office from the jurisdiction of one division to another, changing funding structures, reducing or expanding staff capacity, or encouraging collaboration between certain offices. As a result of these bureaucratic processes, some students may end up spending most of their extracurricular hours in the same building space, such as the Diversity and Leadership Center (DLC) at GU, or share a similar network of mentors. Staff capacity dedicated to a defined student population may create opportunities of encounter for students who may not have met otherwise, while resources available student offices can determine who traffics those spaces. These organizational changes have a dialectical relationship to people's everyday interactions with their university and each other, such as a particularly vocal undocumented undergraduate student at GU who met Felipe, a DLC staff member eager to support him. Together, they applied for a one-time university grant to create an on-campus hub for undocumented students, which exists today as a center with a permanent funding stream. These diffuse social webs, while not confined by it, exist within a structured environment of the university as an institution, where norms about campus life have a material presence and relative longevity in the form of various offices and centers. This chapter is a story about such offices and centers, and especially whose primary function is affiliated with the campus life of international students.

There are three main characters in this story about international student subject formation at GU: the Institute of International Leadership and Exchange (IILE), the Office of International Student Services (OISS), and the International Campus Resource Center (ICRC). While ICRC

and OISS are official university entities, IILE is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1950, distinct from but deeply intertwined with GU. Among the three offices, IILE has existed for the longest time in its current form. Located a stone's throw away from the GU campus, the IILE hosts various activities throughout the year such as social events, local tours, and festivals to orient international students and other foreign students visiting the U.S. to the U.S. and the region. In addition, it facilitates homestays, holiday celebrations, and local school visits to create opportunities for cross-cultural exchange between local community members and students from overseas. IILE receives government grants to host students from various countries visiting the U.S. short-term through various government-mediated international exchange programs. Until 2017, one of IILE's primary functions was to run the international student orientation for students newly arriving at GU as well as other campus-wide activities into the school year. As one of IILE's main institutional affiliates since its founding, in 2017, GU's partnership constituted more than a quarter of IILE's annual budget. However, the following year, GU decided to end the decades-long relationship with IILE, which led IILE to relocate to an off-campus location for the first time and reduce its staff and programming. At a loss for a stable funding source, IILE started directing more of its attention toward fundraising. Further, tax filings from 2017 show that revenues from the federal government to host overseas youth on international exchange almost doubled, replacing GU as its primary institutional source of revenue and expenses. I return to GU's move away from IILE in a later section, as this moment deserves our attention to better understand GU administration's evolving orientation toward international students.

IILE was established in 1950 with the goal of promoting global peace based on cross-cultural understanding between the U.S. and the rest of the world through educational migrants.

It was a collaborative volunteer effort between GU administrators, faculty, and local business leaders. According to IILE representative Diane, starting funds for the Institute came from the proceeds made from selling a house near the GU campus owned by a regional business leader in the 1930s. The house used to provide lodging for foreign students from Japan enrolled at universities in the surrounding area. At the time, many students from Japan and other countries struggled to find housing given the prevalence of discriminatory rental practices, including racial covenants that restricted people of color from occupying certain housing properties. However, with the outbreak of World War II, the federal government ordered the mass removal and internment of people of Japanese descent in the U.S., including U.S.-born American citizens. The house had lost its original function and was eventually sold. With those proceeds, the IILE opened its doors at the GU campus in 1950, where it would remain until 2017. Despite its physical location, it aimed to engage all foreign students in the surrounding area regardless of their institutional affiliation. IILE's activities during its beginning years involved social mixers and homestays to promote interaction between foreign students and local residents—programs that continue to this day. The Institute's purpose as a cultural diplomacy apparatus aligned with the national discourse about international student migration as a vehicle for global peace, which proliferated in the interwar period and has persisted ever since (Kramer, 2010). Shortly after World War I, efforts to recruit student migrants to the U.S. were mainly led by educators, philanthropists, and business elites who believed in what Kramer (2010) dubbed the "proximity theory of peace," the idea that nurturing cross-cultural knowledge and familiarity among individuals is the key to preventing geopolitical conflict. These figures tended to coalesce around the Institute for International Education (IIE). In addition to the aims of citizen diplomacy, business leaders and corporate-affiliated civil society were strongly motivated by the potential of

expanding their global influence and creating new export markets through transnationally mobile students. In these efforts, the pursuit of international peace and the pursuit of capital flows across borders were often considered indistinguishable. Following World War II, the federal state started getting much more involved in facilitating international student migration to U.S. universities, supercharged by the national security imperative of Cold War geopolitics. It is against this backdrop that IILE came into being at the GU campus as a nonprofit organization and continues to this day as a federal grant recipient for foreign exchange programs.

Two years prior to IILE's move off campus, in 2018, a new university office launched at GU: the International Campus Resource Center (ICRC). The opening of ICRC and the eventual relegation of IILE to the periphery of the institutional life of GU's international students was fraught for ICRC, IILE, and OISS representatives alike. The ICRC shares a GU building with the Office of International Student Services (OISS) several blocks away from IILE. Housed and funded under the GU Division of Student Life, the ICRC engages international graduate and undergraduate students at the GU. Given the population it serves, many of ICRC's programming overlaps with IILE, such as social events on and off campus, holiday celebrations, workshops about U.S. culture, and organized opportunities for international students to build relationships with their domestic counterparts. Since GU terminated its contract with IILE, ICRC has taken on the role of introducing newly arriving international students to the GU, with remote student orientations and in-person welcome events. Unlike IILE, however, ICRC does not cater to international students or other educational migrants beyond GU, nor does it engage as much with local residents beyond the campus community. ICRC is a strictly GU entity with a student advising angle which differentiates it from IILE and OISS. Current leadership at ICRC are comprised of staff who used to fulfill international student support roles within GU's

undergraduate and graduate student affairs. Among national professional organizations, IILE and OISS are better connected to the NAFSA, the National Association of International Educators, whereas ICRC staff tend to engage more with NASPA which is the national association for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

The Office of International Student Services (OISS) is the third and last office I want to introduce. Located in the same building as ICRC, the primary responsibility of OISS is to ensure that the GU stays in compliance with federal regulations as the institutional sponsor of enrolled international students—referred to as “nonimmigrant students” in the language of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) during the time of writing (US Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). To enroll international students, schools must receive a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certification from the federal administration and appoint Designated School Officials (DSO). DSOs are school employees whose main job is to ensure that the school and international students enrolled at the school comply with all federal regulations regarding their institutional sponsorship and student status. The Principal Designated School Official (PDSO) serves as the main point of contact between the DHS and the university. At GU and many other similar institutions, OISS is the office of DSOs. The DHS extends its reach to monitor educational migrants through the OISS, as the on-campus entity that administers regulatory records, ensures compliance, and provides information about federal rules and processes to students and the school. Thus, it is instructive to conceptualize OISS as an instance of “prosaic statization,” wherein the state seeps into our everyday social lives through the imbrication of everyday actors and spaces we interact with on the daily (Painter, 2006). The OISS holds a vast archive of documents through which to track the lives and movements of international students. For example, international students must report to OISS if they change

their major, program, or degree level, take a leave of absence, move to a new address, change their name, or need a program extension. Students must have an unexpired permit from OISS if they intend to travel overseas and apply for work authorization in the U.S. through the OISS. The OISS also keeps an eye on whether students are registered for an appropriate number of credits on time or if they are failing classes to ensure that they are not violating the conditions of their visa status. In other words, students' deeply mundane needs and desires, such as seeing their family and friends outside the U.S., taking a break from school to tend to medical or other personal circumstances, or changing passions for one field of study over another all become objects of state surveillance assisted by OISS (See Boggs, 2013 and Boggs, 2020 for an in-depth discussion of the history of the surveillance of student visa holders in the U.S.).

Understanding the OISS as a space of prosaic statization is especially apt in light of its everyday realities. As the office at the frontlines helping GU adapt to changing federal regulations regarding nonimmigrant students, OISS's budget and staff capacity have historically corresponded to these changes. More monitoring of migrants meant more paperwork, and more paperwork required more people who can do the administrative tasks involved in statecraft. For instance, in 1987, the Director of the International Services Office (ISO), the office under the Division of Academic Personnel that later became OISS in 2010, made repeated, frustrated pleas to GU administration to hire more staff at ISO, citing a list of additional compliance requirements introduced that year. In 2009, the Vice Provost of Academic Personnel, in her letter to the GU President enumerating the impacts of budget cuts on her Division, wrote that resource needs at ISO expanded greatly after the wave of regulatory changes regarding foreign students and scholars implemented post-9/11 in 2001. Regardless of individual DSOs' desire to support international students, the time and energy they have for each person is determined by the

periodic budget squeezes and the university's priorities for OISS which is to remain in good standing with the DHS. For example, appointments with the DSO are usually capped to 10 minutes per student. While no longer the case today, former students shared that appointments were very limited, and that they were only able to secure appointments more than two weeks in the future. As a result, a fair share of students ended up not showing up for their appointments, as the issue they needed help with two weeks ago—such as completing paperwork to travel abroad or meeting a registration deadline—were likely no longer relevant. Despite that international students' options for employment, academic trajectory, and their personal lives are delimited and complicated by their visa status, the state-serving function of OISS meant that students had very limited access to their DSOs. As I will soon discuss, the budgetary reasons for establishing OISS in the first place also probably contributed to students' limited access to the office.

However, there was more to OISS than simply being an on-campus proxy of the national security state. As Bonnie, an OISS employee, shared, international students asked more of OISS than its intended purpose:

International students, for example, would come to OISS and it's not an immigration related issue. So let's say difficulty with housing—like they're having roommate problems, or can't find housing and they want support.

As an entity that international students are required to interact with for their legal status, staff at OISS found themselves being a point of contact for students who are looking for help during times of crisis, which falls outside OISS's charge as an extension of DHS. DSOs professed feeling overwhelmed by everything they had to know to properly answer the questions students brought to their office, such as information about tuition forfeiture and curricular requirements. International students were often left to their own devices to piece together partial information after shuttling back and forth between various offices, because the university infrastructure was

incongruent with the holistic experience of international students. As a result, the OISS website and its newsletters frequently posted campus resources available to international students, and ICRC staff saw their role as remedying this gap. According to a 2012 cross-institutional study organized by the GU, comparable offices to OISS at other universities absorbed this role formally, providing social programming, advising for international student clubs, as well as academic and personal advising. This shows that at GU and beyond, the everyday spaces through which the disciplinary power of the state is exercised also involved overworked yet well-intentioned administrators, students looking for help wherever they can, and other unexpected people and interactions that leave open some room to experiment with power.

In sum, the offices that constitute international student campus life today at GU—IILE, ICRC, and OISS—are a window into how U.S. institutions have used foreign students to their advantage. Traces of the U.S. postwar project of global expansion to higher education's search for revenue beyond national borders, and the anxieties about U.S. national security, can be seen in the mundane geographies of the GU campus. In what follows, I focus on how the logic of budgeting has seeped into various corners of international student life since the 2010s.

Budgetary logics and configuring international student life

In this section, I suggest that the primary logic that explains today's configuration of OISS, ICRC, and IILE is that of budgeting. The Office of International Student Services (OISS) is a product of university-wide restructuring in the 2010s, a period of significant changes at the GU responding to state budget cuts. Today, OISS reports to the Division of Enrollment which among other things, manages undergraduate admissions at GU. Before OISS was formed, there was International Services Office (ISO) which was housed under the Division of Academic Personnel. In 2010, ISO split into two offices: OISS and the Office of International Scholars

(OIS). While the OIS remained under the Division of Academic Personnel, the newly established OISS was transferred to the Division of Enrollment during this time. The OIS serves postdoctoral scholars, faculty, and research staff at the GU, many of whom are on J or H visas, while the OISS serves undergraduate, graduate, and professional students on F and J visas. During this reorganization, the GU appointed Bonnie, a long-time staff member of international undergraduate admissions to lead the OISS. These changes were motivated by GU's plans to maximize the revenue-generating potential of recruiting and admitting international students in their undergraduate program. As such, these developments in infrastructure were driven by GU's need to meet federal legal requirements associated with a specific group of revenue-generating students. DHS put it best in its guideline to schools about the budgetary strategy to target this student group:

School officials should carefully consider the decision to petition for [SEVP] certification. It is a *business decision* that requires financial commitment, significant personnel commitment and strict adherence to reporting and record keeping requirements. School officials should consider this decision within the context of the school's strategic direction, long-term planning and ability to conform to regulatory requirements. [emphasis added] (US Department of Homeland Security, n.d.)

While graduate students used to constitute the majority of international students at GU prior to 2010, the establishment of OISS under the Division of Enrollment indicated that undergraduate students started taking center place within the university's imaginary of its international student population.

Despite the creation of OISS, the GU was severely underprepared for the growth in international undergraduate enrollment. The way this growth was experienced by the campus community underscores the extent to which GU, similar to many other higher education

institutions where international students are enrolled, viewed students as fungible capital (Miller, 2021). Recounting that period, Bonnie shared:

To be honest, I don't know that all of the university was prepared for that. I think the offices that were being asked to recruit and enroll more international students, especially at the undergraduate level, I mean, we knew what was happening. ... I was collaborating closely with at the time, IILE ... and First Year Experience who do the academic orientation, but it was kind of limited to those offices that were going to first have contact with the international students. ... but we didn't realize the impact until after that growth. ... So it wasn't like there was a lot of time to plan. It just happened very quickly and continued to grow.

For the first half of the 2010s, the impacts reverberated across campus, with faculty and staff raising various unexpected issues regarding international undergraduate students they encountered in their classrooms and other settings. One of the most salient reports pertained to the plagiarism allegations made by faculty about international students. As a result, the GU added more staff to the Student Conduct Office which adjudicates on student academic misconduct and doles out official disciplinary action. Relatedly, faculty raised concerns about international students' English proficiency and readiness to engage in coursework. These trends observed at the GU echoed broader conversations in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and other Western higher education contexts about the correlation between international students and the prevalence of cheating and plagiarism (Amsberry, 2009; Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Marom, 2022; Parnther, 2022). Panicked headlines on media outlets helped draw quick and alarming associations between international students and academic dishonesty (Fass-Holmes, 2017). At once, such concerns at GU spoke to the complicated realities of the challenges that both international students and instructors faced in a new educational setting they found themselves in, with not enough resources to navigate them. These difficulties were exacerbated by the absence of infrastructure to meet the mental health needs of international students and to help them navigate their post-graduate lives especially in relation to the legal constraints put in place

by the US visa regime. The GU responded to these crises by hiring more people at the Counseling Center and the Office of Career of Services. As GU's lack of preparation for international students to join its campus became abundantly clear, an international student committee was formed, composed of staff at IILE, OISS, and other offices directly providing service to international undergraduates. Externally, however, through for example interviews with media and alumni brochures, senior GU administrators emphasized that international students only kept the university up to date with an increasingly borderless world. Ironically, there was some truth to this public relations strategy, as what students, faculty, and staff were going through at the time was how the global commodification of education under capitalism was lived at the campus scale.

GU's turn away from IILE in 2017 and the kick-off of ICRC in 2018 seemed motivated by the desire to capture the growing international student population within its own orbit. ICRC, OISS, and IILE representatives unanimously used the term "outsourcing" to describe how senior GU administrators leading the charge to found ICRC perceived GU's relationship with the IILE. To my inquiry if this shift was in part a cost-saving measure, none of my interviewees believed creating ICRC was more cost-effective than hiring IILE as a contractor. Rather, it was about establishing a more direct connection between GU's international student population and the university. Diane recalled involved senior administrators bemoaning that the IILE diverted international alumni donation dollars away from GU. GU's decision to terminate their contract with IILE seemed driven by the false assumption that IILE was receiving international alumni donations that could have gone to GU instead. In fact, former international students and their parents were never IILE's primary donor types. Diane suspected that the GU administrators were skeptical of this despite that they had access to IILE's list of donors for several years leading up

to the end of their partnership. In addition to securing an international student donor base, providing more cohesive international student advising in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)⁶ was another reason for the creation of ICRC. According to Jie, an ICRC staff member, there were additional barriers to the extent to which the GU could share student information with IILE for advising purposes without the student's permission, as IILE was an external entity. In GU's university records, I stumbled upon one complaint letter from an incoming graduate student in 2012 who cited FERPA taking issue with GU's partnership with IILE to provide international student orientations. While the volume of complaints of this nature is unclear, it was not until 2017 that these concerns, compounded by other motivations, led to the establishment of ICRC. For IILE, the end of its relationship with GU meant that it had to move off campus for the first time in almost 70 years of its existence. With its major source of revenue gone, the IILE spent the next few years scrambling for additional sources of funding and aggressively raising money from individual donors.

These organizational changes betray the active role that GU played in shaping the campus lives of international students in accordance with broader shifts regarding the primary function that international students served for U.S. institutions. IILE and ICRC each helped reproduce divergent geographies of international student belonging conducive to the prevailing institutional logics governing this migrant student population. As an independent non-profit funded through federal grants for exchange programs and through contracts with the GU, IILE's mission was to promote cross-cultural exchange between Americans and non-Americans through international students. As such, students' affiliation with the GU was not a defining factor in IILE's

⁶ In broad terms, FERPA is a federal regulation that restricts publicly funded schools from disclosing student educational records without consent.

relationship with its student base, and more emphasis was put on facilitating international student engagement with non-GU community members. On the other hand, through ICRC, the GU aimed to further integrate international students into university life, rather than as citizen diplomats in the region more broadly. The ICRC was preceded by a program at GU formed in 2014 called the Global Friendship Program (GFP) that organizes formal socializing opportunities for international and domestic students at the GU. Similar initiatives at other campuses include: the Global Siblings Program at the University of California Los Angeles, the iBuddy program at the University of South Florida, and the Unite UW at the University of Washington. In addition, the soon-to-be ICRC staff member used to accompany the Vice Provost of Student Life to different countries and conferenced with parents of prospective international students to talk about GFP and other aspects of international student life at the GU. In part, these trips were meant to raise funds for the founding of ICRC as well. In these ways, GU had started claiming ownership over international students as its private global client base.

DEI and international students after Covid-19

While the university's motivations for pursuing the bureaucratic changes enumerated above were primarily budgetary, individual staff members related to them a bit differently. Their perspectives were informed by their orientation toward international students as allies, advocates, and at times as mentors, and as university employees who did not wield executive authority over which offices should open or close. For instance, Jie felt complicated about GU ending its contract with IILE and the impact it had on the staff there. Still, he ultimately believed that ICRC filled a crucial structural gap at the GU when it came to supporting international graduate and undergraduate students. In 2020, two years after its inception, the ICRC successfully advocated for "international students" to be mentioned in the university-wide 5-year Diversity, Equity, and

Inclusion Blueprint at GU for the first time, albeit in passing with no specific policy commitments. Jie saw this as a sign of progress:

I think there is a disservice, as well as a missed opportunity to see how international students bring[] all these different cultures, work perspectives, work views, and languages that could really help enrich—but *not money wise, right?*—enrich this campus to truly achieve the idea of diversity. I think before that, international students were not included in the university's Diversity Blueprint ... The first few years [international students were] not there. Well, after our office was built ... we focus a lot of time to advocate. Then so finally, they mentioned international students. [emphasis added]

Specifically, he took it as an indication that the campus community was starting to appreciate international students as more than tuition dollars.

This recognition on paper coincided with the attention that international students received campus-wide as students deserving of protection. Federal attacks against student visa holders, travel bans, and anti-Asian violence related to the outbreak of Covid-19 all contributed to campus interest in international students. Unlike previous years when department staff and faculty considered knowledge about international students' experiences and legal constraints the sole responsibility of IILE, OISS, and ICRC, more people started approaching these offices to better understand the changing legal landscape for this student population. Jie and Bonnie were heartened by these cultural shifts, especially compared to previous years when their work was often met with either disinterest or even resistance. On July 6, 2020, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a directive attempting to expulse international students not enrolled in in-person classes, when universities had started switching to remote instruction. In response, the GU joined many other colleges and universities, higher education associations, state governments, as well as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the corporate world to protest and successfully rescind the policy (Redden, 2020). Regardless, the directive created chaos and turmoil within the international student community. Within a few days, students and the graduate

student union organized a petition and protest. According to Hyejun, a graduate student union organizer at the GU, this directive triggered the most number of international students to become active in the union during her five years of involvement from 2018 to 2022. Bonnie recounted campus reactions to the directive as follows:

There was loud support from the President's Office, down to faculty, instructors, [international] students, and other students that are like, "this is unfair to our international students." ... I always say we [OISS and international students] were under the radar up until Covid. ... I think since Covid, there has been a huge shift in the culture in that ... people on campus now definitely understand the importance of immigration and how that can impact an international student. ... I mean, it was really hard, but it was also good that international students became forefront on the stage, and that everybody at the university rallied around international students.

While federal attacks against international students in the 2020s were undoubtedly disruptive and distressing, Bonnie thought it also prompted positive cultural changes that benefited international students:

And it continues to today, because even now I will get questions from, you know, the Graduate Student Association saying, what are we doing to advocate for [international students]? Those questions never came to us previously. But because I think international students and immigration issues are in the media so much, especially over the last three or four years, now there is this understanding and awareness that is good. ... In the past, ... departments didn't necessarily know who the international students were in their department, and they would maybe put the student on the wrong path towards doing something that isn't allowed under their immigration regulations.

From Bonnie's perspective, she was finally getting traction from campus partners to collaborate on international student issues that had intensified under the Trump administration, but have long existed before then.

While international students have been made a spectacle under the second Trump administration—including the mass revocation of student visas in 2024 which was ultimately reversed, the kidnapping of visa holders engaging in pro-Palestine speech, travel bans, and

intensified social media vetting for certain political views during visa interviews and at the border—Jie expressed muted irritation at the misrecognition of international students' mundane challenges:

The way people talk about international students are changing as well. There's a lot more empathy. I don't know if you remember last year in March, there was national news that [some students'] visas were just revoked. The amount of support was ... very touching. Even though it was a funny thing ... if you actually talk to individual students, what they are mostly worried are very different than what their American counterparts or even their American advisors or professors are thinking. ... People are like, "What if Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) comes to grab our students?" ... That's actually not as often [relevant] to international students ... because they're typically legal here, they have their documents.

While the threat of ICE to international students cannot be dismissed, Jie drew attention to the difficulties that he often saw among international students in his role, which were not exceptional to the Trump era:

I would still say the biggest piece [students need help with] right now, it is finance, especially. Definitely a lot more students who find themselves in a really difficult financial situation where they can't continue. ... All the other students coming in [for help], we were able to find it one way or the other, to help them to find a way forward. But this is the part, just like, I don't have the money laying around there. Especially if they come here first quarter, whether it's as [undergrad] freshman students or as first year master students, we just don't have that kind of money to be able to provide the tuition support.

Undergraduate students whose families could no longer afford the steep tuition and living expenses in the U.S., Masters students whose families invested everything and more in their degree to land a lucrative job in the U.S. after graduating, and doctoral students who were too afraid to speak up about their supervisor's exploitative behavior for fear of losing their tuition funding and stipend were all frequent visitors of ICRC. Especially in the past couple of years, the tumultuous employment landscape in the tech industry, decreasing opportunities for employer-based visa sponsorships, and sudden federal grant cancellations all disrupted the promise of GU

education for many international students. In her ethnographic study of middle-class Indian men international students in New York, Susan Thomas (2024) found that students' everyday lives were much more complicated than the American Dream they expected would come true once they moved to the U.S. for higher education. Many carried with them a sense of indebtedness to their families as well as the U.S. financially and emotionally, for an opportunity to attain what they considered a version of global, modern masculinity by getting a U.S. degree and securing a well-paying job. Such feelings of gratitude coexisted with experiences of marginalization on and off campus as non-white migrant students. As graduation drew closer, however, the image of successful masculinity students had come to pursue felt increasingly fragile and out of reach. Even as students saw themselves as the lucky ones who had a winning chance in the neoliberal global economy, feelings of precarity settled in as they confronted the U.S. visa regime.

It is against this backdrop that Jie celebrated the inclusion of international students in the university's 2020 DEI Blueprint and the cultural shifts on campus more broadly. His hopes for what diversity can do for international students were distinct from GU's performance of neoliberal multiculturalism to generate revenue from international student tuition. To Jie, it meant that the campus community finally accepted international students as community members not "cash cows," and treated their needs with empathy instead of disinterest or suspicion. In a way, it also named the illusory nature of the shiny future that international students might have expected to await them at a U.S. university. For many, the realities of pursuing higher education in the U.S. turned out to be more complicated, as staff at IILE, OISS, and ICRC were well aware. The blatant racism of the Trump administration has presented administrators such as Jie and Bonnie an opportunity of sorts for their work to have more legitimacy on campus. Campus perceptions of international students were more aligned than ever

before with their direct experiences with students. They were optimistic that these attitudinal changes would improve the lives of international students, even amid a hostile political climate.

Despite the cultural shifts, however, the structural conditions of international student life still remain. To name a few, they include the university's transactional relationship to students amid the privatization of higher education, the booms and busts of capitalism that impact students' ability to afford tuition and living expenses, and the whims of state power wielded through the immigration system. Campus life at GU involved international students who are no longer able to prove their worth as consumers, those who must grapple with their reality as migrants regardless of their degree, or those who simply refused to be treated as cash cows. The jury is out on whether the cultural changes on campus could lead to a structural challenge to the status quo. At the very least, the expansiveness of this task means that international students and their advocates have plenty of potential allies to build solidarity with.

The imagined geographies of campus diversity

I first started interviewing campus office representatives expecting to find that their everyday work would contest the group distinctions between the student identities each center was assigned to serve. Despite the university's organization of students as students of color, international, or undocumented students with their corresponding spaces on campus, I wondered if students and staff themselves may engage with these offices in ways that question these categories. This was true to an extent. Occasionally, students who have U.S. citizenship but mostly grew up outside the U.S. found a community at ICRC even though they did not fit the profile of the main student population the center serves. Centers also had a working relationship to each other. The ICRC reports to the Division of Student Life alongside the Rainbow Center that serves queer students. As "centers who serve different identities together," explained Jie, the

ICRC, the Rainbow Center, and the Diversity and Leadership Center (DLC), which serves students of color and reports to the Division of Equity and Inclusion, have quarterly council meetings to discuss what students approached them for. While the GU also has an Office of Disability Services (ODS) and a Disability Cultural Center (DCC) that serves students with disabilities, they were not mentioned as council meeting attendees. This may be because the focus of ODS is to provide accommodations compliant with state and federal laws and the DCC, despite its focus on student life and community, does not have a professional staff member. Jie suspected that student clubs affiliated with the DLC and the ICRC might work together more closely, but collaboration at the level of student centers was to establish a “higher level of communication.” With the leadership of a student organizer, for a time, the ICRC offered programming for queer international students. The ICRC and DLC had also facilitated cultural conversations together in the past to help incoming students transition into college. Jie elaborated, “[Y]ou have a lot of students who might not have F-1 visa status, but they just immigrated here, or they’re low income. They need that cultural transition as well.” In the past few years, international student clubs have been able to utilize meeting spaces at the DLC with the support of ICRC. Each year, the DLC, along with other student centers funded by the student services fee, submits a budget proposal to the student services fee committee. “When they [DLC] applied for the [student services] fee, they of course mentioned international students, right? So, I’m like, well then let them use [the DLC space],” said Jie.

Even still, the boundaries were more rigid than what I had assumed. Group distinctions were relevant for clarifying the distribution and allocation of expertise and resources, such as staff time, budgets for each center, and access to university spaces. Ultimately, GU campus life reproduced an imagined geography of diversity constituted by distinct student constituency

groups, each accounted for in the university's budget. There was also a political element to maintaining the separation between offices. For example, it was important that the DLC primarily served domestic underrepresented minority students in the state, and my conversations with Felipe, a DLC staff member confirmed that this was by and large true. The DLC, along with the Division of Equity and Inclusion which it reports to, are institutional legacies of the 1960s student movements at the GU led by Black students and other students of color demanding racial equity in their education. Felipe tried to preserve this legacy in DLC's work. Today, international students, like any other GU student, were welcome at the DLC, but it did not do any additional outreach to international students, nor did many international students come to DLC looking for support, so far as the staff was aware. Thankfully, Felipe noted, the DLC has not received any negative attention thus far amid the Trump administration's attempts to dismantle DEI in higher education. The fact that DLC was open to all students probably helped, he guessed. Four months after my conversation with Felipe, the University of Missouri (UM) announced in April 2026 that it will defund all six multicultural student organizations on campus (Jepsen, 2026). In July 2025, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) had issued a memo declaring that DEI programs were "discriminatory." In its stunning weaponization of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the memo warned that universities that continue DEI programs risked losing federal funding (Alonso, 2025). The UM's decision, which students and alumni are continuing to challenge, was made in anticipatory compliance of this memo. The 2023 Supreme Court ruling on *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* prohibiting affirmative action in college admissions did not come up in my interview with Felipe. Affirmative action had already been outlawed at the state level, so the federal level attacks did not seem to have much of a bearing on the DLC today. Rather, the DLC had been more impacted by recent austerity measures across the university. Last year, all

divisions, including the Division of Equity and Inclusion where DLC was housed, were asked to cut spending by 5-6%.

As for IILE and ICRC, one of their main unintended tasks was convincing campus partners to see international students as more than “foreign” capital at the university. Diane mentioned that some international students she knew had gone to the DLC hoping to find a sense of belonging, but felt for one reason or another that they did not fit in. She guessed that these social experiences might be connected to the broader political economic tensions in U.S. higher education:

[DLC is] funded by those same tuition dollars, right? There’s always in a state university going to be tension about how we use funds when they’re not necessarily serving state residents. And I think that’s something that international students are kind of unaware of. But I feel like I see it all the time. More than like, racism or things like that. It’s more like, where’s the money going? Is it going to [state] residents?

While it is unclear how much the concern about state resources informed the DLC, it was certainly something that both the Diane and Jie frequently ran into in their own roles. In conversations with colleagues at the GU, they had to defend against the concern about resources, sometimes by emphasizing that international students too are community members or by helping other administrators and advisors understand the varied experiences of international students, as students first and non-residents second.

Student life emerged as a site in which group distinctions are reproduced through debates about budget allocation. This was especially pronounced in juxtaposition to my conversations with three representatives of the graduate student union at GU who have been involved with international student worker advocacy for the past decade or more. Susan was a graduate student union leader when it first became recognized at the GU in 2004. While not an international student herself, many of her fellow core organizers were student visa holders and international

student issues were deeply integrated into broader efforts for unionization. The visa sponsor relationship that international student employees had to the GU meant that they were especially vulnerable to their supervisor's abusive behavior and had limited options for seeking recourse. As such, many international students were motivated to organize for more rights and protections at their workplace as a way to combat issues impacting them as workers on visas. In the last decade, their efforts included protesting travel bans under the Trump presidency, demanding that the GU rescind a special fee imposed on international students, and fighting for university protections regarding detention, deportation, and other immigration-related crises through collective claims to better working conditions. In these ways, visa holder issues were integral to the organizing life of the union. Unlike Diane and Jie who were acutely aware of the tensions in higher education about international students, the three union organizers I interviewed almost never encountered similar pushback about the strain international students may put on university resources and their domestic counterparts. While it is difficult to draw substantial conclusions from my interviews, one probable explanation is that the graduate student union focuses primarily on the graduate student level. In contrast, IILE and ICRC, despite their work with graduate students, serve a big undergraduate student base in which such tensions are starker. In addition, whereas union representatives have an oppositional relationship to the university, IILE and ICRC, as university centers or affiliates, were constrained by institutional terms and resources. The budgetary logics that shaped the institutional subjectivity of international students loomed large over the everyday labor of staff members who were responsible for international students' experiences at the GU.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the logic of budgeting informed campus infrastructure and the day-to-day work of campus administrators who arguably have the broadest contact with this student population. The university enlisted “diversity” as marketing for this entrepreneurial venture to generate revenue from non-resident student tuition. However, staff members who worked at offices tasked with interfacing international students had a different experience of the university than the one broadcasted externally. In their role, they saw a campus environment that was not ready and at times resistant to meet the needs of this student population often reduced to “foreign” capital. It was not until the 2020s, when international students’ vulnerabilities became acute, that the offices’ work was seen as legitimate in the eyes of the rest of the campus community. For one administrator, the mention of “international students” in an official university diversity document in 2020 was evidence of this cultural change that he had been waiting for.

The new cultural narrative that international students deserve institutional resources appears to be at odds with the economic relationship of the university to this student population as a revenue source. Rather than disavow budgetary logics in favor of a humanitarian one, however, I suggest that there is something to be gained from confronting the economism of international student mobility today. Despite their generally exceptionalized location in the immigration system, common difficulties among international students still have to do with its economic function to control the flow of labor and capital to fit university needs and the needs of the corporate world. As migrants, international students are managed and surveilled through mundane practices of statism to ensure that they fulfill their intended purpose. Their social reproduction is easily curtailed when they are unable to complete their assigned role—whether it be as tuition-payers, migrant workers for the tech industry, or otherwise. Lupe, a faculty advisor

of the undocumented student club at GU and supporter of DLC, has had more and more international students approach him over the past few years wanting to talk to him about their struggles as visa holders. He learned that for many international students, the possibility of falling out of status was a big source of anxiety that made them wonder about what comes next. As a mentor of many undocumented students, Lupe was both familiar with students' anxieties about the future given their immigration status, but still new to the experiences of student visa holders. He was eager to learn more about how the connected yet differential relationships that students have to the immigration regime shaped their everyday lives. In this light, immigration reveals itself as a promising site for international students and their advocates to build relationships of solidarity with others on campus.

Conclusion

Crossroads

International students have made national headlines in the 2020s as one of many groups targeted by the Trump administration's broad anti-migrant agenda and attempts to dismantle higher education as we know it. As Boggs (2020) noted, these attacks constituted but one feature of what Lisa Lowe diagnosed as "a multi-pronged assault on public higher education, of a piece with migrant detention, bans, walls, Islamophobia, state racial terror, prison buildup, & neglect of public health." Indeed, this decade of right-wing assaults which is continuing to unfold has made astute how international students are wrapped up with the institutional survival of U.S. higher education and with supplying a STEM labor force for the corporate world.

This dissertation has argued that the evolution of international students' racial subjectivities from the 2010s to the 2020s indexed how U.S. higher education turned toward the global student market to adapt to market logics and continues to try and make this neoliberal mode of accumulation tenable amid various threats to it. As a hegemonic ideology through which race knowledges have been circulated and mediated in institutions of higher education, diversity shaped international students' perceptions and experiences of race and racism in the U.S. However, the 2020s advances of the far-right white nationalist program have disrupted the neoliberal paradigm of diversity which shrouded the pernicious logics of racial capitalism in the language of sociocultural progress. This rupture spawned various reactions among international students and their allies and advocates, which I tracked through the Stop Asian Hate and higher education labor movements as well as the changing campus climate toward international students. As one vantage point from which the tumultuous landscape of U.S. public higher education could be observed, East Asian international student subjectivities in the 2020s show

that the higher education community is once again at a crossroads. It can either find a way to continue “business as usual” through privatization and corporate managerial strategies, or seize the opportunity to breathe life into a collective desire for something new (Newfield, 2021).

Chapter 1 set out to contextualize the racial formation of international students within the global geographies of accumulation by dispossession that constituted the reorganization of domestic social relations in the U.S. and the countries students migrated from. Domestic class stratifications in sending countries were expressed through global racial and cultural hierarchies, as cultural capital was conferred through associations with a particular version of Americanness. However, as demonstrated in subsequent chapters, the realities of attending higher education in the U.S. revealed that pursuits of the American Dream or attempts to reproduce domestic class privilege were not so straightforward. Chapter 2 considered international students’ implication in the Stop Asian Hate movement alongside the higher education labor movement that amplified students’ needs as Covid-19 swept across the world. I suggested that the limits of hegemonic anti-racism to issue an adequate response to the common difficulties international students faced in the U.S. came into sharp relief during this time. Lastly, Chapter 3 illuminated how the budgetary logics that informed international student recruitment were enacted through bureaucratic changes at the campus scale. In its efforts to hone its attractiveness in the global student market, the university also had to acknowledge the campus realities that were incongruent with its external communications about international student enrollment as an uncomplicated good.

Together, the three chapters explored how East Asian international students experienced and related to the neoliberal university as a starting point for charting out how they may figure in efforts to transform it. With the exceptions of Boggs (2020), Miller (2021), and Thomas (2024),

the field of critical university studies has neglected to pay attention to this community of students beyond their role as revenue generators for higher education as a part of the broader pattern of privatization (Newfield, 2008; Williams, 2006). A rich body of research usually grouped as the literature on international student mobility (ISM) has elaborated on the transnational geographies that enabled international student recruitment to become a viable strategy for U.S. universities. Further, it documented how these mobile subjects reproduce and mutate transnational and domestic social relations in their attempts to accumulate cultural capital through international education amid an increasingly precarious global economy (Fong, 2011; Jo, 2024; S. Kim, 2023; Koo, 2022a; K. H. Lee, 2020; Ma, 2020a; Waters, 2006). However, the literature's overall focus on the flexible, transnational strategies students employ for elite social reproduction has made it difficult to identify where the pressure points lie for these students to contest their structural conditions, rather than respond with unfaltering entrepreneurialism. Scholars have also examined the common challenges international students face including their implication in new forms of racial tension on campus, as a part of a larger investigation of international students' experiences at U.S. universities (Abelmann, 2009; Braskamp & Glass, 2012; Kwon et al., 2019a; J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Lynch et al., 2023; Martirosyan et al., 2022; Z. Ritter, 2012; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2019; Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). Recent work in this vein has turned attention toward international students' own efforts to navigate their various difficulties through private refusal or developing relationships that support their resilience (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017b; S. Kim, 2024). However, much work remains to be done to articulate the connections between the lived experiences of international students to more structurally oriented critiques of the neoliberal university that created the conditions for such experiences. Save for Jiang (2021), this lacuna has made it difficult to register and envision how East Asian international students

today engage in counterhegemonic politics of solidarity in an organized fashion. Taking advantage of the opportunities the 2020s presented to remedy this gap, this dissertation captured the resonances of critical university studies' diagnosis of U.S. higher education in international students' lived realities. The nascent collective identities and politics among international students that emerged from this decade help us key into the potential of these formations as they encounter movements beyond the immediate issues that impact international student life.

From the violent repression of Palestinian liberation protests to the anticipatory defunding of DEI programs, many universities in the 2020s have chosen to cooperate with the federal agenda to outlaw critical inquiry and efforts to achieve equity through higher education (*Symposia*, n.d.). Such decisions were meant to ensure institutional survival in the face of strong-armed threats to withhold federal funding. Ironically, they ended up bringing universities even farther away from what they could be, as a publicly accessible institution for life-saving research and life-affirming education. How did we, as those in higher education, reach this point where institutional survival seems to depend on forsaking more and more of what the university could be? What would it take to refuse this manufactured dead-end and forge something different? My next project will turn to 1985 at UC Berkeley where thousands of university members protested for six weeks against the South African apartheid. One year later, the university decided to divest about \$3 billion in financial holdings from companies operating in South Africa. My hope is that this past moment could yield answers about what enabled such mass mobilizations, what conditions were in place to achieve this victory for international solidarity, and what has precipitated since that makes today's organizing landscape distinct.

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