Interrogating Whiteness in Graduate Education Culture: A Phenomenological Exploration of Southeast Asian American Graduate Student Experiences

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Interrogating Whiteness in Graduate Education Culture: A Phenomenological Exploration of Southeast Asian American Graduate Student Experiences

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Lesley Nina Sisaket

June 2022

Dr. Christine A. Nelson
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the role that whiteness has in shaping the graduate education experiences of Southeast Asian American students in the United States. This study explores two research questions. 1) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education? 2) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe concepts of whiteness, if any, throughout their graduate education? According to the experiences from six self-identifying Southeast Asian American students, their graduate education experiences were described to be racially taxing, unchallenging, and isolating experiences. These findings stemmed from their graduate education experiences, which centered graduate learning spaces and curriculum, interpersonal interactions, and individualized processes related to their specific graduate program and education. With concepts of whiteness (e.g., censorship, model minority myth as either/or thinking, the right to comfort, and power hoarding) penetrating these four areas, implications include but are not limited to: culturally conscious organizational practices to promote inclusion; culturally conscious trainings for faculty and staff; an expansion in research pertaining to Southeast Asian American graduate education experiences and the interrogation of whiteness within organizations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For all of the pep talks, reality checks, validation, and reminders that I need not be afraid, ashamed, intimidated, or apologetic because I am worthy and capable of this work. Thank you to each and every one of you. I could not have done this without your kindness, support, and encouragement. This accomplishment is for all of you.

Mom & Dad: Thank you for being there for me so that I could reach this goal, while also allowing me to grow on my own. Thank you for everything. I love you both so much.

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My Committee Members: Thank you for your patience and support throughout this process, Drs. Nelson, Hurtado, Uhrmacher, and Baack. Much of my growth as a scholar, researcher, and professional was due to the opportunities that I had to learn from each of you and for that, I am eternally grateful.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Due to their generalized racial categorization, Southeast Asian American students in higher education are often “held to a level of achievement that does not necessarily reflect their real lived situation and background” (Borromeo, 2018, p. 2). The erasure and dismissal of Southeast Asian American realities in educational discourse have resulted in the feelings of being invisible within the spaces of the academy at the graduate level (Borromeo, 2018). Such feelings of invisibility and isolation only expand the growing list of challenges that Southeast Asian Americans must navigate while pursuing higher education, including the need to adapt to a culture steeped in whiteness (Borromeo, 2018; SEARAC, 2013; Her, 2014). For this research study, the terms white culture or culture steeped in whiteness refers to the idea that concepts, ideas, and beliefs stemming from whiteness have embedded itself in the culture of an organization (Okun, 2000; Cabrera, 2014). When an organization’s culture is steeped in whiteness, policies and practices inherently perpetuates whiteness (Omi & Winant, 2015; Diangelo, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Whiteness further manifests itself via organizational beliefs, actions, and structures. When whiteness goes uninterrogated within organizations, we fail to consider the repercussions that this has for invisible populations, like Southeast Asian Americans. Without understanding whiteness and its role within an organization, we cannot consider the impact that it has on Southeast Asian Americans
Chapter one serves to introduce to the reader the target population of this study. I also introduce my research questions and explain how I utilize transcendental phenomenology to explore my research questions. I then briefly provide the reader with key literature informing this study. This overview segues to introduce the purpose and significance of the study and the theoretical frameworks that helped to guide the research along the way. Towards the end of the chapter, the reader will find a list of terms that are used throughout the study, which have been defined for the reader.

**Research Questions and Methodological Overview**

This research study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education?
2. How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe concepts of whiteness, if any, throughout their graduate education?

Answering both research questions require a qualitative approach, as employing a qualitative methodology in research is a known tool to “centralize individual’s experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them” (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005, p. 99). Since phenomenological studies require participants to deeply reflect upon their experiences, there is a value in utilizing a phenomenological methodology because the method centers the entire human experience, as it relates to the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). Leaning on the knowledge of those partaking in this qualitative study, I was able to explore “what a particular experience means for people who have experienced a shared phenomenon so that the structure of the experience can be
understood, and the essence of the experience can be abstracted” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 27). By centering these experiences, I was also able to illuminate the systemically silenced voices, experiences, and realities of the Southeast Asian American graduate population, which is often masked and dismissed in educational discourse. In the next section, I offer a brief overview of literature germane to this study.

**Southeast Asian Americans in Higher Education**

The underrepresentation of Southeast Asian Americans, specifically Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese identifying students, in higher education hinders the population’s ability to exist outside of the assumed monolithic “Asian American” experience (SEARAC, 2013; Her, 2014; Vang, 2015). In research and discourse, Asian American experiences have often centered the lived experiences of East Asian identities, such as individuals self-identifying as Chinese, Korean, or Japanese descent. This act of essentialism has long masked the uniqueness of Asian sub-groups, like Southeast Asians. This underrepresentation also perpetuates the notion that, like their East Asian counterparts, all Southeast Asian American students are hardworking, high-achieving, and capable of attaining educational success without any additional assistance (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; SEARAC, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Her, 2014). As demonstrated by a growing body of research, the reality is Southeast Asian American students come from a history where systemic socioeconomic challenges have heavily impacted their chances of attaining equitable opportunities in the United States, including pursuing and obtaining graduate-level education (Her, 2014; SEARAC, 2013; 2019). To actively resist a deficit framing of Southeast Asian students, I frame the
challenges associated with Southeast Asian students’ educational journey by questioning how their underrepresentation in higher education is a symptom of systemic inequities.

Systemic challenges associated with Southeast Asian students’ educational journeys are only intensified for Southeast Asian Americans through factors like having to navigate a dominant culture steeped in whiteness. So, while challenges may be associated as being an individual experience, many of these challenges are merely representative of systemic inequities. In Table 1, I briefly share three challenges generally associated with Southeast Asian student navigation of higher education and briefly point to how these challenges are connected to systemic inequities rooted in whiteness.

**Table 1.1**

Challenges Linked to Systemic Inequity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Challenge</th>
<th>Systemic Inequity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Navigating higher education with limited intergenerational English proficiency</td>
<td>Being able to speak fluent English is signaled as a smartness (Thorstensson, 2013). While students may speak fluent English, they may come from multigenerational homes where English was not a caretaker’s first language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending K-12 institutions that are primarily low-income and under resourced</td>
<td>Despite funding and resource disparities at K-12 schools, the students attending these institutions are still measured against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SEARAC, 2013; Her, 2014).</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Limited parental engagement in, and throughout, their educational journey (SEARAC, 2013).

The practice of homogenous reproduction in hiring limits the necessary racial and ethnic diversity that is needed amongst staff members who are able to connect the student and their families to community and school resources (McGee, 2020).

Table 1 is a brief overview and more details are provided in chapter 2.

The challenges and systemic inequities mentioned above contribute to the devastatingly sparse numbers of Southeast Asian Americans who are without a high school degree or a 4-year education, which inevitably also influences the lower numbers of Southeast Asian American representation in graduate education (SEARAC, 2013; 2019). The low numbers of Southeast Asian American college attainment illuminates how concepts of inequality remains impactful in the mobilization of Southeast Asian Americans within the education system. Such an assortment of systemic factors have been linked to the population’s lower educational attainment rates. To be clear, systemic factors have been called to be the root of the problem and lower educational attainment rates are the symptoms (Her, 2014; Vang 2015; SEARAC 2013; 2019). Despite the overrepresentation of Asian identifying students in post-secondary education, harmful stereotypes like the model minority myth continue to mask the unique experiences and
challenges that Southeast Asian American students must navigate due to the systems of inequity that they must navigate. Nevertheless, the model minority myth creates additional hardships for Southeast Asian American students due to the assumption that the stereotype perpetuates; the idea that all Southeast Asian American students are capable of attaining their post-secondary degree with little to no assistance, like their East Asian counterparts.

**Impacts of the Model Minority Myth on Southeast Asian American Educational Experiences**

The idea of the model minority has gone on to create even bigger challenges for Southeast Asian American students who find themselves double marginalized in the education system where they are constantly forced to navigate two dominant cultures—a culture embedded in whiteness and a culture that assumes East Asian experiences are applicable to all Asian subgroups—all the while still being the marginalized identity in both contexts (Banks, 2015; Chiang, Fenaughty, Lucassen, & Fleming, 2018). To further understand and explore the post-secondary experiences of Southeast Asian American students, we must first understand the perpetuation of the model minority myth on the broader Asian American student population. The academic experiences of Asian American students in higher education have been heavily influenced by negative stereotypes like the model minority myth (Museus, 2013; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ng, Chan, & Chen, 2017; Maekawa Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002; Her, 2014; Fu, 1995; Diangelo, 2006; Borromeo, 2018). While various scholars (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009) have published scholarship to address
the impacts of the model minority on Asian American students, the racially aggregated academic success of Asian American students in higher education continues to portray all Asian American students to achieve academic success with ease. While the model minority myth encourages the notion that all Asian American students are an overrepresented identity within the academy, the reality is that there are Asian American-identifying students who are in need additional academic support (Her, 2014; Museus & Kiang, 2009). A deeper explanation of the model minority myth will be presented in the second chapter.

**Purpose of the Study**

There are two aims of this research study. First, I explore how Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education experiences. Second, I unearth how whiteness informs their student experiences as Southeast Asian American graduate students. While we know there are Southeast Asian American students pursuing their graduate education, the low number of Southeast Asian American representation has not provided enough information to fully understand their general experience in graduate school. The first aim of this research study provides a steppingstone for researchers and scholars to address the gap that exists due to the low number in Southeast Asian American representation. The second aim confronts our current socio-political climate and answers the call to interrogate how our institutions of higher education have been shaped by, and continues to perpetuate, whiteness.
Significance of the Study

While research exists around the undergraduate experiences of Southeast Asian American students, educational research has not expanded beyond the experiences at the four-year level (citations needed). This research study contributes a plethora of critical knowledge and understandings around Southeast Asian American graduate students and their experience in graduate school. The first significance is that this study offers insight on what the graduate experience has looked and felt like for Southeast Asian American graduate students in the United States. The second is that this study illuminates the ways that whiteness has, and continues, to operate in graduate education. Lastly, this research study will offer insight into how Southeast Asian American graduate students understand, interpret, and navigate educational spaces that are steeped in whiteness.

With this research study having occurred during one of the most vulnerable times in the United States’ history (e.g., COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate), it is time to expand the critiques of whiteness into the realm of graduate education to understand how it shapes the experiences of one of the fastest growing racial sub-groups in the United States: Southeast Asian Americans. The desire to interrogate the influences of whiteness in the graduate experiences of Southeast Asian American students stems from the reality that persons of color “are constantly reminded of their lack of privilege, and [that] their thoughts and beliefs are influenced by these experiences and realizations” (McDermott, 2020, p. 123). With whiteness being embedded in every aspect of American life, it would be naïve to pretend as though there are no intersections between whiteness
and the racialized educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students studying in graduate programs in the United States.

The current study is designed to encourage and advocate for a disaggregated approach to be used to explore Southeast Asian Americans in education and in other facets. The outcomes of this study provides higher education institutions with insight on how they can appropriately support their Southeast Asian American graduate students. Additionally, this research provides institutions of higher education with an understanding of how their perpetuation of whiteness may create additional barriers and feelings of exclusion for their Southeast Asian American students with the assistance of Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture, to aid in its interrogation of whiteness in graduate education.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

For this study, I interrogate the normalization and perpetuation of whiteness within graduate education culture. To accomplish the purpose of my study, I implemented Critical Whiteness Studies (Du Bois, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2002; Applebaum, 2016) and the theory of organizational culture (Jacques, 1951) as my theoretical frameworks. The details pertaining to the application of each theory are presented below.

**Critical Whiteness Studies**

For this study, Critical Whiteness Studies sought to challenge the normalization of whiteness within (racially) inequitable systems. For Southeast Asian American graduate students, the utilization of Critical Whiteness Studies focuses on the systems in which
Southeast Asian American students navigate to understand their lived-realities. Leonardo (2002) emphasizes that whiteness is not a culture, rather that whiteness is embedded in everyday life because it survives in the ways in which Americans think, their beliefs, and through what it is that they value (Yoon, 2012). “Since whiteness is an interactive process, it is socially, historically, and culturally constructed in social structure, ideology, and individual actions. The particulars of the process of whiteness may change depending on the people or situational factors involved” (Yoon, 2012, p. 3). Whiteness is dependent upon individuals and society’s ability to exist within a paradox that perpetuates contradictions and hypocrisies of thoughts, which has been noted in educational research where institutions often claim to value X (e.g., equity, socioeconomic mobilization of students, diversity) but practices Y (e.g., neoliberalism, homogenous reproduction, whiteness) (Delanty, 2003). Whiteness is based on the agreement that whiteness has been normalized and embedded in all facets of American society (Leonardo, 2002; McDermott, 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and therefore, the goal of Critical Whiteness Studies is to begin to deconstruct and interrogate such notions.

Additionally, Critical Whiteness Studies questions and de-essentializes whiteness while operating under three primary beliefs (Nayak, 2007). The first belief is that whiteness is a modern invention and that it has changed over time and place. The second is that whiteness is a social norm and has become chained to an index of unspoken privileges, and lastly, it is believed that the bonds of whiteness can be broken and deconstructed for the betterment of humanity. Nayak’s (2007) three tenets guides the research process to examine how whiteness exists within and around the graduate
experiences of Southeast Asian American students. Ultimately, Critical Whiteness Studies centers the interrogation of whiteness at the systems level to understand how institutional practices shape individual realities.

**Theory of Organizational Culture**

As a second theoretical framework, the theory of organizational culture (Jacques, 1951) aided in the study in following ways. The first is that the theory of organizational culture supports the application of the Critical Whiteness Studies framework by interrogating how concepts of whiteness exists, are manifested, and are perpetuated within the graduate-level education system. “There is a constant interplay between culture and leadership. Leaders create mechanisms for culture and development and the reinforcement of norms and behaviors expressed within the boundaries of the culture” (Bass & Avolio, 1993, p. 113). This notion is emphasized when such organizational characteristics that have been defined by leaders are then taught by its creators and are eventually adopted by its followers—thus perpetuating policies, practices, and procedures that uphold white values, bodies, and ideas within its organization (Okun, 2000). Using the theory of organizational culture as a second framework for this study, I was able to center the educational environments that each eligible Southeast Asian American identifying participant has been navigating and operating within. This was important, particularly during the data analysis process, because it provided insight on how each educational environment and institution operated within, and perpetuated, whiteness. It is with certainty that the utilization of both Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture, best supported this study because it allowed me to explore how
Southeast Asian American graduate students described both their graduate education experiences and the concepts of whiteness that existed within them.

**Terminology**

To assist the reader in their navigation and understanding of this study, I have provided a list of definitions to terms that are used within the context of this research. In the context of this study,

*America* refers specifically to the United States of America, its 50 states, and its capital of Washington D.C. I will intentionally use United States of America but if quoting others, the term America might be used.

*Critical Whiteness Studies* has been promoted as an activist scholarship, which aims to de-essentialize and de-stabilize whiteness (Nayak, 2007). Critical Whiteness Studies operates under three primary beliefs: 1) Whiteness is a modern invention, thus having changed over time and place; 2) Whiteness is a social norm that is connected to a plethora of unspoken privileges, and 3) The bonds of whiteness can be broken and deconstructed for the betterment of humanity (Nayak, 2007).

*Culture steeped in whiteness*: Whiteness is not a culture, but a construction of a social concept (Leonardo, 2002). When speaking about a culture steeped in whiteness in higher education, I must first talk about how culture is what makes an organization; culture is what an organization *is* and not what it has (Sinclair, 1993). The culture of an organization is defined by their beliefs, their values, their behaviors—variables that, when pieced together, create an organization’s culture. For there to be a culture steeped in whiteness means that the social construct of whiteness has infiltrated the
culture of an organization. In higher education, this can be seen in the founding notions that influence the creation of policies or practices that are implemented (e.g., Pell Grants are exclusionary of undocumented college students). For this research study, the terms white culture or culture steeped in whiteness refers to the idea that concepts, ideas, and beliefs stemming from whiteness have embedded itself in the culture of an organization. When this happens, and when the organization perpetuates these policies and practices, its culture now operates under, within, and from the concept of whiteness. The organization is choosing to manifest whiteness in its culture via their beliefs, actions, and structures.

*DACA* refers to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, an executive order signed by the Obama administration in June of 2012. The policy served to support and encourage the socio-economic mobility of undocumented individuals living within the United States (Gonzales, Terriquez, & Ruszczyk, 2014).

*Data saturation* refers to the “point at which the categories are saturated, and the inquirer no longer finds new information that adds to an understanding of the category” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 318).

*East Asian*, in educational literature and research, often refers to individuals of Chinese, Korean, or Japanese descent (Schneider & Lee, 1990).

*Epoche* refers to the phenomenological process that researchers are encouraged to engage in to set aside any preconceived notions and biases that may otherwise impact the data analysis process. The goal of epoche is that once the process is complete, the
researcher will approach their data with an open mind and an uninfluenced lens (Moustakas, 1994).

*Graduate education* refers to research, study, and teaching that is beyond the bachelor's level (University of Washington, n.d.).

*Graduate students* refer to individuals pursuing a graduate-level education through either a Masters (e.g., Master of Arts or Master of Science), professional (e.g., Master of Business Administration, Master of Social Work, Master of Fine Arts, or Master of Education), or doctoral-level program (e.g., Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Education, Juris Doctor, or Doctor of Business Administration) (Education USA, n.d.).

*Imaginative variation* refers to the third transcendental phenomenological process where the researcher is “able to derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through phenomenological reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).

*Southeast Asian American:* There is no satisfactory term that exists to collectively refer to Americans of Southeast Asian American descent (Vang, 2015). In this study, Southeast Asian American refers to individuals who self-identify as Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, or Vietnamese (Her, 2014; Vang, 2016).

*Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction* refers to the second step in transcendental phenomenology where each experience is “considered in its own singularity, in and for itself” (Moustakas, 2011, p. 8) It is during this process that the researcher is able to “derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the
phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experiences in consciousness, from
the vantage point of an open self” (Moustakas, 2011, p. 8).

Whiteness refers to “a hegemonic system that perpetuates certain dominant ideologies
about who receives power and privilege. Whiteness maintains itself in cultures
through power dynamics within language, religion, class, race relations, sexual
orientation, etc.” (Carter, Honeyford, McKaskle, Guthrie, Mahoney, & Carter, 2007,
p. 152). It is imperative to note that whiteness is the construction of a social concept
and not a culture (Leonardo, 2002).

White ignorance is defined as:
    a social product with a functional goal: provide support for maintaining white
supremacy by legitimizing domination. White people pursue ignorance to defend
against antiracist critique and evade moral and practical implications of critical
racial consciousness (Mueller, 2020, p. 148).

White supremacy refers to the belief that the white race is superior to other races and
further expands on the notion that white people should not only have control over
people of other races, but that power belongs to those within the white race as well
(Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Chapter Summary

Chapter one provided relevant context pertaining to the necessary introductions of
the population to be explored in this study, a statement of the problem, the purpose and
significance of the study, and a defined list of terms that will be used through this
research study. Chapter two provides an appropriate literature review that will further
assist the reader in understanding the phenomenon that is being explored in this research
study, whereas chapter three introduces the methodology that is being used to explore the
research questions: 1) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education? 2) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe concepts of whiteness, if any, throughout their graduate education? Chapter three also explains the data collection and data analysis process that this study engaged in to uncover its findings. Chapter four presents the profiles of each graduate student that participated in this research study before unearthing the findings that answered both research questions recently mentioned. Lastly, chapter five addresses the limitations and implications of the study, while also diving into a discussion about what the unearthed findings mean.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

To understand how whiteness has manifested itself into spaces of higher education that shape the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American graduate students, it is imperative to acknowledge that whiteness is woven into the fabrics of the higher education system in the United States (White & Ali-Khan, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dennis, 2018). Whiteness has influenced the policies and procedures, institutional values, and organizational culture since the construction of the education system and continues to perpetuate and uphold colonial ideologies through those facets (White & Ali-Khan, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Okun, 2000). The normalization and perpetuation of whiteness in higher education has too often forced racially diverse students to assimilate to, and navigate, the dominant culture steeped in whiteness throughout their post-secondary pursuits (Cabrera, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Joseph Mbembe, 2016); leaving many to disassociate themselves from their ethnic and racial values and adopt white, hetero-normative ideologies. While such ideologies have conditioned students to utilize assimilation as a coping mechanism to “remain resilient against barriers and stressors experienced in educational and social settings” (Bonderoff, 2017, p. 2), not enough empirical exploration has been done to understand the kinds of personal sacrifices and consequences a culture steeped in whiteness can have on the graduate experiences of ethnically diverse and marginalized students in higher education.
To further demonstrate how existing literature informed this study, I present the literature in three sections. Table 2 demonstrates how this chapter is broken up into three sections.

**Table 2.1**

Organization of Chapters

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<th>Section One: Theoretical Frameworks Informing this Study</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Critical Whiteness Studies</td>
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<td>• Southeast Asian Students Navigating Whiteness</td>
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Section one focuses on the two theoretical frameworks that assisted in the review of the literature for this research study: Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture. Section two of the literature review introduces graduate education before deep diving into how whiteness has manifested, and stabilized, itself in the culture of graduate education. The interrogation of literature that occurred in section two was made possible by the utilization of both Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture. In using both theories as a lens when review the literature, the deeply engrained culture of graduate education was illuminated. Using Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture allowed me to interrogate the literature
used to support my research study to understand how whiteness has shaped the graduate education experiences of the broader Asian American student population. Introducing the Asian American graduate experience is imperative because it provides context that better helps to understand the Southeast Asian American student experience. Educational research and policies have long lumped the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students with the experiences of the broader Asian American student population. Addressing the common act of essentializing racialized experiences in educational research and discourse thus leads us into the third and final section of chapter two. Section three centers the targeted population of this research study, which are Southeast Asian American graduate students. To center Southeast Asian American graduate students, section three prioritizes the limited amount of literature around the population to explore how Southeast Asian Americans have navigated whiteness within higher education. Additionally, section three addresses the model minority myth and how Southeast Asian American students differ from the broader Asian American student population, thus requiring additional research to center their unique experiences in higher education.

Section One: Theoretical Frameworks Informing this Study

Whiteness is the most dominant, socially constructed, concept that influences the North American education system (Dennis, 2018; White & Ali-Khan, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Whiteness has influenced the creation and implementation of policies and practices that exists within the academy and has also infiltrated and stabilized higher educational culture as well (la paperson, 2017; Okun, 2000). To begin the deconstruction
and interrogation of whiteness in graduate education culture, I rely on the guidance of two frameworks: Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture.

**Critical Whiteness Studies**

To interrogate the concept of whiteness in graduate education culture, and in the experiences of the Southeast Asian American students, I am utilizing Critical Whiteness Studies as a foundational theoretical framework. Critical Whiteness Studies illuminates whiteness as a critical concept (Berkovits, 2018), stating that whiteness is neither a descriptive or interpretive concept because those who are white can, and do, enjoy white privilege. “He [the white man] does not need to be racist himself because he automatically benefits from racially marked social structures and perpetuates them” (Berkovits, 2018, p. 92)—insinuating that the white man chooses to engage in and perpetuate racism in order to maintain his superiority over other races and to continue benefitting from their open access to whiteness. As supported by Ruth Frankenberg (1997), “whiteness remains unexamined—unqualified, essential, homogenous, seemingly self-fashioned, and apparently unmarked by history and practice” (p. 1). It is through the utilization and application of Critical Whiteness Studies where the concept of whiteness can be interrogated and more critically examined because Critical Whiteness Studies aims to mark the unmarked by casting whiteness as a problem that needs to be investigated and deconstructed (Berkovits, 2018; Dennis, 2018). The end goal of Critical Whiteness Studies is to focus on whiteness in an attempt to disrupt it by questioning the existence and preservation of whiteness (Berkovits, 2018), to deconstruct the neutral approach that has
long existed around race and the Black-white paradigm (Berkovits, 2018), and to “destabilize the assumptions around whiteness as a cultural norm” (Knoetze, 2016, p. 30).

Through Critical Whiteness Studies, scholarship conducted within the social sciences offers a space and place for “the radical critique of the racial order [:] delineating the historical processes which culminated in the social positioning of whites as relative to its others” (Knoetze, 2016, p. 30; Steyn, 2007). Critical Whiteness Studies has been able to illuminate how whiteness has impacted the everyday practices in the political and legal realms of the United States and how whiteness “maintains racial privilege [and a] normative place from which racial power is deployed” (Knoetze, 2016, 30-31). Discourse challenging the white conditioning of racialized bodies continues to, and can primarily, occur due to Critical Whiteness Studies where it continuously seeks to question whiteness being not only the neutral color, but also the default color in contrast to people of color (Berkovits, 2018).

Additionally, Critical Whiteness Studies aims to question and de-essentialize whiteness and operates under three primary beliefs (Nayak, 2007). The first is that whiteness is a modern invention and that it has changed over time and place. The second is whiteness is a social norm and has become chained to an index of unspoken privileges, and lastly, that the bonds of whiteness can be broken and deconstructed for the betterment of humanity. It is under these beliefs and understandings of how Critical Whiteness Studies seeks to challenge the normalization of whiteness within (racially) inequitable systems that makes the utilization of Critical Whiteness Studies the most appropriate framework for this current study. Critical Whiteness Studies will not only
support my ability to understand how whiteness exists within and around the graduate experiences of Southeast Asian American students, but it will allow me to pivot my interrogations of whiteness between the institutional and individual level, while also applying Critical Whiteness Studies to the Southeast Asian American population in higher education; this theoretical application has yet to be done in educational research at both the undergraduate-level or the graduate-level.

Since this study interrogates whiteness in graduate education, and in the individualized experiences of the participants, it is important to note that whiteness is not a culture. According to scholars (Leonardo, 2000; Yoon, 2012; Denis, 2018) whiteness is a socially constructed concept that is embedded in everyday [North American] life.

Since whiteness is an interactive process, it is socially, historically, and culturally constructed in social structure, ideology, and individual actions. The particulars of the process of whiteness may change depending on the people or situational factors involved (Yoon, 2012, p. 3).

Whiteness is dependent upon individuals and society’s ability to exist within a paradox that perpetuates contradictions and hypocrisies of thoughts, which has been noted in educational research where institutions often claim to value X (e.g., equity, socioeconomic mobilization of students, diversity) but practices Y (e.g., neoliberalism, homogenous reproduction, whiteness) (Delanty, 2003). Whiteness is based on the agreement that whiteness has been normalized and embedded in all facets of American society (Leonardo, 2002; McDermott, 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and therefore, the goal of Critical Whiteness Studies is to begin to deconstruct and interrogate such notions.
Whiteness, in Critical Whiteness Studies, is meant to express a position of dominance (Berkovits, 2018). “The assertion is not only that the division between white and non-white should be relevant in the interpretation of privilege and domination universally; but more importantly, that these phenomena should be conceived exclusively in terms of color” (Berkovits, 2018, p. 88). With whiteness, there is a valuing in white bodies that allow whiteness to be normalized in society. So long as whiteness is the norm, white-identifying people do not see themselves as white, but rather people without a race (Dennis, 2018). This can be seen the markings of national and ethnic identities where white people in North America are considered merely Americans, but bodies of color are identified with hyphens (e.g., Vietnamese-American, Irish-American). To assert my interrogations at graduate education, I also rely on the theory of organizational culture to assist me in my pivoting between whiteness at the systemic level, and whiteness at the individual level.

**Theory of Organizational Culture**

There is no definite definition or approach to organizational culture. Since its creation (Jacques, 1951), there has been numerous approaches taken to understand and define the concept of organizational culture. Some (Bunch, 2007; Schein, 1996) define organizational culture “as shared assumptions that organizational participants collectively hold and use when making decisions and responding to environments;” (Baek, Chang, & Kim, 2019, p. 652); others see it as the goals and values created by an organization, which are then communicated to their employees to guide their decisions and actions (Daft, 2006; Kunda, 2009). For the purpose of this study, both definitions will be
considered to broaden the ability to explore how whiteness is manifested in the graduate culture that the participants exist within.

Due to the unsolidified definition of organizational culture, many competing views exist regarding the theoretical concept and what it encompasses. In attempt to make meaning of the theory, scholars such Martin (1992), Johnson (1988), Schein (2010), and Alvesson (2013) have proposed the following perspectives to seek an established understanding and approach to the theory of organizational culture. Martin (1992) suggested three perspectives on how organizational culture can be present in an organization: the first being the concept of integration, which proposes the notion that there is only one culture that exists within an organization. The second perspective is differentiation, which indicates that there are multiple subcultures in an organization, and the third is the idea of fragmentation, which states that there is an uncertainty in whether or not an organizational culture, indeed, exists. Johnson’s (1998) approach to understanding organizational culture emphasized a focus on the manifestations of an organization’s culture. This included the created of an organizational web that centered an organization’s routines, rituals, myths, symbols, power structures, organizational structures, and control systems.

Schein’s (2010) approach is similar to Johnson’s in that their perspective emphasized the observation of an organization’s culture through the artifacts, shared values, and assumptions that exist at different levels within an organization. Lastly, Alvesson’s (2013) understanding of organizational culture was created through the use of six metaphors: exchange regulator, compass, social glue, sacred cow, affect regulator,
and mental prison. The metaphors were used to interpret the meaning of organizational culture by illuminating the need to consider how an organization devises their policies and implement change initiatives from within. Despite the varying perspectives and approaches to understanding and approaching the theory of organizational culture, common concepts of the theory have aligned across the varying meaning-making process to identify shared values and norms and how they manifest themselves in member’s attitudes and behaviors as common characteristics of what organizational culture entails.

As a second theoretical framework, the theory of organizational culture (Jacques, 1951) aided in the study in following ways. The first is that the theory of organizational culture supported the application of the Critical Whiteness Studies framework to interrogate how concepts of whiteness exists, are manifested, and are perpetuated within graduate-level education and culture. The theory of organizational culture, when applied and previously included in scholarship, perpetuated and normalized notions of whiteness in organization and leadership literature; the theory’s previous applications supported the idea that organizations should function within a dominant culture steeped in whiteness and did nothing to interrogate it (Bass & Avolio, 1993). To date, there have been one new theory to emerge that interrogates how deeply embedded in whiteness the theory of organizational culture is (Ray, 2019). “There is a constant interplay between culture and leadership. Leaders create mechanisms for culture and development and the reinforcement of norms and behaviors expressed within the boundaries of the culture” (Bass & Avolio, 1993, p. 113). This notion is emphasized when such organizational characteristics that have been defined by leaders are then taught by its creators and are
eventually adopted by its followers—thus perpetuating policies, practices, and procedures that uphold white values, bodies, and ideas within its organization (Okun, 2000).

**Racialized Organizations**

The previously outlined theory regarding organizational culture, has been the traditional approach that scholars have taken to understand organizations. Organizational theorists have utilized the original, and more superficial, understanding of organizations through the theory of organizational culture to understand the ways in which an organization operates and how they are managed. Empirical research has not only explored race and organization separately, but it has also neglected to center race within organizations because of their high prioritization of other fundamental concerns such as market efficiency and gross profit (Omi & Winant, 2015; Ray 2019). The problem with the traditional approach to organizational interrogation is that it neglects to correct the idea that organizations are “race-neutral, bureaucratic structures” (Ray, 2019, p. 27).

Scholars like Ray (2019) and Bonilla-Silva (2015) have called on the need to illuminate that organizations are indeed structures of racialization and have emphasized that to understand racialization in organizations, a critical, racial, and ethnically conscious approach is needed to explore the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of an organization because organizational change can be fueled by racial conflicts of constituents and social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter) (Ray, 2019; Bell, 2014).

Victor Ray (2019) created the theory of racialized organizations to bridge both above mentioned approaches. With the theory, their goal was to not only call out race-neutral cultures of organizations, but to encourage the exploration of how racialized
structures within organizations have the power to shape “both the policies of the racial state and individual prejudices” (p. 27). The theory of racialized organizations was created with four tenets in mind. The first tenet states that racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups. According to Ray, controlling the use of time is a method that organizations utilize to shape agency.

As racial structures, organizations partially delineate where, and how, one is to spend one’s time. Within organizations, segregation or incorporation into the lower tiers of organizational hierarchies diminishes one’s ability to influence organizational procedures and the larger institutional environment” (Ray, 2019, p. 36).

In essence, the practice becomes racialized when one’s ability to be an agent of how or when they use their time can be influenced by the positioning that an individual has within their organization. Another example of practices diminishing the agency of racially marginalized and minoritized members of an organization is limiting their emotional expression via racial tasks. Ray (2019) explains racial tasks as the emotion and physical labor that bodies of color carry out for an organization, due to their (professional) positioning that upholds white bodies and the power that they hold.

The second tenet claims that racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distributions of resources. In their article, Ray (2019) denotes that a foundational characteristic of organizations is racial segregation. Historically, segregation has aided in the limiting and prioritization of resources for whites through legislation, policies, and law (Ray, 2019; Kendi, 2016). Organizations are less likely to form when there are intentions to distribute resources equally; an act of power distribution that is unlikely to be favored by those wanting to harbor the organizational power for themselves.

Problematically, founding scholarship around organizations and their culture have “never
guaranteed the rights necessary for organizational formation on an equal basis with whites,” thus subjecting large proportions of Black, Indigenous, People Of Color (BIPOC) bodies to navigate a white/non-white hierarchy (Ray, 2019, p. 38).

The third tenet indicated that whiteness is a credential. Whiteness is needed to access the organizational resources that have been strategically limited and reserved for those who either acquire whiteness or are in close proximity to it. Through an organization, whiteness is often created by those in power and are perpetuated through cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors. This practice thus forces Black and Brown bodies to engage in, and perpetuate, whiteness to gain access to resources that are needed from them to adequately do their jobs. In essence, this tenet supports Harris’s (1995) theory that whiteness is property. The final tenet of racialized organizations states that decoupling is racialized because racialized organizations tend to avoid policies and practices that challenge the status quo. Racialized organizations are more prone to implement policies that adhere to the dominant culture of the organization, thus discriminating against organizational practices that could benefit Black and Brown bodies. While this research study involves the lived experiences of Southeast Asian American graduate students, and though the theory of racialized organizations could be an appropriate lens to apply, I only mean to give an ode to this new and upcoming theory.

Using Jacques’s (1951) the theory of organizational culture as a primary framework is important for this study because I believe this is the one of the first research of studies of its kind. As a result, it is important to first lay a foundational stone that explains the superficial understanding and lens that organizations have been observed
under. Additionally, using the theory of organizational culture as a second framework for this study allowed me to center the educational environments that each eligible Southeast Asian American identifying participant has been navigating and operating within. To interrogate the educational environments, I took the differentiation approach from the theory of organizational culture to understand the differing subcultures that exists within a post-secondary institution (e.g., field of study, departments, praxis, curriculum, etc.). Identifying which approach to take required me to align the notions that since 1) lived experiences are based upon an individual’s perspective and reality, and 2) whiteness is not a monolithic experience, and therefore it is not possible for only one kind of culture to exist. As a result of the second point, this excluded the option of using integration as an approach to take.

**Section One Summary**

To begin the deconstruction and interrogation of whiteness in graduate education culture, I rely on the guidance of two theoretical frameworks: Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture. Both theories are essential to this study because of the opportunities that it provides to interrogate whiteness in graduate education. Graduate education remains a key contributor to upholding and perpetuating concepts of whiteness in organizational systems found within the United States. Most noticeably seen in how the normalization of whiteness exists within graduate education through the emphasis in individualism and meritocracy. Section two of this chapter introduces graduate education and the educational culture that has existed within the context of the United States. The main points that were presented in the second section were: 1) a
general overview of post-secondary educational research, 2) the educational culture of whiteness, and 3) graduate school culture, particularly from lens of Asian American students. Section two begins to articulate what whiteness is and how it continues to be manifested in higher education and graduate education culture.

Section Two: Pervasiveness of Whiteness in General and Graduate Education

I provide section two to help the reader understand not only how whiteness exists within this research study, but also how it has remained a stable and powerful concept [used] in the general and graduate education system. This section interrogates the influences and domination that whiteness has [had] in educational culture, centering how graduate education culture can, and is, steeped in whiteness. Whiteness refers to “a hegemonic system that perpetuates certain dominant ideologies about who receives power and privilege. Whiteness maintains itself in cultures through power dynamics within language, religion, class, race relations, sexual orientation, etc.” (Carter, Honeyford, McKaskle, Guthrie, Mahoney, & Carter, 2007, p. 152). Whiteness preserves and reproduces values that stem from white supremacy (Okun, 2000) and embraces a culture steeped in whiteness, white ideology, racialization, (white) expression, (white) experiences, (white) epistemology, (white) emotions, and (white) behavior (Matias et al., 2014).

Whiteness In General

Whiteness in educational and societal discourse is not new, nor has it ever been any less harmful as it is today. For white bodies, the dominance of whiteness remains invisible as it is assumed to be the norm. This unmarked aspect of the white racial
category allows white bodies “to remain ignorant to its authority and privilege and in turn, secures its power by refusing to identify itself” (Dennis, 2018, p. 35). Some have even gone on as to claim that they have deserved, what some consider to be “a disproportionate share of advantages in social life, when they are confronted by any challenges that are raised pertaining to their unearned, racial advantages” (Matias, 2016, p. xiii). A key tool that is used to defend their access to the benefits stemming from and connected to whiteness is the concept of ignorance-making (Knoetze, 2016).

Ignorance-making acts as the primary machine that continues to produce and maintain hegemonic power. Ignorance-making contends that “instead of voluntarily and critically engaging with their whiteness, white-identifying individuals attempt to perpetuate hegemony through the use of their “ignorance contract” (Knoetze, 2016). An ignorance contract is “a tacit agreement to entertain [the idea of] ignorance and claims that it is something that lies at the heart of societies structured in racial hierarchies” (Knoetze, 2016, p. 28). Common claims of ignorance most notably lie within statements like “Well, why don’t [insert minoritized ethnic group here] just go back to their country if they’re not happy here?” According to Leonardo (2002, p. 33), such xenophobic statements:

1. Assumes that those who voice their opposition to white racism do not belong in the nation they seek to improve by ridding it of racism.
2. Frames the issue of racism as the problem or realm of non-whites who are dissatisfied with their lot in life rather than a concern for humanity of all people, including whites.
3. Centers whiteness as a global phenomenon and there is very little space on the globe that is unaffected or unpartitioned by white power.

4. Assumes white ownership of white territories; whites rarely tell other whites to “go back to Europe.”

While not all white-identifying persons intentionally bask in their white privilege nor fully engage in the superiority mindset, which has been perpetuated by generations of inequitable and unjust systems in the United States, their privileges have been granted to them by the color of their skin, nonetheless. However, for the white bodies that speak up against racism and “against the dehumanizing structures of racism, even against their own immediate interests” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 35), these white bodies (some claiming allyship to various communities of color) are often betrayed and labeled by their white community as “white traitors” (Leonardo, 2002). This is a prime example of the gatekeeping that exists as it pertains to accessing whiteness. The exclusivity of whiteness can only be attained if one operates in ways that upholds and encourages the perpetuation of whiteness and does not challenge the status-quo.

Characteristics of whiteness includes the notion that whiteness is powerful, yet power-evasive—indicating that the concept, itself, maintains a sense of real power in society and that white-identifying individuals may try to ignore, resist, or deny its power (e.g., white privilege) (Haviland, 2008). A second characteristic of whiteness is that it employs numerous techniques to maintain its power. These techniques, according to Okun (2000), range from ideas of individualism and perfectionism, defensiveness, power hoarding, quantity over quality, worshipping the written word, dualistic perspectives,
entitlement, fear of open conflict, and sense of urgency. Lastly, Haviland (2008) notes that the final characteristic that whiteness scholars have agreed upon is that whiteness is not monolithic and therefore serving as a warning to not oversimplify or stereotype whiteness and how it is experienced.

**Whiteness In Education**

The general and graduate education systems are not immune to the pervasiveness and characteristics of whiteness, especially due to the ties that the education system has to external forces (e.g., socio-political climate of the country). Just as whiteness has been normalized and embedded within the functions of the North American society, whiteness has also been normalized and perpetuated in the realm of education (Cabrera, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Okun, 2000; la paperson, 2017). This can be seen in the criteria of who gets hired, which is often based on Eurocentric ideas of success, and the prioritization and value of certain concepts of knowledge (Dennis, 2018). As it has been argued, “in schools and other social settings, white power and privilege masquerade as excellence. Though this process, what is defined as success and excellence within schools and society becomes linked to its proximity to whiteness” (Dei, 2008, p. 30).

A primary example of white influences in educational policy is California’s Proposition 227 of 1998 (Leonardo, 2002). This particular policy challenged the existence of bilingual programs within public schools within the state of California; requiring and pushing for an “English only” approach to teaching—particularly for students whose first language is not English. The passing of this proposition not only eliminated bilingual classes, in most cases, but it also shorted the time that limited
English proficient (LEP) students were able to stay in their specialized language classes before integrating into the classrooms with the majority (Ballotpedia, n.d.). Additionally, Proposition 227 required that LEP students were to move to regular classes once they acquired “a good working knowledge of English” and that specialized English courses were not to last longer than one year (Ballotpedia, n.d.).

Proposition 227 gained momentum and support to pass through financial contributions from the wealthy and the elite—particularly from white bodies. In fact, according to Ballotpedia (n.d.), the highest financial contributor was an individual named Ron Keeva Unz. Unz had contributed nearly $753,000.00, but I highlight this individual not only due to the power and position that they held during the initial proposal of this proposition, but for the following reasons, as well (Ballotpedia, n.d.). Unz was a US businessman and politician that ran as a Republican nomination in the California gubernatorial election in 1994 but had unsuccessfully captured the position. What was (and even still is) most concerning about Unz was their support of the problematic and exclusionary ideologies that they held; ideologies like anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, conspiracy theories, and white supremacist material (ADL, 2018). Although California Proposition 227 was eventually appealed in 2016, by Proposition 58, the passing of Proposition 227 calls attention to the fact that “as long as white perspectives on racial matters drive the public discourse, students receive fragmented understandings of our global racial formation,” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 36) particularly from the perpetuation and inclusion of America’s grand narratives in educational spaces. For as long as wealth and power are reserved for white bodies, white narratives and values will continue to
influence the prioritization of whiteness in the policies and practices that make up the education system in the United States. In turn, these policies and practices go on to shape the culture of an institution, such as the culture of graduate school.

**An Overview of Graduate School Culture and Student Experiences**

While reviewing recent literature around graduate school culture, there appeared to be a continued scholarly contribution centering the need to establish further support systems for students of color in graduate school (Jaumot-Pascual, Silva, Martínez-Gudaoakkam, & Ong, 2021; Martin, Goodboy, & Johnson, 2015; O’Meara, Griffin, Kuvaeva, Nyunt, & Robinson, 2017). According to Martin, Goodboy, and Johnson (2015), graduate education culture is often shaped by the interactions that occur between students and faculty within graduate school. Whether the experience is positive and meaningful, or negative and harmful, the overall student experience has boiled down to the connection that students have with their program’s faculty members. Faculty members, even at the graduate level, serve as the en loco parentis of graduate students to an extent. Students turn to their faculty members as mentors, advisors, experts of the field, and an avenue for support.

While many graduate students have healthy and productive relationships with faculty members, some graduate students have regrettable experiences with faculty as well. Graduate students who perceive their professors as being non-supportive or even hostile and verbally aggressive could seemingly lose motivation, interest, and efficacy in succeeding in their graduate education, and possibly even leave their graduate programs without completing their degrees (Martin et. al., 2015, p. 439).
At times, these experiences may prove to be more challenging for students of color who may not be accustomed to the culture of graduate education, nor have grown comfortable in their graduate programs.

Marginalized students often come to institutions of higher education with attitudes and behavior patterns that are different from the culture of graduate schools making their path through school more [challenging] than it might be for a student with the dominant forms of cultural capital (Daniel, 2007, p. 26).

These dominant forms that Daniel speak of are representative of the dominant culture and characteristics of whiteness that exists within academia, such as the normalization and prioritization of individualistic and defensive behaviors like power hoarding, entitlement, worshipping the written word, and perpetuating a fear of open conflict amongst many other traits (Okun, 2000). These behaviors are often foreign to the student of color, whose values and beliefs were likely crafted from a collectivist ontology (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). However, the success in academia often requires students of color to assimilate to the dominant culture that permeates within its walls and boundaries.

“The privilege of whiteness is so interwoven with the ‘normal’ functioning of institutions and character of interactions that it is often noticed only in cases of rupture of the ordinary,” (McDermott, 2020, p. 3) and so to dismiss whiteness as having any influence in the creation of policies, praxis, and the educational experiences of students of color pursuing higher education would be naïve.

Graduate education remains a key contributor to upholding and perpetuating concepts of whiteness in organizational systems found within the United States. Most noticeably seen in how the normalization of whiteness exists within graduate education through the emphasis in individualism, in contrast to collectivist practices that racially
and ethnically diverse students are more accustomed to or celebrating annual “diversity days” that reaffirm a culture steeped in whiteness in organizations (McDermott, 2020). These practices continue to create additional barriers for students of color pursuing graduate education, particularly students who are found to be double marginalized in the dominant cultures that they exist within, like Southeast Asian Americans. A deeper discussion around double marginalization will be presented in section three.

Section Two Summary

This section interrogated the influences that whiteness has had in graduate education culture, which centers how graduate education culture can, and is, steeped in whiteness. The practices and policies enacted within graduate education are the very avenues that allow whiteness to infiltrate the culture of graduate education. Whiteness is most noticeably seen in how the normalization of whiteness exists within graduate education through the emphasis in individualism and meritocracy in scholarship. While the normalization and continuation of whiteness is what allows whiteness to survive within graduate education, it does not exist as a harmless concept for students of color. Section three presents literature that focuses on the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students. While the Asian American student population increases within higher education, the growth of the population continues to mask the presence and uniqueness of Southeast Asian American students due to the model minority myth and research’s normalization of lumping Asian American educational experiences together in literature.
Section Three: Southeast Asian American Experiences in Higher Education

The goal in providing section three is to provide the reader with information that will help with their understanding of what whiteness is and why it is important to interrogate the presence of whiteness in the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American graduate students. When it comes to higher education research, rarely have Southeast Asian American experiences and perspectives been given attention (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009). I contribute this lack of recognition within scholarship to the abundance of scholarship centering Asian American student experiences, as a whole, and the lack of scholarship that would aid in the differentiation and centering of Southeast Asian American student experiences. Section three first addresses the concept of the model minority myth before diving into the available literature around Southeast Asian American student experiences.

Model Minority Myth

Being subjected to the model minority myth, Southeast Asian American students have remained at a disadvantage while navigating graduate education due to their socio-economic positioning and other educational challenges stemming from a system that is steeped in whiteness. The normalization of white bodies, ideologies, and experiences supports the notion that whiteness is the baseline and is at the forefront of everything, which calls on the needs for an expansion of the literature that includes and centers the marginalized and minoritized voice and experiences in graduate education. The term ‘model minority’ was first used to describe Asian Americans during the civil rights era and was used to differentiate Asian Americans from other ethnic minority groups.
As model minorities, Asian Americans are viewed as the minority race that other marginalized racial groups should look to and a status that they should strive to achieve. The survival of this notion created negative comparisons between racial groups in North America, especially within the field of education. In education, “Asian Americans have been referred to as ‘model minorities’ for their ability to succeed within while standards of excellence” (Dennis, 2018, p. 38) and for their compliance with performing within, assimilating to, reproducing, and perpetuating Eurocentric standards of excellence.

Whiteness became constructed as the norm of excellence and used as the standard to which the achievement of other minority groups was constructed. Whiteness has become the standard against which everything is measured or compared [against],” (Dennis, 2018, p. 36) and is continued to be survived by the Black-White paradigm. The Black-white paradigm allows for a dualistic complexity of epistemologies to exist “by viewing the racial hierarchy through proximity to whiteness and the traits of whiteness” (Dennis, 2018, p. 37). This notion has been perpetuated and sustained through personal and institutional racism as Asian Americans are often noted to be the model minority in [North American] society. It is due to such practices that embed the model minority myth deep inside ideas of whiteness.

Many scholars attribute the lack of consideration to the model minority myth and the admiration of East Asian American students as the modeled minority, which “serves to exclude and dismiss them from the dominant white center of peer culture. Minority is even included in the name of the stereotype to reinforce their position as outsiders; that are considered a model but only amongst minorities” (Bablak et al., 2016, p. 55). In specific instances, Poon et al. (2016) points out that the experiences and realities of
Pacifc Islanders and other Indigenous populations are altogether disregarded [from public and educational discourse]. As a result, the complexities of the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) lived experiences with race, racism, and settler colonialism in education remain concealed within this dominant framing of education and race (p. 472).

The purposeful removal of ethnic identity within Asian American populations creates a means for institutions to not include ethnicity when considering race for scholarships, for institutional funding, or for the admissions process.

The underrepresentation of Southeast Asian Americans, specifically Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese identifying students, in higher education has hindered the population’s ability to be included in educational policies and discourse. It is their underrepresentation and the perpetuation of the model minority myth that has contributed to their exclusion in game-changing conversations because the myth supports the following assumptions: that 1) since Southeast Asian Americans are a part of the broader Asian American racial category, they are academically inclined; 2) since Southeast Asian Americans are a part of the broader Asian American racial category, they require little to no assistance whilst pursuing post-secondary education, and 3) since Southeast Asian Americans are a part of the broader Asian American racial category, they are considered a part of the overrepresented racial group in higher education (Museus, 2013; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ng, Chan, & Chen, 2017; Maekawa Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002; Her, 2014; Diangelo, 2006; Borromeo, 2018). These three assumptions create grounds for the dismissal of Southeast Asian American students in educational discourse. Additionally, the idea of the model minority has gone on to create even bigger challenges for Southeast Asian American students who find themselves double marginalized in the
education system where they are constantly forced to navigate two dominant cultures—a culture embedded in whiteness and a culture that assumes East Asian experiences are applicable to all Asian subgroups—all the while still being the marginalized group in both contexts (Banks, 2015; Chiang, Fenaughty, Lucassen, & Fleming, 2018).

While some may argue that the model minority myth illuminates Asian Americans in a positive light, stating that they are a minority group that is a monolithically hard-working racial group whose high achievement undercuts claims of systematic racism made by other racially minoritized populations as a tool of racial wedge politics (Poon, Squire, Kodama, Byrd, Chan, Manzano, Furr, & Bishundat, 2016, p. 469), the fact of the matter is that the model minority myth fails to consider the subgroups of Asian identities who do not fit nor benefit from the concept of being the model minority and therefore creates harm against these populations. To refute the model minority myth, Zhao and Qui (2009) emphasizes that 1) Not all Asian American students achieve academic excellence; 2) The result of academic achievement for Asian-American students’ is the result of conscious choice and not genetic determination; 3) Academic excellence, as it pertains to Asian-American students, has a tendency to mask the psychological problems of this population, and; 4), academic excellence for Asian-American students comes at the cost of other skills and knowledge, therefore, it is important for administrators to understand the costs when working with Asian-American identifying students and the other ethnicities within.

“Asian Americans are often noted for their overrepresentation in colleges and universities due to the large presence of East Asian ethnic groups (e.g. Chinese and
Korean identities) at many selective institutions” (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009, p. 70). With such generalized overrepresentation, stemming from the dominant East Asian population, the perpetuation of racial stereotypes pertaining to the academic and professional achievements of Asian scholars continue to subject all Southeast Asians to the myth of the model minority. This can be seen in the stereotype that all Asian scholars are academically inclined and attend elite institutions but when we look at the Southeast Asian (SEA) subgroup, we find that “some Southeast Asian subpopulations hold college degrees at lower rates than all other racial and ethnic groups in the nation,” (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009, p. 71). In fact, according to Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante, Hmong and Cambodian students have higher dropout rates at the undergraduate level compared to their Korean and Chinese counterparts. These findings are important to cast light upon because differences between the subgroups are often overlooked as all individuals under this racial category are usually considered to be honorary whites (Tuan, 1998).

**Honorary Whites and Perpetual Foreigners**

The honorary White identity “is the product of the socio-political needs of the Whites to maintain White supremacy given local and international changes [and their] standing and status will be dependent upon Whites’ wishes and practices” (Bonilla-Silva, 2004, p. 661-662). The survival of the “honorary white” identity for Asian Americans in North America is due primarily to the perpetuation of the model minority myth stereotype (Poon, et al., 2016). “The perpetuation of the model minority myth is more than just a stereotype, but a “racial device used to uphold a global system of racial
hierarchies and White supremacy... exploiting Asian Americans and placing them in a racial bind between Whites and other marginalized groups,” (Poon et al., 2016, p. 474). Labels like “honorary whites” and “perpetual foreigners” are racialized reminders that one can be consumed and surrounded by whiteness, but they will never reap the full benefits of what it means to be white in North American society. The white category is exclusive, and access to whiteness and the white identity is controlled by gatekeepers who strive to uphold the status-quo (Dennis, 2018). Though the possession of whiteness is invisible to those who possess it, to the colored body, “the power of whiteness is maintained by being seen” (Dennis, 2018, p. 35).

Despite their citizenship, Asian Americans are always viewed as outsiders and will be (mis)perceived as connected to the geographic origins of their ancestors. This misperception shows that despite the fluidity which allows them to move within closer proximity to whiteness, there are strict boundaries preventing them from entering into whiteness because of their perceived difference,” thus reinforcing the notion that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners in the United States (Dennis, 2018, p. 41). Additionally, the model minority myth creates additional harms to ethnic groups marginalized within the overarching Asian population. Myths, such as the model minority myth, stemmed from white observations of East Asian success in North American society. This was “because of their performance in international comparative studies and the economic achievements of these countries,” (Zhao & Qui, 2009, p. 339), in addition to their ability to sacrifice their cultural values to assimilate to and uphold the status-quo in the United States through forms of whiteness (Dennis, 2018).
While some may argue that the model minority myth illuminates Asian Americans in a positive light, stating that they are a minority group that is a monolithically hard-working racial group whose high achievement undercuts claims of systematic racism made by other racially minoritized populations as a tool of racial wedge politics (Poon, Squire, Kodama, Byrd, Chan, Manzano, Furr, & Bishundat, 2016, p. 469), the fact of the matter is that the model minority myth fails to consider the subgroups of Asian identities who do not fit nor benefit from the concept of being the model minority and therefore creates harm against these populations. To refute the model minority myth, Zhao and Qui (2009) emphasizes that 1) Not all Asian American students achieve academic excellence; 2) The result of academic achievement for Asian-American students’ is the result of conscious choice and not genetic determination; 3) Academic excellence, as it pertains to Asian-American students, has a tendency to mask the psychological problems of this population, and; 4), Academic excellence for Asian-American students comes at the cost of other skills and knowledge and therefore it is important for administrators to understand the costs when working with Asian American students. Once administrators understand how to appropriately serve and assist Asian American students, there is better likelihood that they will understand how to support the uniqueness that Southeast Asian American students bring forth.

Differentiating and Centering the Southeast Asian American Student Experience

When included in conversations, experiences of Asian students often focus on the realities of East Asians - a subgroup that consist of primarily Chinese, Korean, and
Japanese persons who have long been considered to be elite, wealthy, and the model minority or individuals who have “served as an exemplar for other minorities, who evidently exhibit less than desired behavior (Park & Teranishi, 2008, p. 112). When looking at the overall Asian American population within the United States, many often think of members from these three East Asian countries, creating a problem for other subgroups present, like Southeast Asians (e.g. Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, Hmong). Through the constant comparing, lumping, and/or blanketing of experiences, Southeast Asians have and are forced to find means of either living up to the stereotypes and expectations that have stemmed from the dominant population but without the resources, experiences, and wealth that many East Asians embody, their realities continue to be erased or dismissed.

The absence of Southeast Asian American graduate students in educational discourse, especially at the graduate level is due largely in part to lack of Southeast Asian American representation (Ng, Chan, & Chen, 2017; Um, 2003). Although statistics regarding Southeast Asian American representation in graduate education is not available, their underrepresentation in post-secondary education given the statistics that do exist at educational levels at the high school and undergraduate level. The most recent report available on Southeast Asian Americans in the United States has found that 66.5 percent of Laotian Americans, 65.8 percent of Cambodian Americans, 63.2 percent of Hmong Americans, and 51.1 percent of Vietnamese Americans over the age of 25 have reported to not have attended any form of postsecondary education (SEARC, 2013). These numbers have been said to be the direct response of Southeast Asian American
students being pushed out of the educational system during their secondary educational stage, thus accounting for the low representation of Southeast Asian American students in higher education (SEARC, 2013; Her, 2014). Additional barriers preventing access to higher education for Southeast Asian American students have also included little or no access to information pertaining to higher education and limited access to support (Um, 2003; Her, 2014; SEARC, 2013).

Furthermore, given their political histories—of war, dislocation, and dispossession—many Southeast Asian American students and their families already start from a position of grave disadvantage of poverty, daily encounters with delinquency and crime, family dysfunctionalism, and racism both at school and in society. These obstacles, especially when they cannot be addressed through timely and effective intervention, can undermine the prospect of successful completion of secondary schooling, without which the pursuit of higher education is impossible (Um, 2003, p. iii).

The reality is that Southeast Asian American students come from a history where socioeconomic challenges have heavily impacted their chances of attaining equitable opportunities in the United States, including pursuing and obtaining graduate-level education (Her, 2014; SEARAC, 2013; 2019). When white bodies and ideas are established as the norm in educational practices and discourse, it is easy to dismiss the unique experiences and histories of ethnically marginalized and minoritized students, in turn, perpetuating the practice of neglecting promising students in our higher education culture to uphold an inequitable system of whiteness.
Southeast Asian American Students Navigating Whiteness

A scarce amount of literature has explored the college experiences of Southeast Asian American students, but primarily at the undergraduate level (Blair & Quian, 1998; Borromeo, 2018). The absence of research that focuses on graduate experiences of Southeast Asian American students is problematic because such a gap leaves room to assume that Southeast Asian American postsecondary experiences are homogenous at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Given the scarcity in Southeast Asian American graduate education research, there is not enough literature to challenge or address this assumption.

Additionally, Southeast Asian American students have often been researched through three primary approaches in educational research: 1) through the lens of internationalization (Fu, 1995; Collins, 2006), 2) through the sole exploration of undergraduate experiences (Blair & Quian, 1998), and 3) through the assumed monolithic experience of (East) Asian students in the academy (Kember, 2000; Schneider & Lee, 199). The harm of these approaches has left Southeast Asian American students fatigued, frustrated, and forced to find ways to navigate a dominant culture that continuously measures them against white standards. To add to the exclusion, Southeast Asian Americans in higher education discourse remain an overlooked and understudied ethnic population that exists within the depths of the academy (Borromeo, 2018; Her, 2014; Museus & Kiang, 2009). While there have been strides by scholars to illuminate the Southeast Asian American population and their post-secondary experiences, much
remains unknown about their graduate-level experiences in comparison to other racial
groups that have been explored (Borromeo, 2018; Teranishi, 2012).

The gap in literature is problematic because the lumping of experiences masks the
true realities that exist at the disaggregated level. To approach Southeast Asian American
experiences in higher education at a disaggregated level allows for a better understanding
of the educational experiences that Southeast Asian American students have at the
undergraduate and graduate level, which can address the perpetuation of essentialism and
push for more scholarship to cover Southeast Asian American students at various points
in their post-secondary journey. Additionally, while statistics on Southeast Asian
American representation exists at the undergraduate level, the number of Southeast Asian
American bodies at the graduate level remains absent (SEARC, 2013; 2019).

Section Three Summary

The goal in providing section three was to provide the reader with information
that will help with their understanding of what whiteness is and why it is important to
interrogate the presence of whiteness in the educational experiences of Southeast Asian
American graduate students. The scarce amount of scholarship centering Southeast Asian
American [graduate] education experiences subject the sub-group to essentialism,
experiential lumping, oppression via the model minority myth, and feels of frustration
and invisibility. From the review of the literature, additional experiences such as double-
marginalization warrants further research to explore the unique experiences that this
student population undergoes throughout their graduate education; calling on institutions
of higher education to do, and provide, more support for Southeast Asian American graduate students.

**Chapter Summary**

“Whiteness has functioned as a pseudo-universal category that hides its specific values, epistemology, and other attributes under the guise of a non-racialized, supposedly colorless ‘human nature’” (Dennis, 2018, p. 35). Whiteness has led to the illumination of many inequities within the field of [higher] education, which has often been noted to cause rifts in the college experiences of ethnically and racially diverse students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The intersections of whiteness and post-secondary experiences of students of color have been explored by various researchers, but research has neglected to pursue a deeper and disaggregated exploration of marginalized Asian ethnicities in graduate education. Although Southeast Asian American graduate students have been dismissed in educational research and discourse, the population is not immune to influences of whiteness. Chapter two centered the various experiences that have been noted to exist for Asian American and Southeast Asian American students, as they have had to navigate cultures of whiteness within [North] America’s education system, and the reasons why graduate education remains important for ethnically diverse students to pursue. Additionally, chapter two expanded on the guiding frameworks to remind the reader that this research study is guided by Critical Whiteness Studies and the theory of organizational culture and aims to explore this study’s two research questions: How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education? 2) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe concepts of whiteness, if any,
throughout their graduate education? In splitting the chapter into three sections, I showcase three areas that demonstrate how whiteness remains pervasive in graduate education culture. Progressing forward, chapter three focuses on the methodological approaches that this research study underwent to address the two research questions previously mention. Chapters four and five will address the findings, limitations, and implications that this study unearthed.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education?

2. How do Southeast Asian American students describe concepts of whiteness, if any, throughout their graduate education?

To achieve the purpose of this study, a qualitative methodology is used to center the voices of each participant and specifically utilizes a transcendental phenomenological research design to explore each experience in its singularity.

Chapter three offers further justification of the appropriateness and implementation of the methodological approaches that are dispatched for this research study and provides further context that includes: 1) research design appropriateness and rationale; 2) procedures for participant selection and sampling; 3) data collection and data analysis procedures; 4) instruments used during data collection and data analysis; 5) trustworthiness; and 6) ethical considerations. At its end, a summary of the chapter is provided along with an introduction of what is detailed in each remaining chapter of this research study.

**Researcher Positionality**

I first invite you to learn a little bit about who I am, what I stand for, and where I come from. As a first-generation, Lao scholar, I am a daughter to immigrant parents who
sacrificed their land, their families, and their sense of familiarity to flee from the spread of communism during the Vietnam War. I have been blessed for the life that I have received, as a result of their sacrifices, and I acknowledge that. Additionally, I am blessed for the worriless nights where I do not fear over my permanency of citizenship in this country, or the permanency of those I love. I am blessed that during the world’s greatest time of unknowns, I need not worry about where or how I will receive my next meal or pay for next month’s mortgage. I am blessed that regardless of the paths that I choose to pursue, I am supported and loved. This is particularly proven to be crucial, especially during the times where I find it the hardest to support and love myself.

As a woman [of color] I have long been conditioned to selectively speak. Selectively listen. Selectively interact with the world around me. I am told many things. I am told how to speak. I am told to listen. I am told to be calm, to smile, and to be good. I am told how to be, how to act, how to breathe. All of these messages have pulled me in many different directions, for years I have tried to understand what it meant for me to be [North] American, when on the outside I do not appear to be American enough. As a [North] American, I am told to be individualistic—I am to put my needs before the needs of others. I am to make my own decisions without any hesitations or second thoughts. I am to be independent and able to support myself financially, emotionally, and mentally. As a [North] American, I am to be strong—I am to be strong enough to survive the “dog eat dog world” that exists outside of my safe spaces—these spaces often only found within my own home. Strong enough to “take the heat” and to not flinch at the sights and sounds of hate and ignorance. As a [North] American, I am to be revolutionary—because
no one remembers the weak. However, as a critical [North] American, I am to challenge
the superiority that stems from [North] America because being American does not
necessarily mean the United States, but it can mean South and Central America as well.

Having been raised in the white suburbs of Minnesota, I grew up only knowing
what whiteness was, which I used as a tool to help me navigate and thrive in white
spaces. While I was blessed to have access to the ivory tower, an opportunity that is not
always attainable for Southeast Asian Americans in America, I was very much aware of
the white standards and expectations that were pinned against me. At times, I benefitted
from my close proximity to whiteness; having tasted whiteness as my own property
through my smartness (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). My early childhood exposure to
whiteness naturalized me into a whitewashed Asian who became accustomed to the white
expectations and standards that were inflicted on me as a young student.

Since entering the field of higher education, I was eager to make a change; to
make an impact on the lives of those that I would soon work with and support. Looking
back, I may have been a bit naïve upon entry, because the realities (and inequities) that
exists within of the realm of education would soon become all too apparent to me. With
each time that I am told that “This is just how higher education works,” I cannot help but
roll my eyes. The rolling of my eyes has become a normal reaction in my life. They are a
normal response to the foolishness that I have had to deal with – the foolishness that
comes with ignorant comments around my race/ethnicity, my gender, my age, my
occupation, and my educational status. The foolishness that often leads to white men [and
even men of color] dismissing me, my presence, and my knowledge. It is through these
various means of rejections and feelings of being undervalued and underwhelmed by the white policies and practices that I must continue to perform and navigate around that remind me of my purpose in this field.

As a member of the higher education community, I am driven by my desire to foster an environment that encourages resistance and self-preservation. What fuels my research in the realm of higher education is the reality that higher education will always foster and perpetuate an environment where oppressive systems will and continue to thrive for certain generations of scholars to come. My belief in the never changing systems that have consumed the realm of higher education stems from my exposure to and understanding of the colonial histories that are embedded within colleges and universities, the displacement of Indigenous peoples for ownership of land, the differing hieratical systems in place that encourage colonial ideologies, and practices that remain and consume the state of society that we live in today. What this means for me is that as a practitioner and future educator, it is important for me to focus on, strive for, and incorporate any opportunities in my practice and to approach my work with the readiness needed to push back against white policies and praxis that continues to place more value on the dominant bodies and ideologies. It is important that I locate and create spaces that will acknowledge and encourage the liberation and creation of thought, while also striving to highlight the voices of marginalized identities within the academy and acknowledging that equitable treatment does not equate to equitable opportunities.

What further fuels my desire to contribute my work to the realm of higher education is the reality that higher education will always foster an environment where
oppressive systems will continue to thrive for some scholars over others. What this means for me is that as a practitioner and future educator, it is important for me to focus on, strive for, and incorporate any opportunities in my practice and to approach my work with the readiness needed to push back against White policies and praxis that continues to place more value on the dominant bodies and ideologies. It is important that I locate and create spaces that will acknowledge and encourage the liberation and creation of thought, while also striving to highlight the voices of marginalized identities within the academy and acknowledging that equitable treatment does not equate to equitable opportunities.

I am recognizing the important role that I have in creating a welcoming and equitable learning environments that will foster curiosity and the co-creation of knowledge; a space that recognizes the diverse backgrounds of my students and the importance of providing a space where they are able to share their ideas, give grace in dialogue, and show up as their true, authentic selves. To do this, I acknowledge the importance and value of incorporating empathy and rapport into my work, and the relationships that I strive to build. With the help of these two concepts, I am striving to create relationships between myself and the students that I will support, protect, and push because I want to be more than another institutional agent that is upholding the status-quo. In this field, I hope to continue to feel that feeling that I know all too well, but mainly because it is stemming from opportunities and initiatives that I am pushing for change. Call me a bit dangerous, call me a bit radical, but for as long as I am being called something, that means that I am being seen in these spaces that I have worked so hard to be in.
Research Design Appropriateness and Rationale

“How one understands truth and reality has a direct bearing on the kind of research one conducts” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 1). It is under the direction of this notion that I have committed to a qualitative approach for the study, particularly due to the understanding, and agreement amongst qualitative scholars, that qualitative research deeply values the relationship between the knower and the known (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

Employing a qualitative methodology in research is a known tool to “centralize individual’s experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them” (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005, p. 99). Since phenomenological studies require participants to deeply reflect on their experiences, there is a value in utilizing a phenomenological methodology because the method centers the entire human experience, as it relates to the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). In leaning on the knowledge of those partaking in this qualitative study, the research study explored “what a particular experience means for people who have experienced a shared phenomenon so that the structure of the experience can be understood, and the essence of the experience can be abstracted” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 27), while also centering the invisible voices, experiences, and realities of the Southeast Asian American graduate population that have often been masked and dismissed in educational discourse (Vang, 2015; SEARAC, 2013; 2019).

Phenomenology Inquiry

Phenomenology operates under three primary assumptions (Bhattacharya, 2017). The first assumption is that it is believed that there is a fixed essence that exists in the
lived experiences of a phenomenon. The second assumption assumes that “the meaning of an experience can be captured through lived experiences” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 65). Lastly, in using phenomenology as a method, it is assumed that any prior experiences that have been had with a phenomenon has the potential to interfere with the meaning-making process. While these assumptions exist, there have also been critiques towards the method such as that 1) there may not be (only) one, or a fixed, essence, but rather multiple essences that emerge from the data analysis process due to the level of subjectivity that exists in the shared experiences; 2) researchers may never get to merely one single essence; 3) “cultural critique is missing and focus on the phenomenon is not always present in studies conducted,” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 65) and; 4) it is difficult to say that bracketing is anything more than the act of reflexivity. Although critics have gone on to explain that the act of bracketing, or epoche, does not fully aid in one’s ability to compartmentalize their prior knowledge (of the phenomenon of interest) to the extent that their analysis will not be influenced by their previous experiences during the meaning-making process, the act of engaging in bracketing is still encouraged. A detailed analysis of how I will engage in bracketing will be presented in section below titled “preserving authentic voices.”

**Transcendental Phenomenology**

The decision to use transcendental phenomenology as the method of choice were influenced by three notions: 1) Reality is a social construct (Creswell, 2016; Moustakas, 2014; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005); 2) Whiteness is not a monolithic experience (Okun, 2000; McDermott, 2020), and 3) regardless of ethnic and educational identities, the
graduate educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students are also not monolithic (Her, 2015; Vang, 2015; SEARAC, 2013; 2019). Using transcendental phenomenology allowed me to interpret the experiences of each participant with an understanding that their lived experiences are their realities and that it, in fact, has value. Used as a design to acquire and collect data that illuminates the essences of human experiences, transcendental phenomenology is reliant upon the concept of meaning making and explores the “how” and “what” in lived experiences (Moerer-Urdahl, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology dismantles the dualism that exists between objectivity and subjectivity. Transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to “develop an ‘essence’ through aggregating subjective experiences of a number of individuals” (Moerer-Urdahl, 2004, p. 32) who have experienced a phenomenon of interest.

As a method, transcendental phenomenology provides a systematic approach to analyzing data about lived experiences and is interpretive by nature (Moustakas, 1994). The interpretive framework and subjective approach allow for ambiguity, complexity, and dynamism to exist because in the end, there are no definitive truths (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). It is the absence of a definitive truth that is crucial to accept when relying on the subjective experiences of others to come to an understanding of a phenomenon. While most qualitative methods are embedded in a constructivist ontology, transcendental phenomenology is based within a subjectivist paradigm because the emergent themes are identified solely from the lived experiences of the participants; the themes serve as descriptors that capture the essence (the meaning) of the experience.
These three research types allow for the phenomenon of interest (e.g., whiteness) to be explored through the sole experiences of the participants involved in this study. The concept of subjective openness was created by Edmund Husserl, a philosopher who challenged traditional notions of philosophy and science (Moustakas, 1994), and is an important concept for this research study because the experiences of each Southeast Asian American participant, as they have had to navigate and have encountered whiteness, is subjective and specific to each individual self.

**Intentionality and Intuition**

Transcendental phenomenology is embedded within two concepts: intentionality and intuition (Moustakas, 1994). Intentionality refers to consciousness (Moustakas, 1994; Bhattacharya, 2017). Intentionality centers the internal experiences of consciousness that one has around a phenomenon and connects humans to their surroundings (Moustakas, 1994). Acquiring knowledge and an awareness of intentionality requires that we be present, not just physically, but also to ourselves and to things in the world. Intentionality calls on individuals to recognize that we as humans and the world around us are interconnected, thus requiring a level of openness and directness from our consciousness (Moustakas, 1994, p. 29). In short, intentionality should not be understood as one’s intent to do something, when used in transcendental phenomenology, but rather applied in a way that explores the interconnectedness of humans and their experiences to the phenomenon being explored.

In relation to this research study, seeing as how the concept of whiteness has been argued between scholars (Howard, 2004; Okun, 2000; Leonardo, 2002) in regard to how
it is believed to be experienced and understood, the interpretation of whiteness, at the
core of discourse, is done by the individual self. It is through this notion that that the
application of subjectivity and openness is needed when exploring how concepts of
whiteness have shaped the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American
graduate students in the United States. Each experience, interaction, and understanding of
whiteness is subjective to the individual who has lived within or in close proximity to the
phenomenon of interest: whiteness.

In addition to intentionality, at the core of transcendental phenomenology is
intuition. Intuition “derives knowledge that is free of everyday sense impressions and the
natural attitude” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32), in short, intuition is the essence of the
phenomenon of interest. René Descartes, a French philosopher, has gone on to say that no
matter what it is that may enter the awareness, it cannot convince an individual to
understand their own experiences in a way that is not true to the individual. No external
force or influence can sway an individual to account their own perception in a way that is
not an accurate account of the experience.

The fact that this [transcendental phenomenology] approach relies on individual
experiences means that the stories to be told will be told from the participants voices
and not those of the researcher or from individuals reporting studies in the literature,
an approach consistent with human science research (Moerer-Urdahl, 2004, p. 32).

For the reasons mentioned, the act of analyzing each experience in its own
singularity is important when utilizing transcendental phenomenology as a method.
Additionally, to observe and explore each experience as its own also supports this study’s
goal to challenge the perpetuation of essentialism (Museus & Kiang, 2017), which has
long been inflicted upon the Southeast Asian American population.
Epoche, Reduction, and Imaginative Variation

There are three required steps to engage in when employing a transcendental phenomenological methodology: epoche (bracketing), transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Epoche requires that the researcher bracket their views as it pertains to the phenomenon being explored. Bracketing allows for transparency to occur between the researcher, the participants, and the readers (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing also enhances the legitimacy of a researcher so that others can understand and follow along (Newman, 2010). Setting aside any pre-conceived notions allows the researcher to approach the data through the perspectives of the participants and not one that may be heavily influenced by the experiences or beliefs of the researcher (Bhattacharya, 2017). I engaged in the process of epoche below, but it is important to note that it is believed that if there is no position taken (in regard to the phenomenon of interest) then nothing can be determined in advanced. When that occurs, the phenomena can then be explored with fresh eyes (Moustakas, 1994).

The freshness and openness that occurs after epoche refers to the process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction.

It is called transcendental because it moves beyond the everyday to the pure ego in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time. It is called ‘phenomenological’ because it transforms the world into mere phenomena. It is called ‘reduction’ because it leads us back to the source of the meaning and existence of the experienced world (Moustakas, 1994, p. 8).

This particular stage of transcendental phenomenology is where each experience is analyzed in its own singularly. During transcendental-phenomenological reduction, textual descriptions are derived from the meanings and essences that were found in the
experiences that were shared in regarding the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994; 2011). The goal of transcendental-phenomenological reduction is to describe in textural language what one sees in these experiences. To fulfill this goal, the process of transcendental-phenomenological reduction requires one to describe the external object (e.g., the phenomenon of interest) and the internal act of consciousness (e.g., one’s relation to the phenomenon of interest) (Moustakas, 2011). It is during transcendental-phenomenological reduction that the process of horizontalizing occurs, or the clustering of themes.

A horizon refers to the textural experiences that are collected during the data analysis process that touch on the essence and nature of the phenomenon of interest. Horizontalizing occurs during the data analysis process where each statement, when analyzed in its own singularity, is treated with the same weight and value as other statements and experiences analyzed. In analyzing each textural description, irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping statements are deleted, thus leaving clusters of “coherent textural descriptions of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 11) and leading the researcher to engage in the final step of transcendental phenomenology: imaginative variation.

Imaginative variation strives to identify and uncover the root of each experience. The process of imaginative variation requires the researcher to utilize their imagination to seek possible meanings from the clusters of themes identified during the transcendental-phenomenological reduction process. The goal of imaginative variation is to come to an understanding of how the experience of the phenomenon came to be what it is
(Moustakas, 1994) by creating structural descriptions of the phenomenon from the
textural descriptions created during transcendental-phenomenological reduction. In short,
to reach the essence of the phenomenon being explored requires describing the essential
structures of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To achieve and engage in each of the
three processes required to conduct a transcendental-phenomenological inquiry, the
researcher can then “integrate all textural and structural descriptions into a unified
statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas,
1994, p. 13) to which then establishes the true essence of the phenomenon of interest.

Preserving Authentic Voices

As mentioned, this study not only sought to explore the intersections of whiteness and
Southeast Asian American graduate experiences, but it sought to center the voices of an
otherwise invisible population found in graduate education. To center these voices and to
preserve their authenticity, it was important that the meaning of an
experience was created by the individual experiencing the phenomenon (Moerer-Urdahl,
2004). This was particularly important to note given my shared identities as a Southeast
Asian American graduate student. To ensure that I was drawing from the authentic
experiences and centering the voices of each participant, I employed the following
strategies to refrain from re-writing the stories and experiences shared by each participant
due to my own racialized experiences in graduate education due to my shared identities:

1) I engaged in epoche where I will bracketed my own experiences, biases, and
understandings of whiteness. I bracketed the tensions that I have had in my own
experiences when faced with navigating and partaking in the perpetuation of
whiteness while pursuing my post-secondary education. In bracketing these experiences, the goal was to approach the newly collected data with fresh eyes by relying on the participants confirmed experiences. This process of member checking helped me to understand how whiteness had shaped the graduate educational experiences of the Southeast Asian American students (Moustakas, 1994; Bhattacharya, 2017).

2) As briefly mentioned, I used member checking to ensure that I was capturing the true experience that was being shared with me by the participants. After each interview and the completion of each transcript, I sent each edited transcript to the participants and asked for their confirmation that their stories were accurately captured. This allowed me verify that their original intent and meaning has been captured and understood accurately before the data analysis process began (Creswell, 2013).

Procedures

In order to achieve the purpose of this research study, I needed to recruit an appropriate sample of participants to complete a series of three semi-structured interviews. Once the interviews were completed, I was then able to engage in Moustakà’s (1994) four stages of transcendental phenomenological data analysis. This section provides an in-depth explanation of how each procedural step was carried out.

Sampling

For this research study, two nonprobability design methods were used to assist in the sampling of participants. The first method employed was criterion sampling and the
second was be snowball sampling. Both sampling methods are considered purposeful sampling types, which emphasizes the selection of information-rich cases to be used in a research study to be explored in great depths regarding a phenomenon of interest (Coyne, 1997; Suri, 2011, Patton 2002). Information-rich cases are considered cases that have the potential for a researcher to learn a great deal from when exploring “issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Coyne, 1997, p. 624). Purposeful sampling is often used in phenomenological research studies because the sampling method has been seen to be of utmost effectiveness “in terms of allowing researchers to connect and invite relevant participants” to partake in the research study (Bates, 2019, p. 49).

Due to the specific requirements that the participants needed to meet in order to be deemed eligible for participation, criterion sample was used. Employing criterion sampling often requires a level of reviewing to ensure that all cases involved in the research study meets some sort of criterion of importance that was likely to have been predetermined (Suri, 2011). Criterion sampling “is frequently employed by [researchers] to construct a comprehensive understanding of all the studies that meet certain predetermined criteria” (Suri, 2011, p. 6). Criterion sampling is achieved by explicitly stating an inclusion/exclusion criterion, but it is important to be mindful during the creation of the criterion because too strict of a criterion of have an impact on the overall sample size. The criteria created for this study will be introduced in the “participants” subsection below.

As mentioned in chapter two, the representation of Southeast Asian American identifying students pursuing graduate education in the United States is limited. For this
reason, the second and final sampling method that aided in participant recruitment and selection was snowball sampling. “Snowball sampling involves seeking information from key informants about details of other information-rich cases in the field” (Suri, 2011, p. 6). Often times, snowball sampling is employed through listservs to reach a wider audience (Suri, 2011). For this research study, snowball sampling was used to assist in the recruitment of eligible participants using my personal and professional social media accounts on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In implementing snowball sampling, the goal was to reach more eligible participants through the direct connections that I have in the field of education, and amongst my personal connections. When snowball sampling was initiated, many of my friends, family, peers, and colleagues shared my research flyer via social media sites such as: Linked In, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. Additionally, some of my peers posted the flyer to various bulletin boards and Facebook pages of associations that they were a part of, thus achieving the goal of snowball sampling. When using phenomenological inquiry as a research method, a sample of 3 to 15 participants is the suggested size to proceed with the exploration of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For this research study, six graduate-level students contributed to the findings.

**Participants**

The target population for this study were Southeast Asian American identifying graduate students pursuing their graduate education in colleges and universities in the United States. Participants were required to meet the following criteria in order to partake in the study. 1) Must at least self-identity as Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and/or
Vietnamese, 2) must be a citizen, permanent resident of the United States, or a DACA recipient, and 3) must be enrolled in a graduate program at a public or private, not-for-profit college or university in the United States. Failure to meet all three requirements of the study made participants ineligible to participate.

With the utmost intentionality, I created the criteria above because I not only want to understand the context and environments that the participants exist and operates within, but I also want to focus on capturing data that limits the influences of internationalization. Requiring that participants be either citizens, permanent residents, or DACA recipients does reassure me that each participants’ understanding of whiteness will stem from a U.S. context. Requiring that participants must at least self-identify that they are Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and/or Vietnamese ensures that they are of the Southeast Asian American population that this research study is seeking to explore. Additionally, requiring eligible participants to be enrolled in a graduate program at a public or private, not-for-profit college or university in the United States controls for an institutional culture that is embedded in the U.S. context and has been accounted for in the literature review.

The study did not deem students attending for-profit institutions as eligible for the research study because of the range in organizational culture that could exist within for-profit institutions. Lastly, I made the conscientious decision to open up the field of study to invite a wider range of students to come forth and partake in the study. This was important, not only to challenge assumptions around Asian students in STEM, but also because it allowed for another layer of representation to exist within the data; a layer that
is not often included in educational discourse when discussing Asian-American experiences: program of study. This was particularly important to include not only due to the limited bodies of Southeast Asian American students in graduate education, but also because it challenged the assumptions and stereotypes that exists around Asian-American educational and career interests.

Approaching participant selection via criterion sampling and snowball sampling allowed me to take into account how each participant was conditioned to think about higher education and the concept of whiteness, whether it is due to familial or communal influences or their conditioning in the U.S.’s education system. Doing so further allowed me to pivot between interrogating the culture of graduate education and their individual experiences. At the end of the research study, a total of 6 Southeast Asian American graduate students participated in the study and contributed to its findings. Their demographic information is below.

**Figure 1.** A chart exhibiting the descriptive information of each participant in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Institution Location</th>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Degree Type</th>
<th>Field of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Private, 4-year</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esmae</td>
<td>Asian-American, Khmer/Cambodian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Private, 4-year</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>English Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>Public, 4-year</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhia</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
<td>Private, 4-year</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Private, 4-year</td>
<td>Doctor of Education</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhea</td>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>Lao/Laotian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Private, 4-year</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A further, and more detailed, description on each participant is provided in chapter four.

**Recruitment**

The recruitment of eligible participants primarily occurred through my personal and professional social media accounts such as on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Digital flyers (see Appendices C & D) advertising the research study was publicly posted on my personal Facebook account, my professional Twitter account, and my personal Instagram account. Posting the flyer in a public post, status update, and tweet allowed any individual to re-share the flyer to their network, which helped me to reach participants on both the West and East Coast. The flyer contained information pertaining to the purpose of the research study, the study’s criteria for eligible participants, and the researcher’s name and contact information. Interested and eligible participants reached out to me via email inquire additional information pertaining to the research study and to be screened for their eligibility.

The screening process required the inquirer to answer the following questions: 1) Do you self-identify as Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and/or Vietnamese? 2) Are you a citizen, permanent resident of the United States, or a DACA recipient? 3) Are you enrolled in a graduate program at a public or private, not-for-profit college or university in the United States? 4) What is the name of the institution that you are enrolled at for your graduate program? Once the questions were answered, I then went onward to validate that the institution that they are enrolled at met the requirement of being a public or private 4-year institution. Once that classification was confirmed, the inquirer was contacted via email about their eligibility and they were provided more information about
the research study. Once the eligible participant responded, via email, with the completed questionnaire and signed consent form, the first 60-minute interview was scheduled and confirmed via Microsoft Office Outlook. For ineligible participants, they too, were notified via email of their ineligibility but were encouraged to share the study’s flyer with their network.

Data Collection

Consent

The coronavirus pandemic created challenges in obtaining handwritten and physical forms of consent mere moments before the official start of the data collection process. For this research study, obtaining consent occurred via virtual means. Prior to virtually meeting for the first scheduled interview, consent forms and demographic questionnaires were sent to participants via email as a Microsoft Word file (see Appendices F & G). The email requested that the participants complete and return the consent form and the demographic questionnaire via email before the start of the first interview. The email also encourage eligible participants to reach out either via email or phone, if they had any questions, comments, or concerns regarding the consent form, the consent process, the demographic questionnaire, or the research study before and throughout the research study.

Instrument

Official interviews with each participant were scheduled at the end of the initial screening of participants as mentioned in the “recruitment” section above. The scheduled interviews were dependent upon the preferred time and date of the participant. To explore
the graduate experiences of Southeast Asian American graduate students and how whiteness shapes their educational experiences, each participant engaged in a series of three, 60-minute long, semi-structured interviews. The primary purpose for holding multiple interviews was to intentionally build rapport and trust between myself, as the researcher, and each participant. (Rowan & Grootenboer, 2017).

**Interview Protocol**

The COVID-19 pandemic had created tremendous restrictions for (air) travel, which resulted in an obsolete possibility of conducting in-person interviews with each participant. The interviews took place over the communications software Zoom and was audio and/or video recorded depending on the consent of each participant; at a minimum, the interviews needed to be recorded for the automatic transcription feature that was being used through Zoom. The decision to utilize interviews lies in its purpose, which is to “elicit detailed and personal stories of a group of individuals who share a common experience with a phenomenon” (Billups, 2021, p. 55). It allowed for the experiences of the participants to be interpreted and justified by the participants, themselves, based on the varying ways that they experience their world and how they have engaged with whiteness (Billups, 2021).

**Interview One Protocol**

The first interview focused on rapport building with each participant, which included an introduction of the researcher, the participant, and the study. Before the start of each interview, the participants received the designated set of questions via email (see Appendix H). Sharing the list of questions ahead of time created an opportunity for the
participants to meaningfully reflect on what they were being asked and how they wanted to respond. Each participant received the same list of questions. The use and creation of open-ended questions liberated the participants from a rigid structure, where the goal was to alleviate any feelings of pressure or nervousness that they may experience. Factors that could have contributed to those feelings included the power dynamic present, any unfamiliarity to the research process, or fear of being judged negatively, to name a few. With this liberation, the intent was to be able to engage in kind of dialogue that would allow for trust and rapport to be built over the first and second interviews. It was not expected that all interview questions would be asked during the first interview due to timing. At the start of the first interview, the participants were thanked for voluntarily partaking in the research study, where they were then further briefed on its purpose and objective. After the initial introduction, the participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions that they may have had upon entering into the interview; any questions that were asked by the participant was first tended to before the interview questions were asked.

For all six participants, the first interview often lasted for the entire 60-minutes that the meeting was allotted for. With the consent from the participant, which was received via the consent form that was sent out via email before the start of the first interview, all but one of the participants agreed to be both audio and video recorded. Only one participant consented to just being audio recorded. The recordings were crucial in assisting with the transcription of the interview. Through the communications software Zoom, an automatic transcription of the interview was captured and available for
download once the meeting ended. This method of transcription capturing, and assistance, was used for all interviews.

An organic unfolding of story sharing during the semi-structured interview occurred to ensure that rapport and trust could be built throughout the series of interviews. This was achieved by allowing the participant to take the lead on where they would like to start and how they would like to navigate the experiences that they wanted to share. At times, some of the questions that were prepared for the interview were not directly asked, but that did not cause any complications or hindrances for the study. This approach was found to be successful, per the feedback of the participants, at the end of the data collection phase because all six of the participants felt more open to share, less pressure to share “the right thing”, and they felt comfortable in the relationship that had been established with the researcher.

With each questioned asked, the participants were asked follow-up questions or for clarification to encourage more depth of information. When the end of the hour drew close, the last ten minutes were reserved for the participant to ask any questions or to include any additional information that they wanted to have on record for the research study. Before ending the interview, the participant was notified that they would be receiving their transcript within 7 calendar days and were asked to view and approve of the transcript in seven calendar days after the transcript was sent to them. Additionally, at the end of the first interview, the participants shared their preferred method of receiving their compensation for their participation. They could receive a $5.00 gift card of their choice, after each completed interview or receive a $15.00 gift card of their choice, at the
end of the study. All six participants chose to receive a $15.00 gift card at the end of the research study. The second interview was scheduled once member checking was complete for the first transcript. The scheduling of the second interview was also dependent upon the participant’s preferred time and date. This process was identical for interview 2 and 3.

**Interview 2**

The first 10 minutes of the second interview served as an opportunity to receive any clarification that may have been needed after analyzing the first round of interview transcripts. This created an opportunity for the participants to contribute any additional information that they felt they may have left out in the first interview. Once clarification was received, the second interview proceeded by resuming with interview questions that were not asked in the first round of their interview due to shortage of time. If all questions were tended to in the first interview, then the second interview proceeded by having the participant begin however they would like; at times this would warrant some assistance from the first interview question that was created for that specific session (see Appendix I). Other times they were able to deep dive into an experience that they wanted to share. Similar to the process for interview one, the participants received the designated set of questions via email before the start of the second interview. It was also not expected that all interview questions would be asked during the interview due to timing or other prioritized topics of discussion per the participant. When the end of the hour came to a close, the last 10 minutes were, again, reserved for the participant to ask any
questions or to include any additional information that they wanted to have on record for the research study.

**Interview 3**

The third and final interview primarily served as a debriefing session and an opportunity for the participants to self-reflect on their experiences. During the interview, many of the participants shared any closing thoughts that they had and spoke of any additional experiences that they wanted to share. The participants were also able to ask any questions they may have had during this time, as well. Additionally, some of the time was used to ask for further clarification that may have arose during the finalization of the transcript for the previous interview. Similar to the previous interview processes, the participants received the designated set of questions via email before the start of the third interview (See Appendix J). It was also not expected that all interview questions would be asked during the interview due to timing or other prioritized topics of discussion per the participant. When the end of the hour came to a close, the last 10 minutes were, again, reserved for the participant to ask any questions or to include any additional information that they wanted have on record for the research study. At the end of the final interview, each participant was thanked for their time and contributions, and were informed that they would be sent the final interview transcript via email within the next seven calendar days. Like the previous interviews, the participants were encouraged to submit their approval within seven calendar days from the transcript being sent and they were encouraged to reach out with any questions, comments, or concerns that they may have.
Data Protection and Storage

Each interview recording and transcript was downloaded and deleted from the Zoom software where a password, known only to myself, was required to gain access to. The files were then stored in the hard drive of my personal laptop, which also required a password to gain access into. When the laptop was not in use or not in my direct possession, it was stored in a lock-safe cabinet whose key was only in my possession. The intent, at the end of the research study, is to keep all transcripts so that further exploration of Southeast Asian American graduate experiences can be done in future research. The transcripts that will be kept will have non-identifiers in them and will only use pseudonyms for each participant. The interview recordings will be deleted three months after my degree conferral.

Data Analysis

There is no fixed way to approach the data analysis process for a phenomenological methodology (van Manen, 2016; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005; Borromeo, 2018). As a result, many qualitative researchers who craft their studies, using phenomenological inquiry, have approach the data analysis phase using general qualitative procedures like coding, member checking, and the use of interpretation (Borromeo, 2018). To understand how Southeast Asian American students describe both whiteness and their graduate education experiences, I employed Moustaka’s (1994) four stages for analyzing transcendental phenomenological data.

**Figure 2.** Moustakas’s (1994) steps (in bullet points) for phenomenological data analysis as it exists within the four steps that are required when conducting
phenomenological inquiry (bolded and underlined). The process data analysis process progresses to the stage of synthesis when data saturation is reached.

The first stage required that I engage in epoche, or bracketing. Bracketing required that I, not only practice a state of self-reflexivity before analyzing each transcript, but that I revisit my bracketed assumptions, beliefs, and biases to ensure that I am reaching as close to pre-conceived state (regarding the phenomena of investigation) as possible. Epoche is an important stage when analyzing transcendental phenomenological data because it is imperative that the researcher accept the meanings that emerge from the data, regardless of their own epistemologies regarding the phenomena. As Dr. Adu (2016) describes, the process of epoche is one’s journey to being baggage free. I provide a further explanation of the epoche/bracketing stage and how I engaged in the process below.
Stage One: Epoche/Bracketing

“Bracketing is a method used by some researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project” (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). When a research topic is selected to explore, there is often a relationship that exists, or is created throughout, the research process between the researcher and the topic of interest. Engaging in bracketing, or epoche, can be beneficial to the researcher and the reader in phenomenological research studies. Bracketing can protect the researcher when examining any emotionally challenging materials in situations where the topic of interest may be closely connected to the personal experiences of the researcher (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing can also encourage the researcher to engage in an in-depth process of self-reflexivity and transparency, which can enhance the validity of the study (Newman, 2010; Tufford & Newman, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017). Lastly, through the act of bracketing, setting aside any pre-conceived notions allows the researcher to approach the data through the perspectives of the participants and not one that may be heavily influenced by the experiences or beliefs of the researcher (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell, 2021).

I engaged in epoche to bracket my own experiences, biases, and understandings of whiteness. I also bracketed the tensions that I have in my own experiences when faced with navigating and partaking in the perpetuation of whiteness while pursuing post-secondary education. In bracketing these experiences, the goal was so I could then approach the newly collected data with fresh eyes by relying on the participants
confirmed experiences to guide me in understanding how whiteness has shaped the graduate educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students (Moustakas, 1994; Bhattacharya, 2017). Although I agree with criticisms around bracketing, in that “it might never really be possible for one to really claim a pure compartmentalization of one’s prior knowledge and subjectivities to such an extent that there can be no influence on the meaning-making processes during inquiry” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 64), I do believe that it is important to offer a level of transparency to participants and readers of this research study to provide reassurance that I am not making conclusions in haste and to ensure that the findings stem from the data collected. As a result of my belief and value of transparency and authenticity, I provide you with the following section to serve as my means of bracketing.

**A Poem: Personal Tensions**

I am guilty of engaging in

And perpetuating whiteness

Whiteness is what I have come to know

Personally, professionally, subconsciously

I am guilty of being conditioned

To accept and to conform to whiteness

To sacrifice what I now see

Made me unique and an individual

I am guilty of benefitting from

And normalizing whiteness
I am guilty of being complicit with whiteness\textsuperscript{11}

With white practices, ideas, behaviors, and expectations\textsuperscript{12}

Before I was able to\textsuperscript{13}

Learn, think, understand\textsuperscript{14}

What it meant to be critical of\textsuperscript{15}

What it meant to be disruptive in\textsuperscript{16}

What it meant to be liberated from\textsuperscript{17}

The hegemonic systems in place\textsuperscript{18}

I am guilty\textsuperscript{19}

But I am trying to unlearn and do better\textsuperscript{20}

I presented my bracketing in a form of a poem because I wanted to first deliver

my personal experiences in an easily digestible manner. To provide further transparency,

I will provide further details of each line of the poem.

\textit{Lines 1 & 2.} Lines 1 and 2 holds me accountable for the part that I have played in

engaging in concepts of whiteness and perpetuating and upholding whiteness in either my

beliefs, my understanding of the world around me, and in my actions (e.g., speech,

physical representation of self, expectations of self, etc.).

\textit{Lines 3, 4, 5, & 6.} I was raised in a predominantly white town in the upper Midwest

where I assimilated to a culture of whiteness at the early age of 5. Being the only person

of color, and having been the first family of color to move into this small suburban town

in 1998, I learned how to conform, navigate, and operate within whiteness (Cabrera,
2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For a long time, whiteness was all that I knew, personally, professionally, and subconsciously.

**Lines 7 & 8.** My assimilation to the dominant culture of whiteness forced me to give up ethnic qualities, like they were sacrifices that needed to be made so that I could achieve success and mobilization in a white dominated world (Alba & Nee, 1997). Conforming to whiteness forced me to limit the use of my ethnic tongue, which has left me limited and struggling to speak the language fluently. My engagement with, adoption of, and perpetuation of whiteness had also required the sacrifices of my culture and traditions; all things that I felt were not important during my secondary years. Where I am now, I realize how wrong and naïve I was to believe that, and to allow whiteness to consume more of me than I should have.

**Lines 9, 10, 11, & 12.** Lines 9 and 10 also hold me accountable for benefitting from whiteness and from normalizing concepts of whiteness through what I have believed, understood to be true, and in my actions. As an Asian-identifying woman, I benefit from whiteness due to the close proximity that I have to it as a result of my race (Poon et al., 2016). This notion is further supported through stereotypes such as the model minority myth.

**Lines 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, & 18.** Lines 13-18 captures my journey of coming to the point where I can now identify as a critical scholar. Before pursuing my Ph.D., I was limited in the confidence, understanding, and knowledge that I felt that I needed to advocate and push for change. To advocate and push for equity, empathy, diversity, and social justice. I did not know what it meant to be critical, what it meant to be able to disrupt the systems
that I was operating within and for, nor did I know what or how it could feel like to be liberated from those same systems.

**Line 19.** Line 19 serves as a reminder that even though I have the tools to now engage in practices that can challenge the status-quo, the perpetuation and normalization of whiteness, and disrupt the hegemonic systems that we all still operate within, I was still guilty contributing to the problem of whiteness.

**Line 20.** As a critical scholar, while there is still much that I have yet to learn, I am taking the oath to do, be, think, and act in better ways to continue to challenge, disrupt, and dismantle the systems of whiteness and to continue my journey of unlearning whiteness in my personal and professional endeavors.

**Stage Two: Phenomenological Reduction**

The second stage of the data analytical process is phenomenological reduction. This stage requires that the data collected from the participants are reduced. Although the data is being reduced, the core meaning of the data is being preserved by assigning themes or labels to information that is significant. While phenomenological reduction is occurring, bracketing is occurring simultaneously to ensure that the data is being perceived from as close to a biased-free perspective.

My approach to data analysis utilized similar, and general, qualitative steps by first reviewing the transcriptions created, which was provided by Zoom. During the review of each transcript, I made any necessary edits to the transcript that were incorrectly captured by Zoom by comparing the text from the transcript against the interview recording itself. Once I had concluded each round of reviews and edits, I sent
each participant their designated transcript so that they are able to review and ensure that they are authentically represented within the text. Should there be any further edits needed, I made them and repeated the process of member checking until each participant approved of their transcript. Each participant received their transcript within 7 to 14 days of their interview ending. In one instance, one participant received their up to 30 days after the interview had concluded due to a misfortunate event where the software did not transcribe the interview, which led to the interview needing to be transcribed manually. At the end of the interview process, I then entered into the data analysis phase where I engaged in manual phenomenological reduction.

How I proceeded to engage in phenomenological reduction required that I read through each transcript, with the research questions in mind, and identify any statements or experiences that would help me address how Southeast Asian American graduates both described their graduate education experiences and concepts of whiteness. When analyzing the data, it was important to keep in mind that each line of experience is weighted and held at the same value; no individualized experience was more important than another. Identifying these statements and experiences required that I read through each transcript and engage in phenomenological reduction line-by-line. When the statements and experiences were identified, they were then labeled, or themed, with guidance from Okun’s (2002) categories of whiteness. Any repetitive and overlapping statements were reduced, whereas statements that were irrelevant to the phenomenon being explored was eliminated for progressing onward in the data analysis process. The remaining statements were considered invariant meanings. The third step required that I
cluster the invariant meanings for the second step into themes. Step four was the solidification of themes. In step five, each invariant theme was given textural descriptions to capture what was being experienced by the individual sharing their experience with the phenomenon. This step included verbatim examples from the data collected. Step six, similar to the fifth step, gave each invariant theme structural descriptions to capture how the phenomenon was being experienced. Lastly, the seventh step required the combination of the textural and structural descriptions to capture the final essence of the phenomenon. This process was repeated until theory saturation was reached.

**Stage Three: Imaginative Variation**

Imaginative variation requires the presentation, along with evidence, that supports the themes that not only emerged from the data but was assigned to each relevant statement and experience. This stage involves structural description, which requires the connecting of themes from the data to the meanings that emerged during the data analytical process. Additionally, structural descriptions can include the connecting of these themes to the characteristics of the participants involved in the research study.

**Stage Four: Synthesis of Meanings**

The objective of the fourth and final stage is to present the essence of the experiences. I provide my synthesis of meanings in chapter four, which hosts the section pertaining to my findings because the structural descriptions are, in essence, the findings of my study.

Trustworthiness

To account for trustworthiness in the study, I engaged in memoing (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2014), member checking (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2014), and peer checks
(Borromeo, 2018) with a fellow Southeast Asian American colleague who has done work on Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. This peer also acquired some extent of familiarity around whiteness, Critical Whiteness Studies, and the theory of organizational culture. Engaging in memoing allowed me to remain reflective of, and account for any thoughts, feelings, and curiosities that I stumbled upon throughout the data collection process. Member checking helped me to ensure, to myself and the participants that the experiences shared were captured in the ways that the participants desired and were an accurate representation of themselves. Additionally, I made sure that I received approval from the participants on all transcripts, via email, before commencing the data analysis phase.

**Chapter Summary**

To understand how whiteness shapes the educational experiences of Southeast Asian American graduate students, I utilized transcendental phenomenological inquiry to capture the lived experiences of each participant. Chapter three provided further insight and information on the methodological approaches that were used to explore my research question, which sought to explore two research questions: 1) how Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education? 2) How Southeast Asian American students describe concepts of whiteness, if any, throughout their graduate education? I offered rational for using a qualitative methodology and transcendental phenomenology while outlining the approaches taken for participant sampling and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology study was to identify the underlying phenomenon of how graduate education culture perpetuates concepts of whiteness for Southeast Asian American graduate students. Whiteness has been, and continues to be, the foundation of all operating systems found within the United States (White & Ali-Khan, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dennis, 2018). According to Okun (2002), whiteness in organizations can thrive and be reproduced through concepts such as: Perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, only one right way, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, the idea of “the only one”, progress is bigger (and more), objectivity, and the right to comfort. The education system, including graduate schools, remains susceptible to influences of whiteness. Yet, studies rarely explore how whiteness shapes graduate school culture. The purpose of this study is to not see if whiteness exists, however, but to explore how Southeast Asian American students navigate whiteness. Not fully understanding the role of whiteness in graduate education culture limits institutional accountability and practice around diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives for Southeast Asian students. In addition to being invisible across students of color discourse (Buenavista et. al, 2009) and also within the larger Asian American student discourse (Ng, Chan, & Chen, 2017; Maekawa Kodama, McEwen,
Liang, & Lee, 2002; Her, 2014; Borromeo, 2018), this study aims to reveal the unique experiences faced by Southeast Asian American graduate students.

From this research, the interview data unearthed facets of graduate education culture that are shaped by whiteness. The first facet focuses on the whiteness of classrooms and curriculum; the second identifies existing dynamics around whiteness in co-curricular activities; the third facet centers whiteness in interpersonal communication, and lastly, the fourth facet confronts contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging. Chapter four describes the findings of this research study and ultimately, digging deeper into each educational facet most recently mentioned. With each facet explained and informed by the experiences of the Southeast Asian American graduate students, the findings provide answers to the research questions that this study sought to explore.

**Research Questions**

Through this study, the goal was to answer the following research questions 1) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education? 2) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe concepts of whiteness, if any, throughout their graduate education? Transcendental phenomenology allowed me to center and explore the lived experiences of each Southeast Asian American participant. I start off this chapter by providing deeper profiles of each participant who took part in this study because transcendental phenomenology emphasizes the importance of centering each participant and their individualized experiences. Additionally, I place the participants at the forefront of the findings because I want to honor their willingness to
share their experiences and vulnerability throughout the study. To highlight their contributions to the study, the profiles offer a chance for the reader to get a personal glimpse and understanding of each graduate students’ background. The information highlighted in each profile stem from two places: 1) the information presented in each participant profile was acquired from the demographic questionnaire that each participant filled out before embarking on their interview series, and 2) the information found within each profile were bits of demographic information that was shared by the participant during any of the three rounds of interviews.

**Participant Profiles**

For this study, six Southeast Asian American graduate students contributed their experiences and stories to the data collection process. Their pseudonyms are Phil, Alexis, Esmae, Nhia, May, and Rhea. The data collected and analyzed for this research captured each participant’s experiences and understanding of their educational journey at this particular moment in time. Out of the six participants, one identified as a man and the remaining five participants identified as women. Three out of the six participants were pursuing their master’s degree at the time of data collection, whereas the remaining three were pursuing their terminal degree in their respective fields. Four out of the six participants were pursuing degrees in the field of higher education, one participant was pursuing their degree in social work, and the sixth participant was pursuing their degree in English Literature. Ethnically, two participants self-identified as Vietnamese American, two identified as Hmong American, one participant identified as being multi-
racial and self-identified as Khmer and African American, and the final participant self-identified as Laotian American. Further details of each participant are described below.

**Phil**

Phil is a queer Vietnamese American who is pursuing his doctoral degree in the field of higher education. As a doctoral candidate, Phil has had multiple years and experiences in higher education and student affairs, both as a student and as a practitioner. Phil’s educational background has placed him in public and private settings (e.g., 4-year private institutions, public institutions), but he has pursued his graduate education both at the same private institution that he is currently enrolled at, which is in the Midwest. When describing the culture of his current institution, Phil said that it is “very, very white”. The white demographic and culture of his institution has forced him to reacquaint himself with what graduate education meant to him, expected of him, and required him to do in order to obtain his degree.

Phil is also a first-generation college student where he is the only one out of his siblings to pursue and attain a graduate education. Through his educational and professional experiences, Phil has attained a level of criticality, which has influenced how he has experienced graduate education. Phil attributes his criticality to the educational curriculum that he has been exposed to within his post-secondary journey. Additionally, he has worked alongside many critical scholars in the roles that he has held within the academy. As a Vietnamese American, he insists on making a mark within the academy, and creating spaces and opportunities for other Southeast Asian American students to pursue graduate education.
Working in higher education, Phil has worked his way up into roles that have allowed him to have a seat at the table; a seat which granted him access to crucial conversations led by his institution’s leaders, which either impacted his role as a professional of his university or his role as a graduate student. Phil has expressed that his voice has not always been heard due to the patriarchal and racialized approach to leadership at his institution. During our interview, he shared a recent experience that had occurred at the time where he was forced to navigate his position within the department and how he was being treated by his colleagues and superiors. Months before leaving his position to pursue another role within the institution, Phil recounted a period of time where he felt that he was being intentionally excluded from staff meetings and other opportunities where he could have had an input. Phil acknowledged that he had the historical knowledge of how the department that he was current with carried out past processes, which could have been a contributing factor of why he was being left out. Nevertheless, upon his departure from the department, he was informed a short period of time later that his role was being promoted to a leadership-level, which he felt was an intentional decision that had already been decided prior to him leaving. This news further amplified the negative feelings that Phil had about the department, and further supported his belief that his previous colleagues were intentionally excluding, and hindering, him from reaching success within that space.

Alexis

Alexis is a first-generation college student and self-identifies as Vietnamese American. Alexis comes from a background where her family’s economic standing does
not encapsulate the generalized experiences of Southeast Asian Americans in the United States, as she comes from a business-oriented and owning family. Her decision to attend the institution that she is enrolled in for her master’s degree was due to her closeness and accessibility to her family because she was born, and raised, in the same state that she attended her post-secondary education in. As a graduate student, Alexis served in various social justice-oriented roles where she used her level of criticality to advocate for the personal, professional, and educational needs of not only marginalized and minoritized students that she worked with in her professional role(s), but for herself as well.

At the time of the interviews, Alexis was in the first year of her master’s program, where she was pursuing her graduate degree in higher education. Throughout her own educational trials and tribulations, Alexis had attained a deep and critical understanding of how to navigate dominantly white spaces, but her level of critical consciousness was not reached until her graduate studies because of the deep exposure that she had to DEI work and discourse. As a professional and as a student, particularly because of how much whiteness she was forced to move through as an undergraduate student, and she has experienced plenty of frustrating and helpless moments when faced with inequitable and racially hostile instances within her program, the department that her program is housed under, and her university. She shared that the taxing feeling that she has experienced with the last two years of her graduate program has been so overwhelming that Alexis is unsure if a career in higher education is the route that she wants to take post-graduation.
Esmae

Esmae is the daughter of a Khmer mother and an African American father. Raised by her mother, who was adopted by a white family, Esmae has been able to obtain some cultural and ethnic knowledge from her mother’s storytelling and knowledge sharing. However, due to her bi-racial identity, Esmae has spent much of her life navigating her culturally different identities and code switching in various situations. One of the situations that has required Esmae to culture switch between her racial and ethnic identities is, on occasion, at school when engaging with affinity groups. Esmae shared, during the second interview, that while she wants to be engaged and connected to her peers, she is unsure of which affinity group meeting to attend when the meetings overlap; she is unsure of which she identifies with the most in these instances, particularly because she questions if she is “Black enough” or “Asian enough” to be a part of these groups.

At the time of the first interview, Esmae was mere weeks away from graduating with her master’s degree in an English-related field. Esmae was also working full-time, first at the institution that she was pursuing her master’s degree at, and then at another institution following her graduation. Like Alexis, Esmae worked in positions within student affairs, where she was also able to critically engage in her environment and advocate for herself and other marginalized and minoritized students. While in her professional roles, Esmae shared that there have been opportunities for her department to engage in intentional trainings that addressed race and social inequity in their work, but she found that she was still forced to encounter white ignorance (Mueller, 2020) by her colleagues and superiors.
Nhia

Nhia is pursuing her terminal degree in Social Work in one of the coastal states of the United States. Nhia identifies as Hmong American, and throughout all three interviews, she centered the importance and influence that her family and community had on her education. Nhia migrated to the United States when she was a child and was often surrounded by discourse that correlated success in the United States to education. After having engaged in many such conversations with her family and other Hmong folks in her community, she recognized that socio-economic and educational opportunities were limited in the area that her family settled in when they migrated to the United States. With that awareness, Nhia decided to move across the country to pursue her terminal degree, with no intentions of moving back to her home state. Her reason was due to the plethora of opportunities that existed out in the current region of the country that she is in.

At the time of data collection, Nhia was no longer enrolled in coursework and was commencing her dissertation phase instead. Nhia has learned to navigate the system of graduate education through the many trials and errors that she had to overcome and still felt like she was merely learning as she went. In our interviews, Nhia spoke a lot about the overrepresentation of East Asians in Asian American discourse and how she felt that her graduate experience was inequitable due to reasons like the model minority myth. While Nhia had an original interest in pursuing a tenure track position after graduation, her experiences within her current doctoral program encouraged her to re-evaluate her
professional trajectory, which is currently encouraging her to seek a career outside of the academy.

May

At the time of data collection, May had just closed out the first year of her master’s program in Higher Education, and was preparing to enter into her second year by our third interview. May is a first-generation college student who identifies as Hmong American. During our interviews, May shared that she is the only daughter to her immigrant parents. Of her family, she is the only one to pursue post-secondary education at that current time. May credited her educational success to the sacrifices of her parents and elders, but due to closeness and interwoven nature of the Hmong community, she has always felt the pressures of her community to be successful (both in the academy and professionally) and to meet the expectations and standards of the Hmong community. May shared that her life constantly required her to engage in a constant performance of code switching to assist her in navigating the white-dominate culture of the academy and the cultural expectations of her family and community.

During the data collection process, May shared that she held many roles within the academy. She was not only a graduate student, but she also held positions as a research assistant, she was the chair for her department’s student association, and she served as a student member of an advisory board for her institution. When fixated on conversations around her educational trajectory, she shared that she had plans to pursue her terminal degree, in the future, and therefore planned to opt into the thesis option as her graduation requirement from her master’s program.
Rhea

Out of all of the participants, Rhea’s background is a bit different compared to the others. Rhea is a second-generation college student, and she is the second within her immediate, and extended, family to pursue a not only a graduate degree, but a terminal degree. Rhea self-identifies as Lao and is pursuing her Ph.D. in the field of Higher Education. Like May and Alexis, Rhea’s familial background does not fit the assumed and stereotypical social and economic context that research has often alluded to when speaking about Southeast Asian Americans in America. Rhea was brought up in a middle-class family and acknowledges that her educational success is the result of her family’s support and socio-economic standing.

Also, unlike the other participants, Rhea had assistance navigating postsecondary education, due to her sister’s own pursuit for her terminal degree. However, in the interviews, Rhea spoke a lot about the disconnect that would occur between her own educational experiences and that of her sister’s, which made her feel isolated and afraid at times of her educational journey. Rhea identifies as a critical scholar and is not afraid to call in or call out exclusionary or arrogant actions and languages in her work; in a sense, social justice ideologies became a part of her epistemology. Rhea said that her ability and confidence to claim such an identity stemmed from her time in her doctoral program, but in being a critical scholar, Rhea shared that it only contributed to her feelings of isolation. Rhea believes that it is due to her pursuit and exposure to her doctoral education, and the knowledge that she has gained from it, that widened the gap of understanding between herself, her family, and her community. Rhea’s motivation to pursue her terminal degree
was engrained in her mind since she was a young girl. Rhea spoke a lot about what her PhD would mean to her community, but she felt that her ultimate goal was to fulfill the dream that her father had when he immigrated to the United States in the 1980s. This dream included that one child was to become a lawyer and the other was to become a doctor, to which her sister achieved his dream of having a lawyer in the family, leaving Rhea to pursue her title as a doctor.

Overview of Profiles

As previously mentioned, I provided the profiles of each participant because it was important to center each student and the lived experiences that they brought forth to the study. Although each participant self-identified as Southeast Asian American graduate students, their backgrounds provide a first glimpse in just how different their experiences have been within higher education and their journey to pursue their graduate education. Additionally, in highlighting the backgrounds of each participant, I provide a perfect example of how Southeast Asian American experiences are not monolithic in the United States, particularly in regard to their socioeconomic positioning and educational capabilities. With the information provided, it is my goal to illuminate that not only do Southeast Asian Americans experience a lived reality that is non-monolithic, but that not all Southeast Asian Americans students are accurately represented in what educational literature and research has portrayed. Now understanding the background of each participant, the upcoming findings seek to re-tell the experiences of each participant. I center their voices through the quotes collected from the series of interviews to help
describe how each facet of graduate education culture has been infiltrated by whiteness, per the experiences of each Southeast Asian American graduate student.

Before presenting the findings, I must emphasize, that when notions and concepts of whiteness emerge in the quotes, such responses were not solicited by myself, but were organically brought up by the participants themselves. Meaning that I did not include any interview questions that named whiteness or white supremacy. The same goes for responses around race, racism, oppression, and other critical topics and academic language. The findings stemmed from experiences that touched on student experiences that placed the students both inside and outside of the classroom. These individual experiences included their roles as graduate assistants, which took place in departments outside of their immediate graduate program; interpersonal interactions that occurred between the student and other members inside and outside of their graduate program, and personal self-reflections. I provide figure one to aid in the understanding how the four facets: whiteness in classroom and curriculum, whiteness in co-curricular activities, whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging come together to create a graduate education culture steeped in whiteness based on the experiences of the Southeast Asian American graduate students in this research study.

**Figure 1:** Figure one shows the four facets that make up graduate education culture. Based on the experiences of the Southeast Asian American graduate students, each facet is steeped in whiteness, thus shaping a graduate education culture steeped in whiteness. The four facets are: whiteness in classroom and curriculum, whiteness in co-
Curricular activities, whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging.

Finding 1: Whiteness in the dynamics of classroom and curriculum

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the transition to online learning from some colleges and universities, physical learning spaces were a crucial aspect of graduate education. Classrooms were spaces created to promote the teaching and learning of students and while some students thrived and developed their critical thinking skills, others faltered. For the Southeast Asian American students in this study, their experiences
in the classroom limited their ability to contribute to their own learning due to two reasons: 1) the students found that the contributions being in the classroom were from their own voices and experiences and not that of their peers, and 2) the students realized that their learning was being hindered due to their involvement in the curriculum; in a sense, the student, themselves, became the curriculum. Rhea shared an experience where she realized that her contributions in the classroom were not being matched in effort by her peers.

*I remember in one of my earlier courses, I took a class that focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. It was a mixed-level course where there were both doctoral students in it and master-level students in it as well. I recall the doctoral students in the class feeling pretty confident about engaging in the conversations that we were having, because we had been exposed to DEI-related courses before, but by the time we were nearing the middle of the semester, I noticed that the master students weren’t contributing much to the conversation. Additionally, the doctoral students were primarily folks who claimed an ethnic identity, and they seemed to contribute to the conversations a lot, to which the white students were more reserved and hesitant.*

In this experience, Rhea noticed a dynamic that existed within her learning space where doctoral students and master students were expected to contribute to the overall learning experiences equally, but the reality of her learning opportunity within that space fell short. Furthermore, Rhea continued to recount her feelings of dehumanization as she became a part of the curriculum for her white peers.
It was then I realized that there was a power and racial dynamic that was present in the room, and because I felt like I was re-living my traumas and using my racial and ethnic identity as a teaching tool for them [the white and master-level students], I no longer felt it was fair for me to keep giving while my own learning was being oppressed.

During his interviews, Phil also shared a similar experience where he felt that his learning was being hindered within the classrooms that he was occupying.

I feel like I’ve worked backwards. The program that I enrolled in as an undergraduate student was more advanced in regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. I feel like the program that I am in now operates within this bubble because it’s in such a private institution. I don’t feel like the institution is showcasing best practices in the work that they do, so then the department doesn’t know best practices either, and so it’s not found in the curriculum that we’re taught and being exposed to.

The feeling of hindrance in his learning was fueled by the lack of liberated thought and discourse within the curriculum; in a sense, the curriculum was sheltering white students from the discomforts that they may feel while engaging in critically challenging conversations around race, racism, and oppression. This sheltering and act of protection is an example of a concept of whiteness that is being practiced. The concept of the right to comfort is an idea that white-identifying folks and students feel entitled to when they are confronted with challenging topics and conversations. The right to comfort offers protection to white students for their ignorance around issues of social justice,
equity, and diversity. In Phil’s experience, due to the classroom and curriculum aiding in the ignorance of its students, Phil’s learning was jeopardized. The right to comfort was not only present in Phil’s graduate experience, but in Alexis’s as well.

*I feel like a lot of white students in my class kind of come [into the learning space] with a lens of like “oh, like they [marginalized and minoritized students] need so much help.” It’s kind of like pity, like feeling sorry for them or not understanding the entirety of the experience itself. Like, generally, higher ed talks about DACA and undocumented students like “aww, it’s just so beautiful how they are so resilient,” but they [DACA and undocumented students] have no choice but to be resilient so the way we talk about students being resilient is kind of like us [in higher education] accepting the harm that the institution is putting on these students, and I don’t know... I just feel like I need some more challenge, like I need my brain to be picked.*

Alexis’s experience illuminated the normalization of white ignorance in educational discourse and in the realm of higher education. The dangers that the perpetuation of whiteness in classrooms and curriculum pose extend beyond the hinderances in learning, but impose direct harm to the Southeast Asian graduate students. When learning stood at a standstill for the Southeast Asian American graduate students, it came at the cost of their wellbeing. For students like Esmae, who enrolled in a graduate program that did not emphasize diversity and inclusion, she had to take it upon herself to include the ethnic and racial representation that she sought for her own means of learning and academic growth.
It's interesting even seeing the requirements for what we have to take [for English literature]. Like I remember in my undergrad, we were required to take like two or three American literature classes, two or three British literature classes, and then they would just lump together like ethnic literature. From that, you could choose from Native American literature to African American literature; they had nothing on Asian American literature, which was interesting (Esmae)

The absence of Asian American literature in Esmae’s graduate program not only indicated a message of racial inequality in English curriculum, but racial unimportance, as well. To meet the needs of her own learning, Esmae focused her writings and assignments on the ethnic and racial representation that she sought, taking on the labor to teach herself what she was not receiving nor learning in the classroom. Another direct outcome of classroom and curriculum hinderances was racial and ethnic taxation for the students. For Alexis, the taxation that she experienced from her time in classrooms infiltrated by whiteness forced her to seek solidarity amongst other students of color.

I feel like this whiteness is making me a lot closer to my cohort, like to the Black and Indigenous, people of color in my cohort. Like I think we’re able to unpack what we’re feeling in class, you know? Like this idea of education as a practice of liberation... like I’ve been thinking about how that looks differently for white students because in one of my classes, a white student was like “oh, this is so liberating” and it just made me think like liberating for you looks so much more different for a Black woman and [this lead me to] talking to [my Black and Indigenous peers] on this idea of what does it mean for us to be liberated because
I don’t know. Like I just feel like we [herself and her Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) peers] just keep each other sane and we just keep each other together.

Similarly, Phil also experienced the same kind of fatigue and need for racial solidarity.

So my last session [of class], which is a research course, there was me and only one other person who were people of color; me being the only Asian person in a class of about 20 people. So me and the other person of color, who identifies as a Black woman, we paired up to be partners because we have been so fatigued by whiteness that I can’t handle it anymore, and now that I’m at the end of it [coursework], I’m going to pick my battles and I’m going to pick my people who can support me and that’s it. I think that this journey [pursuing their terminal degree] has been quite a lot—to advocate, to serve as representation [for the Southeast Asian American community] it has just been quite tiresome. I’m tired.

Despite the level of graduate education that the students were pursuing, they each expressed the frustration and inconveniences that they have had to endure as they sought to attain inclusive and meaningful learning experiences for their own growth. Often finding themselves in the role of the educator for their white peers, each experience encapsulates the reality that not only are classrooms and curriculums steeped in whiteness, but that the normalization of white practices in teaching and learning have created hostile learning environments for Southeast Asian American graduate students.
Unfortunately, hostile behaviors were not just confined within the classrooms or the curriculum, but they extended into the co-curricular activities and experiences, as well.

**Finding 2: Whiteness in the Dynamics of Co-Curricular Activities**

To exist within the academy often requires students to take on multiple roles while also meeting the demands of being a graduate student. For graduate students, most attain a graduate assistantship to aid in the financial demands of graduate education. In this research study, all six participants held roles outside of their graduate program that included being graduate assistants, full-time or part-time professionals in their field of study, and in student leadership positions. The pressure graduate students succumb to ensure that they are obtaining enough experience to showcase on their resumes is a process fueled by whiteness. The concepts of quality over quantity and that progress is bigger (and more) are two concepts of whiteness that normalize the idea of productivity. Productivity often forces students to take on more tasks and roles that they should, leading them to feel an extreme sense of taxation and fatigue. For our students, their experiences as graduate assistants and professionals did relieve them from racial and ethnic taxation or encounters with racism and white ignorance.

> *When I first started my role [as a graduate assistant], I worked more closely with fraternities and sororities, and I was one of a handful of professionals in that department that was a person of color. I remember, one time, I was pushing for diversity and inclusion workshops because there was such a lack of them, and there was just so much resistance from my white professional staff members and there was just a lot of discomfort around the idea, and I felt like I started it because I*
wanted to talk about DEI work... I don’t know how to phrase [it] but my professional staff [in my graduate assistant office] are very reluctant to create noise or speak up about the issue [that is] happening because they’re afraid of getting fired. There’s a lot of meritocracy [in higher education] because, you know, you don’t want to make [leadership] upset, and so what this safety net does is it allows white folks space and grace to be ignorant [in their work]. It allows them to not take responsibility and so rather than my department supporting the change that I was wanting to create for the students, they suggested that I work in a different department because they don’t do DEI work.

For Alexis, this experience resulted in her feeling unsupported, unwelcomed, invalid, and undervalued; feelings that also emerged across the other participants as well. For Esmae, the dynamics of whiteness within her co-curricular activities (e.g. lunch and learns, advising sessions, university events) revolved around her experiences as a professional the field of student affairs and higher education.

Like I don’t remember what they were called, but they were like social justice series where they were required for all [higher education] staff to have to learn about what is a microaggression [sic] or that sort of thing, but it was interesting because, obviously, we all come from like different levels [of understanding]. Like some people have no idea what a microaggression is, whereas other people know is like the back of their hand because they experience them every day... But I just remember one time that we had one [a training] about names and like confusing people of color for their name and hurtful it is, and how it’s not just a small thing
[but] that it has a real impact on some people, especially when you get into the medical field with misdiagnoses… But one of my previous colleagues [and I] were called each other and people would always call us the wrong names. This was even after we had the whole 3-hour long training, and I just became so frustrated [because] I sat in this training just to have this happen again, and then have it laughed about.

What Esmae’s experience highlights is the lack of stakeholder accountability for their engagement in white ignorance and racism. Additionally, Esmae’s experience illuminates a common response that the Southeast Asian American students have had towards racial encounters to due to the racial and ethnic fatigue that they have felt. For marginalized and minoritized students like Esmae, the need to excuse the racist behaviors of their superiors and colleagues illuminates just how much power individuals can acquire. This unequal distribution of power can cause harm and destruction towards students of color and, when uninterrogated, can be excused for normalized behaviors that are steeped in whiteness.

There was this white professional who was at a gathering and had mistaken me for my colleague and he ended up saying “oh, it’s because you both are just so beautiful and ethnic” and that sort of thing and it’s just like I couldn’t let that go and I was questioning like what are we doing if these trainings aren’t working? It was something that was brushed off because they were the Executive Assistant to the Dean, but like how do you hold people in a higher power accountable to things? (Esmae)
For Southeast Asian American students to turn their shoulder away from racially hostile and insensitive situations is not their way of minimizing or forgiving the actions of the perpetrator, but as a coping mechanism to help them move past the harm that they have encountered. In these types of instances, students like Esmae, are forced to make excuses for white ignorance and racism when faced with a power dynamic that leaves the student in an inferior and vulnerable position.

**Finding 3: Whiteness in the Dynamics of Interpersonal Interactions**

This next facet addresses the whiteness within interpersonal interactions and the experiences that the Southeast Asian American graduate students have had throughout their graduate education. Experiences shared describe interpersonal exchanges between the students and faculty and peers, both inside and outside of the classroom. Phil, Nhia, Esmae, Alexis, and Rhea all spoke about the harmful interactions that they had to overcome and endure as Southeast Asian American professionals and graduate students. For Rhea, she recalled an interaction that she had when she was pursuing her master’s degree and the harm that she endured from the model minority myth.

*Growing up, I was never good at math or the hard sciences. This was a problem because I knew that my father wanted me to be a doctor... Well, to be a doctor you needed to be good at both math and science so early on, I already felt like I was a disappointment to my family. Then, when I went to school, all throughout my K through 12 education and even in college, I felt like I was expected to be smart. In fact, when I was a graduate assistant in my master’s program, my supervisor knew that I wanted to pursue my Ph.D. and her exact words were “you’re going to get in*
because you’re not only smart, but you’re Asian.” Her words still haunt me to this
day.

Rhea’s experience showcases the white ignorance that still blatantly exists in
higher education and the normalization that such comments and assumptions have
become in educational discourse. Due to the power dynamic in the situation, her
supervisor’s actions went unaddressed, and she was forced to excuse the behavior of her
supervisor, not because she forgave her supervisor, but because she was afraid of any
repercussions that could arise if she resisted or challenged her superior.

Nhia experienced a similar interaction that limited her ability to speak out and
correct her faculty member due to an authoritative dynamic that was in play in the
classroom.

This professor, she broke us up into groups, right, and I just happened to be
sitting next to my classmates who were international students and we had to do a
group project in class and then report out to the whole class when we finished.

[When] it was time for us to report out, she called on the other groups and when
it got to our group, her response was “you guys over there, you international
students, what did you guys come up with?” And, like, the whole class was silent
and though I was the only one who heard that, and I just paused and whispered
under my breath “I’m not an international student” (Nhia).

Similarly, Phil also shared his experiences of being essentialized and mistaken for
an international student, stating:
Being in the graduate program, phenotypes, right? At first, people perceive you as Asian, as an international student. This happens quite often until I started speaking and they’re like, “oh, you’re from here” and I’m like, “Yeah, I am!” So there’s this balance or navigation that I’ve had to do where I make sure that people know that I’m Asian American, or Vietnamese American because I don’t want to be perceived as international because their experiences are different, and maybe that’s an internalized xenophobia that comes with it because I see it with my parents.

There are two key points that stem from Phil’s and Nhia’s experiences. The first is the lasting harm that comes from assuming the experiences of racial and ethnic populations. As Okun (2000), Creswell (2016), and other scholars have stated, realities are not monolithic experiences despite the ethnic or racial identity of a population. Secondly, the internalized xenophobia that Phil touches on illuminates the prior experiences that he brings with him to graduate school. This is relevant and important to emphasize because the experiences that students encounter prior to their engagement in graduate education shapes the experiences that they have in graduate school. Phil continues onward to describe his experiences that confronts how racism has manifested itself in the realm of higher education; supporting the notion that whiteness is embedded within the generalized function and operation of the higher education system.

*People make assumptions about my parents because their English is not very great so they make assumptions and it just creates like tension of like, “oh, you’re not from this country, go back to your home,” and I’m not “No, I’m from here,” so*
there’s this issue of your parents wanting you to be Vietnamese, but you’re American. Like you’re Vietnamese American, right, so there’s this issue of like being a foreigner in your own home as well as being a foreigner at school... in the graduate program, so you don’t know where your place is. And, even in the literature, the acronym AAPI—Asian American Pacific Islander have been intentional about including American in the acronyms just so our [Asian domestic to the United States] experiences are valid and different from the international experiences. And then there’s a careful balance that the [Asian] community has to weigh and navigate because, yes, we want Asians to be a part of the community, but at the same time, we have our country here... at the same time, our collective experiences are so different.

While the Southeast Asian American graduate students in this study were able to critically interrogate their experiences and the dissonance that they felt as a result, the tensions that emerged from their engagement with graduate education offers insight into the fourth facet that makes up graduate education culture: whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging.

Finding 4: Contradictions of Engaging with Whiteness in Sense of Belonging

I introduce this fourth and final facet with a note to the reader. While I acknowledge that there has been extensive and meaningful scholarship around the concept of sense of belonging in post-secondary education, I am not speaking about sense of belong in the ways that it has been talked about in literature in this study. For this research study, the experiences shared describe the students’ navigation of their ability...
and appropriateness to exist in the academic spaces of graduate school. Sense of belonging does not refer to whether or not the student feels that they belong in graduate school, but rather if they should be there; engaging with a culture that is steeped in whiteness, perpetuating practices that are steeped in whiteness, and continuing to respond to the cultural assimilation (De Leon, 2005) that they have been conditioned to operate within. This approach to exploring their sense of belonging is important because while we interrogate whiteness in graduate education culture and illuminate concepts of whiteness that the Southeast Asian American graduate students are engaging in, the students are also challenging and resisting whiteness in their graduate experiences. They are challenging and resisting the status quo; they are challenging and resisting a graduate education culture steeped in whiteness, and they are challenging and resisting the act of assimilation whilst striving to be academically successful.

The facet of whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging encapsulates the feelings that the graduate students shared regarding their personal tension and navigation of graduate education, graduate education culture, and graduate school. As the fourth and final facet that makes up graduate education culture in the lived experiences of the Southeast Asian American graduate students, this facet centers the state of limbo that Southeast Asian American graduate students exist within as they pursue their graduate education. The state of limbo includes, but are not limited to, internal conflicts around engaging and perpetuating whiteness while trying to dismantle the systems of oppression; the need to continue forward in their pursuit of graduate education, and resilience despite the harm that the
students have [had] to endure. For all six of the participants, their motivation to pursue their graduate degrees, despite hardships and other negative experiences, were due in part to their family. May spoke about her pursuit for graduate education being a collective achievement.

*You know, because we are such a collectivist culture, you don’t represent yourself. You represent your family, and if you mess up somewhere, then people will start talking about you for it. I guess that’s another reason why I pursued grad school, so that people can look at us [May and her family] and know that, okay, her daughter went to graduate school and maybe she can help the other [Hmong] kids in the community pursue higher education or something like that.*

All six Southeast Asian American graduate students were brought up with the awareness that the cultures that their ethnicities resided in were cultures of collectivism. This meant that family was valued highly, and selflessness was a norm and standard act. To each student, the underrepresentation of their ethnic identities in graduate education pushed each student to overcome challenges and hostile environments for the sake of their community and the sacrifices of their grandparents and parents.

Despite the students using their families and communities as strength to push through [their graduate education], each student did share numerous experiences that captured the plethora of struggles they have faced as students; particularly their journey and ability to navigate graduate education. For Nhia, she reflected on the inequitable opportunities that she was faced with before pursuing her graduate education.
I think [I] would have been in a different position, if [I] would have been better equipped [with knowledge pertaining to post-secondary education]... I think because of where [my family] ended up [in the United States], where we grew up... we grew up in areas where there’s not a lot of opportunities. We had to learn everything on our own and here I have people [colleagues and bosses] that are younger than me [who are] doing more than me or are doing the same thing as me but I really think it’s about how you were raised and what your family exposed you to. I think, you know, their family had a lot more exposure, a lot more experience in terms of helping them get to where they are at.

What Nhia’s experience touches on is cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) and the practice of power hoarding (Okun, 2000) the society engages in. Power hoarding information to aid in socio-economic mobility is an oppressive practice to ensure that resources are available and reserved for those with power and privilege. In the context of the United States, this is often white individuals. Due to the strategic implementation of power hoarding, the system of higher education perpetuates this practice of whiteness by excluding generations of [potential] scholars from pursuing, and obtaining, their post-secondary education. When this happens, marginalized and minoritized students like Southeast Asian American students, cannot benefit from legacy admission or funding; forcing the student to navigate their graduate education journey without any community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

For students like Rhea, Phil, and Alexis, their whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging
highlighted the tensions that they felt about their engagement with, and perpetuation of, whiteness. All three students identified that they operated within systems of oppression and that their graduate education was steeped in whiteness. In the experiences that Alexis shared, her navigation of her sense of belong illuminated the negotiation that she does when she is confronted by whiteness.

*I’ll go talk to folks who didn’t go to college or [they] started working and I feel like they have more depth in their understanding, knowledge of the world, but that’s because I feel like the academy has kind of kept us in a bubble and in this bubble, I realize like I am working within the system, like I’m perpetuating the system [of whiteness], you know? Like I just remember how much I tried to fit the norm of what it means to be a scholar. How do I talk like a scholar? How do I write like a scholar? How do I throw out sophisticated language and a specific vernacular so that my white peers see me as someone smart? So I think about this and I get really cynical and I get very sad.*

The negotiation process that Alexis underwent illuminated a few key points in. The first is that Alexis understood the harms of whiteness but her conditioning of, and assimilation to, whiteness forced her to continue her engagement with it. Second, despite her desire to resist whiteness, her internalized understanding of what made for a “good student” in graduate education contributed to her need to participant in whiteness. Lastly, despite Alexis’s understanding of the harms attributed to the model minority myth, instinctually, she cannot help but measure herself against the educational standards and expectations that have stemmed from whiteness.
Amongst all of the participants, their self-comparison to whiteness was also most notably seen in the experiences that Rhea shared about her graduate experience.

*When I started, I was really intimidated by the program and my peers [their presence and interactions with them], but that was because there was always this reputation that came with being in a doctoral program... that being in a doctoral program is very rigorous and prestigious and selective, and so I think it was partially because of that that I struggled to believe that I was good enough to do the work that we were doing, or smart enough to learn what we were learning [in class]. I don’t know, I just didn’t understand how I made it into the [doctoral] program, so I guess you can say that I was very consumed by the imposter syndrome, and still am. One year, I was assisting a faculty member with their research and the entire interaction and assignment made me feel like everything that I was already thinking and doubting about myself was true, because the way that they would talk to me made me feel very incompetent and how they would give me feedback was very harsh. I cried many times after our meetings; it was very uncomfortable, and I always felt like I was undeserving of the opportunity that I had to pursue my terminal degree. Even now, after a couple of years later, I am still finding myself struggling to believe otherwise. It was just a really, hard, sad, and lonely time for me.*

For Rhea, not only did she struggle with the imposter syndrome (Langford & Clance, 1993), but she also struggled with feelings of isolation and her mental health. She continued on by saying:
You know, we were forewarned that this [doctoral education] was going to be a very isolating and lonely experience, but I didn’t realize just how alone I was going to feel throughout my journey. When I would go home, I remembered my first trip home after I completed an entire semester, I was so eager to share with my family the things that I learned, but they struggled to follow what I was saying, which was sad, because I realized then that no one seemed to understand me anymore.

When asked for clarification, Rhea went on to explain by saying:

There were a couple of instances where I would go home and my parents would ask what I was learning in school, and I think there was one time where I was explaining to them some kind of qualitative methodology that I was writing a paper on, and as I was excitedly explaining it to them, all I saw were blank faces when I looked at them. By the time I was done, all my dad said was “Good, baby. Keep it up.” That was when I realized that I was no longer speaking a language that they were understanding, and that I was using language that they were not used to. No one could understand me anymore at home. It was a really sad moment for me, even though I knew that my parents were proud of me. It was just weird. No one really knows this, but during the second year of my program, I considered dropping out. I didn’t feel like I was being taken seriously or that I was being supported because I would talk to those in charge that I was not okay because I wasn’t being treated well and they didn’t really do anything to help me. My anxiety actually got a lot worse that year because of the assignment that the department had placed me on, and my depression got a lot worse, where I eventually had to go on an anxiety
medication to help me feel okay enough to face my supervisor during our weekly in-person meetings. It was just really bad, and looking back, I still feel really sad that I had to go through that because I essentially lied to my parents and told them that I was doing okay and that things were great, but in reality, I was ready to walk away.

Rhea’s experience illuminates the kinds of harm that whiteness can cause to Southeast Asian American graduate students. For example, the Imposter Syndrome is not only a common experience, particularly for students of color, but the origins of the imposter syndrome stems from whiteness.

The Imposter Syndrome (Clance & Imes. 1978) is a phenomenon [that is] characterized by [one’s] ability to internalize [their] academic success. There is an assumption that the feelings of self-doubt that students may experience are embedded individualistically or idiosyncratically, as students attribute perceived deficiencies to their personal lack of academic competencies (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010, p. 1).

Without the appropriate support in graduate school or without an understanding of how to work with marginalized or minoritized students, Southeast Asian American students can feel more invisible and isolated throughout their educational journey. Additionally, while the students mention that their pursuit of graduate education is for the representation of their ethnic communities, Rhea’s experience addresses another concept and approach to being double marginalized as a student. Within the academy, she is marginalized as a Southeast Asian American. When she returns home, she is marginalized in her level of educational attainment and knowledge. This tension speaks volumes to the pervasiveness of whiteness in the lives of Southeast Asian American graduate students.
For Phil, his experiences highlight his use of whiteness to participate in graduate school, but also his desire to use whiteness to dismantle the system oppressing him.

*Yeah, I participate in whiteness. Like the way I write is not accessible to my parents. When I talk about my role as a graduate student, or as a staff member, is not accessible to my community, so I tell them that I’m a teacher... and when I talked to my friends about the program that I’m in, they’re like ‘oh, you’ve become white,’ and I’m like ‘just because I have the vocabulary that I can use to finally push [back] against the white system.*

Phil’s experience centers the act of resistance to confront the contradictions in his sense of belonging between his community and the academy. Nhia and May also shared their experiences where they resist whiteness in their navigation of sense of belonging throughout their educational journey.

In her graduate education experiences, the whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging has forced Nhia to decide whether or not to remain in a large metropolitan for the socio-economic mobility, or to return to her hometown to remain connected to her family and Hmong community.

*We grew up in areas where there's not a lot of like opportunities, our parents didn't know how to help us. prepare for our future, we had to learn everything on our own, and here I have people who are younger than me and they're doing more, or the same things as me...I think it's really about location [gaining professional experience and opportunities] and it's really about how you were raised and what your family was exposed to what you were supposed to know growing up. My*
coworkers and my boss have done [sic] more than me when I was their age, because. I think, for one, you know their family had a lot more exposure, a lot more experience and in terms of helping them get to where they are at. Also, where they live, their location... had me and you [the researcher] lived in a large metropolitan area when we were finishing our undergraduate degree, I think we would have turned out in way better position than we are now.

This part of Nhia’s experience touches on cultural wealth and showcases the disadvantages that whiteness creates for not just Southeast Asian American graduate students, but all marginalized and minoritized students pursuing post-secondary education. She continues by saying:

If I had to give someone advice, because a lot of people ask me, they're like do you regret [moving to], or do you like the East Coast? I told them that if I had to give them advice that would be my one advice, especially our family members, our cousins friends and relatives who are still back in small towns and city on the West Coast, that, if you have the opportunity to put yourself in a in a position or in a place where there's a lot more opportunities for you, and then you should take it. Had we [Nhia and her partner] not moved to the East Coast, I don't think we [would have] gotten like the job opportunities that we've have now. And [sic] I think our families, because you know with the Hmong community once you and your family moves you get comfortable and you tend to stay there...You go where your relatives are. You go where your other family members are and a lot of those places are not ideal for self progress or you know, helping your kids or your family move up
[socially or economically]. So, if people have the opportunity to move to bigger cities [that] have more opportunities, I think they should do it, and I think that's one of like my advice that I would give.

When asked if Nhia would remain on the East Cost once she finished her doctoral degree, she responded by saying:

*I don’t see myself here [on the East Coast] in the long run, in terms of raising a family, but I would see myself coming back or moving to a similar city [that is large] maybe not as big [as the current city that she resides in]. I definitely do not see myself moving back to where my family is and I don’t think those locations are ideal [for socio-economic mobility]. I want to raise my children better... to be in better positions [academically and professionally].*

Nhia’s comment link her back to the greater Southeast Asian American community where success (measured though socio-economic attainment) is a key indicator of generational sacrifices paying off. In turn, she now strives to pave the way in the United States for her children, and future generations, to attain socio-economic success and mobility. While Nhia’s response is expected (e.g., wanting to break generational trauma linked to poverty), it also shows how Nhia has been conditioned to associate success through social mobility, which can be arguably rooted in whiteness. In Nhia’s case, whiteness has wedged itself between Nhia and the physical proximity that she has to her ethnic community on the West Coast. Nhia’s experience is a prime example of how forced cultural assimilation exists within the academy. Additionally, her experiences highlights how forced assimilation leads to the conditioning of Southeast
Asian American students and the cultural sacrifices that they have had to make to attain a graduate education.

Lastly, while May did not directly address whiteness in her graduate education journey, she resisted whiteness by rejecting the professional expectations that her family had for her.

I can’t remember how the conversation started, but my mom was like “go into the medical field, or some sort of law enforcement [career] like a lawyer, and I thought about going into law enforcement or specifically, you know, a lawyer was something I kind of thought about but I think, maybe it was just too much for me to really think of... I'm not that passionate about defending or prosecuting people so that's why originally, I was going to go into like film when I graduated. I was going to go into film or like cinematography instead of videography stuff because I love film. Like film and editing videos was kind of my thing at the time [in high school]. But then, you know I thought a lot more, and I just thought okay well, can I really make a career out of this because I look at other people and you know I shouldn't have done this by comparing myself to them... [but] I thought okay well this person I know has a degree in film and they're not doing anything related to film and they're not doing anything at all, so do I want to do that?

This first part of May’s experience captures how success through whiteness plagues May’s educational experience by applying pressure on her to make a career decision based on potential income; an idea stemming from the capitalistic nature of whiteness. Additionally, these expectations of success through capitalism are not only
fueled by the model minority myth but also normalizes essentialism in educational
discourse. May continues onward to share the following:

> What I kind of want to do is basically help continue helping students find their path
> and I don't know if a college would like it if I were to say this, but I would say that
> even if you know you don't receive your college degree or if your career interests
> doesn't require a bachelor's degree, then that's OK. Colleges probably like that,
because they're all they're all about numbers and finances, but I really just prefer
> to help students who really want to learn more about themselves and see how they
> can find their inner passion or find more about their values and how they can find
> the steps to get there, you know? It's really sad because I think some college
> professionals, or you know, educators don't really tell students what [a] college
> degree really means and what you can and cannot do with it. I mean, granted [a]
> degree is not going to always land you a job, but I want to help them figure it out.

May’s decision to pursue a degree and career in higher education and student
affairs challenges the professional stereotypes that surround the Asian American
population. Too often does the model minority myth frame Asian Americans as only
pursuing careers in the medical field, in law, or in engineering. Her decision to reject the
stereotype to pursue a career in the social sciences opens up avenues and opportunities
for Southeast Asian American students to pursue careers outside of STEM. Her decision
emphasizes the need to normalize all professional opportunities for Southeast Asian
American Students in discourse and need to normalize the idea that success can exist
outside of STEM-centered careers.
Resisting Whiteness in Graduate Education

The findings from this study illuminated the presence of whiteness in graduate education culture. Despite how deeply engrained whiteness is in graduate education culture, each student in this research study engaged in various acts to resist whiteness throughout their graduate education. As previously mentioned, May resisted whiteness by centering her family, and Hmong community, throughout her master’s program. May’s act of resistance challenged the concept of individualism, which is a concept of whiteness that graduate education values within its culture. Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section, when May shared the following statement:

*What I kind of want to do is basically help continue helping students find their path and I don't know if a college would like it if I were to say this, but I would say that even if you know you don't receive your college degree or if your career interests doesn't require a bachelor's degree, then that's OK. Colleges probably like that, because they're all they're all about numbers and finances, but I really just prefer to help students who really want to learn more about themselves and see how they can find their inner passion or find more about their values and how they can find the steps to get there, you know? It’s really sad because I think some college professionals, or you know, educators don't really tell students what [a] college degree really means and what you can and cannot do with it. I mean, granted [a] degree is not going to always land you a job, but I want to help them figure it out*

May continues to resist whiteness by challenging acts of competition and gate keeping; two concepts of whiteness, which have historically disadvantaged Southeast
Asian Americas in postsecondary education. May’s commitment to serving, and being a resource to, the Hmong community makes pursuing a college education a community effort rather than an individual one. In striving to education the next generation of college-going Hmong students, May is creating an opportunity for other Hmong-identifying students to see graduate education as a possibility that can be reached and achieved.

Another act of resistance that challenged individualism was Phil’s establishment of solidarity amongst his colleagues of color. To overcome and navigate the racial taxation and white ignorance that he experienced within the classroom, Phil built a community of support with other students of color who were also facing similar challenges and experiences. Phil also used his engagement with whiteness to resist whiteness. Mentioned in the forth finding, Phil mentioned that despite some negative feedback from his friends back home about his whiteness, he continues to engage in whiteness as a means of resistance. Phil’s actions and decision to engage in whiteness is a great example of la paperson’s concept of scyborging. As la paperson shares (2017, n.p.),

The scyborg is machined person [sic], technologically enhanced by legitimated knowledge and stamed with the university’s brand. S-he [sic] is the perfect masculine expression of education: an autonomous individual who will reproduce the logics of the university without being told. The scyborg is the university’s colonial hope… Scyborgs are creatues of colonial desire: please be successful, be pretty, be human. The scyborh’s privilege is a manifestation of the first world university’s noblesse oblige. Thus a successful scyborg proves that the university is ethical. However, on the flip side, the scyborg is a source of colonial anxiety: please do not fail us, reject us, betray us. The scyborg has hir desires too. Hirs is a decolonial hope. S-he [sic] is never a completely loyal colonialist and can often be cause in the basement library, building the third world university.
In a sense, Phil has been acting as a scyborg throughout his graduate education experiences because he has been using the knowledge and skills that he has been learning from within the academy to challenge and push back against whiteness throughout his graduate education.

The last student that I highlight in this section is Esmae. As mentioned in the participant profiles, Esmae identifies as bi-racial; she is of both Black and Khmer identities. In her interviews, Esmae spoke about her Khmer identity quite a bit and when she recognized an absence of Asian representation in her English literature program and curriculum, she sought her own means of racial and ethnic representation; utilizing educational opportunities (e.g., writing assignments) to highlight her Khmer identity and the history of the Khmer people. This act of persistence and including ethnic representation in her educational experiences resists grand narratives that educational curriculum has long promoted; narratives of whiteness and a culture of white supremacy. Esmae’s act of centering her ethnic identity in her graduate education likely shifted her program’s culture by forcing her peers to adjust and listen to the counternarratives that her educational findings presented in the classroom, curriculum, and interpersonal interactions.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter four explains the four facets that comprise graduate education culture: whiteness in classrooms and curriculum; whiteness within co-curricular activities; the whiteness within interpersonal communication, and lastly, whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging. The
findings illuminated numerous realities that have not been centered or addressed in Southeast Asian American scholarship pertaining to graduate education. As Southeast Asian American graduate students, go on to pursue their graduate education, they do so for their families and communities; for ethnic representation in graduate school; to push back against oppressive systems of whiteness that have excluded them; to attain equitable opportunities that are not presented to them at the forefront of their graduate education, and they do so to rescue future generations from socio-economic hardships. Their persistence in graduate education, however, has not gone on without any challenges. For the Southeast Asian American graduate students in this research study, they were met various manifestations of harm. In the face whiteness within classrooms and curriculum, students endured racial and ethnic taxation as they felt obligated to recall their traumas for educational purposes; a hinderance in their own learning to assist in the learning of their peers; hostile learning environments, and dehumanization as the Southeast Asian American graduate students became a part of the curriculum.

When looking at whiteness in the dynamics of co-curricular activities, the findings centered the experiences of Esmae and Alexis. As graduate assistants and professionals, their experiences within their roles exposed them to racially exclusive and insensitive interactions. Despite her passion to strive and advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), Alexis was unsupported in her efforts to create more DEI initiatives for her department. For Esmae, she was confronted with the role of power dynamics and the normalization of racist behaviors by white individuals in positions of power. This facet illuminates two key findings: 1) there is an absence of racial and ethnic support that
welcome Southeast Asian American students to advocate for change in, and throughout, their graduate school experience, and 2) racist behaviors remain unaccounted, unaddressed, and normalized in graduate education spaces; forcing Southeast Asian American graduate students to navigate their graduate education with caution.

Third, whiteness in the dynamics of interpersonal interactions centered interactions that the students had with their faculty members, institutional administrators, colleagues, peers, and their ethnic community members. As the students navigated the dynamic of interpersonal interactions, they were often forced to navigate environments that allowed racism, the model minority myth, and white ignorance to thrive. In response, the graduate students have had to implement a variety of coping mechanisms to help them push through their graduate education and to survive a culture steeped in whiteness. Coping mechanisms included further dismissing racial behaviors geared toward the student, building solidarity with other marginalized and minoritized students, and removing themselves from the racially hostile situation.

Lastly, all six graduate students experienced contradictions in their sense of belonging. While four of the six students acknowledged the problematic and white systems that they were operating within, they also reflected on their need to engage in a graduate culture steeped in whiteness. Their reasonings captured their desire for more Southeast Asian American representation in graduate education; to achieve their degrees for their families and ethnic communities; to resist whiteness, and for socio-economic mobility and security. As each student navigated the contradictions of their graduate education experiences, they were confronted by forced racial assimilation; feelings of
isolation; separation from their ethnic communities, and harm to their mental health.

While whiteness was found to be present in all four facets that made up graduate education culture, the students did engage in actions and behaviors that both challenged and resisted whiteness. Chapter five expands on the findings from chapter to discuss not only why this research study is important, but also what is next. It addresses the limitations and implications of the study and a conclusion to sum up the research study.
CHAPTER FIVE: STUDY OVERVIEW, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

For this study, I utilized transcendental phenomenological inquiry to understand the racialized experiences of six Southeast Asian American graduate students pursuing their graduate education across various disciplines and institutions in the United States. Based on the data that was collected from a total of 18 interviews, the findings provide insight on how Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education experiences, whilst also providing an understanding of how the students described the presence of whiteness throughout their graduate education. In this chapter, I provide a summary of the study to reignite its purpose, the research methods used, and its key findings. The goals of this chapter are three-fold. The first goal is to encourage readers to reflect on the implications and the limitations to understand Southeast Asian American graduate student experiences. The second goal is to encourage readers to reflect upon ways that can encourage the academic success and attainment of Southeast Asian American students pursuing graduate education. The final goal is advocate for further interrogation and exploration of whiteness in connection to graduate education and Southeast Asian American students.

Study Overview

The purpose of this research study was to explore the graduate experiences of Southeast Asian American students to understand how they described not just their
graduate education experiences, but how they described the presence of whiteness throughout their experiences, as well. From the data, I was able to identify key findings that answered this study’s research questions: 1) how do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education? 2) How do Southeast Asian American graduate students describe concepts of whiteness, if any, throughout their graduate education? This research study provides higher education institutions with insight on how they can appropriately support their Southeast Asian American graduate students, while also providing institutions with an understanding of how their perpetuation of whiteness may create additional barriers and feelings of exclusion for their Southeast Asian American students. It also encourages institutions and academic programs to be more receptive, cognizant, and responsible for their perpetuation of whiteness.

I employed a qualitative research method to center the individual experiences of the participants (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). In using transcendental phenomenological inquiry, I was able to dig deep into the “what” and “how” that existed within the experiences of the participant (Moerer-Urdahl, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Using transcendental phenomenology allowed me to “develop an ‘essence’ through aggregating subjective experiences of a number of individuals” (Moerer-Urdahl, 2004, p. 32) who have experienced a phenomenon of interest. As a method, transcendental phenomenology provides a systematic approach to analyzing data about lived experiences and is interpretive by nature (Moustakas, 1994). The interpretive framework and subjective approach allow for ambiguity, complexity, and dynamism to exist because
in the end, there are no definitive truths (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). While most qualitative methods are embedded in a constructivist ontology, transcendental phenomenology is based within a subjectivist paradigm and is supported by an idealist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology.

**Researcher Reflection: A Poetic Narrative**

When using transcendental phenomenology, it is not just the practice of bracketing that is important but also for the researcher to provide consistent transparency throughout the writing (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005; Moustakas, 1994; Cresswll, 2013; Cresswell & Poth, 2016). For that purpose, I include a final research reflection to remain in line with transcendental phenomenological expectations. The poetic narrative below provides insight into my own educational and personal tensions and experiences with whiteness. The tensions and experiences address how I have navigated in the face of whiteness and academia, and tensions that have influenced the creation of this research study. The impact that this study has had on myself as a researcher, a scholar, and merely as an individual of Southeast Asian American identity was abundant. While I was unable to reach or interact with a large population of Lao graduate scholars for this research study, the overwhelmingly close connections that I had made with each participant built solace amidst a time that was unknown, uncertain, and isolating. Each meeting was meaningful, intentional, and relational and what I gained from this study was the validation that I needed; that was not alone in my feelings of doubt, alienation, or as an imposter in the academy.

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The shaping and creation of my individual self has been done with the influence and extension of the lived experiences and ambitions of the women before me. My lineage, a line of thin blood that I am not too familiar with; only knowing as far back as three generations before me. Knowing names that I have only heard of paired with blurred faces in my head as I try to make the person whole.

Having fought hard to understand where my place is, fighting through the high-pitched screeches of voices trying to weigh me down with their verbal assaults in not just in this abstract world, but in the intricate cultures that I constantly tip toe in and out of. Using near silent steps as to not draw too much attention to myself. Near silent steps to make sure that I will be not caught or seen in the space as an imposter to all of those around me. Watching me. Watching me with laser eyes so sharp and so hot that I anxiously scream to be freed from their gaze. Watching me eagerly with wide eyes and a Penny Wiser grin, ready to take notes in black ink on a new page of lined paper to never forget the mistakes that I’ve made. Mistakes like walking too close to an elder when I should have been crawling on my knees across old and cushion-less carpet. Mistakes like laughing too loud that the snort that escapes from my nostrils echoes and fades into the slightly stained white walls. These mistakes feeding the emptiness that existed within my petite Asian body. These mistakes never letting me forget the red hot flush that filled my face from embarrassment for not knowing my culture enough.

I am torn and I have felt torn for a long while now. The process of navigating what it means to be Lao and what it means to be American continues to be prove not only challenging but also exhausting. The worlds that exist within these
identities are vastly different. The expectations and experiences are often not understood by the other [Lao versus American, and vice versa]. For 28 years, I strategically and rigidly move between the two ethnic and identities--navigating a double life, hiding within the cold shadows that I have created for myself. Shadows to hide the culture and traditions that I was created within and from, and the [western] culture I learned to assimilate to.

As a woman [of color] I have long been conditioned to selectively speak. Selectively listen. Selectively interact with the world around me. As though tip toeing over broken glass, over shards so sharp that one lick of the skin on its edge is enough to inflict cuts so deep that not even stitches could heal the wounds over time.

The repetition of these thoughts and feelings. Trying hard to come to terms with what both worlds were supposed to provide me and how I was to engage with them. I am told many things. I am told how to speak. I am told to listen. I am told to be calm, to smile, to be good. I am told how to be, how to act, how to breathe. But it is what I am told that confuses me.

As an American, I am to be individualistic—I am to put my needs before the needs of others. I am to make my own decisions without hesitation. I am to be independent and able to support myself financially, emotionally, and mentally.

As an American, I am to be strong—I am to be strong enough to survive the “dog eat dog” world that exists outside of safe spaces found within my home. Strong enough to “take the heat” and to not flinch at the sights and sounds of hate and ignorance. Strong
enough to stand up for myself, to stand up to unwanted groping and catcalls or “you’re my girlfriend, everything is consensual from here”.

As an American, I am to be revolutionary—because no one remembers the weak. No one remembers the quite girl sitting patiently in the corner, counting the minutes that go by. The minutes that stand between myself and the covers that hide me from the atrocities lurking about outside. Hiding me from the boogeyman that creep around me, waiting, waiting, and waiting. Waiting for me to slip up. Waiting for the right moment to gaslight me out of the academy. Waiting for the perfect timing to inflict words so hurtful that they open the doors for depression and anxiety to come knocking again. But as I struggle to hide from the stress of the western world, I am faced with another pile of heavy expectations.

Like the crisp Minnesota air that leaves a slight sting on your face as you walk outside on a day in January, that same sting felt has been felt many times before, reminding me of what rejection feels like. Like how I am often dismissed because I am encapsulated within a racial category that is perceived to not need help (Suyemoto & Liu, 2018; Huang, Calzada, Cheng, & Brotman, 2012). Dismissed because discourse exaggerates that Asians are the model minority (Buena vista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009) – saying that Asian Americans are a monolithically hard-working racial group whose high achievement undercuts claims of systematic racism made by other racially minoritized populations as a tool of “racial wedge politics,” (Poon, Squire, Kodama, Byrd, Chan, Manzano, Furr, & Bishundat, 2016, p. 469). The perpetuation of the model minority myth is more than just a stereotype, but a “racial device used to
uphold a global system of racial hierarchies and White supremacy... exploiting Asian Americans and placing them in a racial bind between Whites and other marginalized groups,” (Poon, Squire, Kodama, Byrd, Chan, Manzano, Furr, & Bishundat, 2016, p. 474).

The dismissals that I encounter, time and time again perpetuates the harm that I must continue to feel within the spaces of the academy. The model minority (myth) creates harm that no one speaks of (Zhao & Qui, 2009). Harm that no one seems to care to know.

So I share within these spaces. I share my truths, my thoughts, and my traumas. I share because I have to constantly answer to the academy. I share because I feel like I cannot exist as a true gatekeeper of my own knowledge. I share and share and share, using my pain as a teaching tool for others. I share, because the shaping and creation of my individual self has been done with the influence and extension of the lived experiences and ambitions of my ancestors before me. It is for them who I owe a voice to. And so I share because I accept the responsibilities and power that I hold as a scholar, as a gatekeeper, as a knowledge producer and seeker.

So let me hold myself accountable

For the knowledge I attain

The knowledge I share

The knowledge I create

For us

For my people
For the community and

For the people who shall come after me and occupy these spaces

Let me hold myself accountable

For challenging

For creating

For unlearning and reshaping

For aiding in the processes that our minds have endured

As we have been conditioned to

Think

Know

Do, and

To be a certain way.

---

This poetic narrative is provided to demonstrate how an insider-outsider researcher position is valuable to research of this nature. The orientation I bring, while being fully transparent in who I am, builds trust with the participants. I provided the narrative in this final chapter to remind myself who I am and how I got here. This poem also reminds me how important it is I steward the participants’ experiences and the implications those experiences have on higher education scholarship.

Discussion

While there remains an abundance of literature exploring the post-secondary experiences of Asian American students, Southeast Asian American students remain
understudied, particularly at the graduate level. The Southeast Asian American student population continues to grow in post-secondary education (SEARAC, 2009; 2013), but the scarce representation of Southeast Asian American student research persists. Southeast Asian American college students bring an ethnic uniqueness with them to graduate school (Tang et. al, 2013), this includes collective values that center familial importance (Borromeo, 2018; Buenavista et. al, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007) and ethnic representation (Vang, 2015; Borromeo, 2018). These values are unique in that they are opposite to the values that graduate education culture has conditioned Southeast Asian American students to adopt; values that stem from whiteness, such as individualism. While pursuing graduate education is a life choice that is commended by the Southeast Asian [American] community (Her, 2014; Vang, 2015; Borromeo, 2018; Tang et. al, 2013), their navigation and success of graduate education is not without enduring harms and hardships produced by whiteness. The findings from this research study verify that harm towards Southeast Asian American graduate students is happening in four pivotal areas of graduate education culture: whiteness within the dynamics of classrooms and curriculum; whiteness in the dynamics of co-curricular activities; whiteness in the dynamics of interpersonal interactions, and in the contradictions surrounding Southeast Asian American graduate students’ sense of belonging. Additionally, the findings support empirical research and contributes new insights into the role that whiteness has in shaping the graduate education experiences of Southeast Asian American students; an area of research that has not been explored prior to this research study. I provide the following implications to assist leaders, faculty, staff,
Implications

The goal of this implication section is to offer additional insight in connection to the study’s findings. This research study identified four facets that, when combined, create the culture of graduate education for Southeast Asian American Students. These four findings are: 1) whiteness in classrooms and curriculum; 2) whiteness in co-curricular activities; 3) whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and 4) whiteness in interpersonal interactions, and contradictions of engaging with whiteness in sense of belonging. Chapter five expands on the findings to inform the reader of what can be learned from the participant’s narratives and provides further context for the findings. Although qualitative methods do not allow us to generalize findings from this study to the larger Southeast Asian American graduate student population, the realities of this research study finally shines a light on what Southeast Asian American graduate students are forced to endure while pursuing their graduate education. The following sub-sections describe implications that center the role of faculty and curriculum, the role of peers, and the realities of graduate education for Southeast Asian American students.

The Role of Faculty and Curriculum

In chapter four, the findings demonstrate how faculty, their pedagogy, and the curriculum of an academic program reinforces harm for Southeast Asian American graduate students. The findings that emerged from the experiences of the Southeast Asian American graduate students in this study support previous research on racial taxation and
the dehumanization of students of color (Franklin, 2016). Teaching has often fallen on bodies of color to contribute to educational curriculum (Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017; Cleveland, Sailes, Gilliam, and Watts, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Franklin, 2016); preventing any educational growth or advancement for Southeast Asian American students. Additionally, the findings pertaining to whiteness in the dynamics of classrooms and curriculum, whiteness within the dynamics in interpersonal interactions, and whiteness in the dynamics of co-curricular activities demonstrates how racial battle fatigue (Franklin, 2016) transpires for Southeast Asian graduate students. For example, when Phil stated, “So my last session [of class], which is a research course, there was me and only one other person who were people of color; me being the only Asian person in a class of about 20 people. So me and the other person of color, who identifies as a Black woman, we paired up to be partners because we have been so fatigued by whiteness that I can’t handle it anymore, and now that I’m at the end of it [coursework], I’m going to pick my battles and I’m going to pick my people who can support me and that’s it. I think that this journey [pursuing their terminal degree] has been quite a lot—to advocate, to serve as representation [for the Southeast Asian American community] it has just been quite tiresome. I’m tired,” he is demonstrating how the labor of teaching and learning falls on Southeast Asian American students. Thus, the faculty and their pedagogical approach to teaching the curriculum is doing a disservice to students like Phil, Rhea, and Alexis. This disservice simultaneously hinders the learning experiences for all students and perpetuating whiteness. However, the additional labor of students in this study shows that
Southeast Asian American students and their BIPOC counterparts are navigating many layers of oppression.

To rely on Southeast Asian American students to lead and facilitate challenging topics and conflict in the classroom, as demonstrated through Rhea’s experience when she states, “I realized that there was a power and racial dynamic that was present in the room, and because I felt like I was re-living my traumas and using my racial and ethnic identity as a teaching tool for them [the white and master-level students], I no longer felt it was fair for me to keep giving while my own learning was being oppressed,” normalizes idea of racialized labor (Acker, 2006). Additionally, hindering the learning of Southeast Asian American students normalizes two ideas: 1) that the experiences and traumas of Southeast Asian American students are learning opportunities, and therefore, should be shared with others, and 2) because the experiences and traumas of Southeast Asian American students are a learning opportunity that should be shared with others, white students have unlimited access to these lived experiences. To expect Southeast Asian American students to carry the weight of teaching and learning for others is not only ignorant on the part of the faculty, but disregards and diminishes the rights of Southeast Asian American students to an education.

**The Role of Peers**

Peer support has been shown to aid in the college success for Southeast Asian American students (Tang, Kim & Haviland, 2013; Hussain & Jones; 2019). In Tang and colleague’s research study (2013), Khmer American undergraduate students identified that peer support in the form of academic support and having studying partners motivated
them to persist in post-secondary education. When exploring the findings of this study, one form of peer support that would be deemed beneficial for Southeast Asian American graduate students is to assist in the racialized labor that is placed on Southeast Asian American students in the classroom. Relieving the burden and labor placed on Southeast Asian American students is a task that white peers can assist in. Since interpersonal interactions is unavoidable, the amount of racial taxation that students of color must endure can seem limitless in their day-to-day lives. To add to the racial battle fatigue, white ignorance (Mueller, 2020) is another concept that adds to the mental and emotion exhausted that is too commonly felt amongst Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color. The responsibility to promote learning, professional, and personal growth in graduate education needs to be distributed amongst everyone: leaders, faculty, staff, and students. To relieve students of color from racial labor, peers of students of color can embark on a variety of paths to support and liberate their peers of color. First, a re-examination their own understandings of race, racism, and their own privileges is a great first step. Second, engaging in frequent self-reflexivity can encourage their own interrogations of whiteness; uncovering how they perpetuate and produce whiteness and thus relieving their peers of color from recognizing their harmful practices and behaviors on their behalf. Lastly is to engage in their own critique of their self and epistemology. This includes the physical work of researching, and acquiring their own knowledge, to understand and address their areas of incompetence. Engaging in these steps can be liberating for not only themselves, but for their peers of color, as well; promoting and encouraging the self-preservation of all students of color in academia.
The Realities of Graduate Education for Southeast Asian American Graduate Students

Despite institutional efforts to provide racial support for their students of color, institutions need to realize that their efforts continue to fall short all the while perpetuating harm. As Southeast Asian American students are constantly forced to navigate their identities and proximity to whiteness in educational environments (Uy, 2018; Zhou, 2004), they remain underserved and unsupported whilst pursuing their graduate education. Based on the findings from this research study, the Southeast Asian American graduate students described a constant need to resist or address essentialism in discourse to differentiate Southeast Asian American experiences from Asian American experiences. Secondly, they feel the need to perform and meet white standards while experiencing extreme feelings of being an imposter. Third, the need to overcome the pressures placed on Southeast Asian Americans by the model minority myth is constant, and lastly, they are subjected to constant ethnic sacrifices to enable them to successfully navigate, and overcome, whiteness. The realities of being Southeast Asian American in graduate education is that it is 1) not only frustrating due to their encounters with white ignorance, but motivating in the sense that their academic achievement illuminates the [educational] abilities of their [ethnic] communities and 2) not only an oppressive experience because of the ethnic invisibility that the model minority myth normalizes for Southeast Asian Americans, but also an experience that allows them to achieve some form of resistance from whiteness because they are able to exist in spaces that were traditionally created to benefit white individuals (e.g., the education system).


**Limitations**

In this study, there were three limitations that I identified: 1) virtual interviews; 2) ethnic representation, and 3) representation of disciplines. Although virtual interviews and the ethnic identities to be explored were pre-determined, I wanted to address how both could be seen as limitations in the eyes of other scholars. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings were not feasible. In turn, all interviews were held virtually, through Zoom. This method of interaction may have limited the depth of rapport that could have been built throughout the interviews with each participant. Secondly, in this study was the representation of Southeast Asian American identities. The ethnic identities that were qualified to partake in this research study was internally determined. The determination was based on the political and social histories of Cambodian/Khmer, Lao, Hmong, and Vietnamese communities in the United States (Vang, 2015; Her, 2014; Tang et. al, 2013). Other scholars, however, have drawn their own ethnic boundaries of what Southeast Asian ethnicities include or do not include, therefore, adding or subtracting Southeast Asian ethnic identities from their research (Borromeo, 2018; Buenavista et. al, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007). The addition or subtraction of Southeast Asian ethnicities in this study could have provided additional or differing information. Lastly, due to the number of participants included in this research study, the representation of disciplines are limited. In this research study, I was able to include, and interview, students who were enrolled in disciplines within education, English, and social work. The experiences shared from the southeast Asian American students highlighted the problematic realities that whiteness
created, enhance, and shaped for these students in their graduate education, but the varying findings could have emerged if there was a presence of other disciplinary representation in the research study (e.g., STEM, law, medicine, and business). There is a chance that the traditional approaches to teaching and learning that students in these fields are conditioned under may have altered the findings, if they were represented in the study.

**Recommendations**

Whiteness continues to thrive through the various ways that Southeast Asian American students engage in their graduate education (e.g., praxis, policies, and classroom engagement). We cannot sincerely dismantle, disrupt, or change our current systems of oppression until we, as organizations, fully acknowledge our engagement with whiteness. We cannot dismantle, disrupt, or change our systems of oppression until we, as organizations, accept responsibility for our own perpetuation of whiteness in educational spaces. The findings from this study serve as a meaningful steppingstone for organizations and institutions to take better and intentional actions to include, and serve, Southeast Asian Americans in the academy. However, to do so, interrogations and an expansion of policies, praxis, and future research much occur. Below are the recommendations that stem from this study’s findings.

**State and Federal Policy Recommendations**

I divide policy recommendations into two areas. The first area addresses policies at the state and federal level, and the second area addresses institutional policy. At this current time, the educational data that is collected and tracked by the state and federal
government remains aggregated (U.S. Census, 2018). Educational and racial variables used to create post-secondary datasets include, but are not limited to, graduation rates of racial groups; enrollment numbers of racial groups; and statistics around the number of Asian American undergraduate students in the U.S.’s higher education system. Assessing post-secondary education via the variables previously mentioned are problematic because they create a plethora of limitations for ethnic representation in educational research. A few limitations include: 1) a limited understanding of ethnic populations that exists within a college or university; 2) a limited understanding of ethnic differences, experiences, and motivators to for students to pursue post-secondary education, and 3) accurate data that encapsulates a true an accurate depiction of undergraduate and graduate for differing ethnic populations. Therefore, it is imperative that state and federal take strives to evolve their means for data collection and the variables that are being explored. I recommend that the first change that state and federal policies take is a disaggregated approach to data collection and analysis. Disaggregating data not only illuminates invisible identities but offers equal importance and emphasis to all ethnically diverse experiences and realities. To effectively disaggregate, there also needs to be an oversampling of Southeast Asian American students.

Another recommendation that I suggest based on the findings of this research study is to utilize cultural competency when collecting racialized data. We know that Southeast Asian American students stem from a culture of collectivism, however, current variables assessed in post-secondary data stem from whiteness. Practicing cultural competency when identifying variables to assess Southeast Asian Americans in post-
secondary education would take into consideration measures such as community motivators to pursue graduate education.

**Institutional Policy Recommendations**

To combat the issue around essentialism and racial lumping, a recommendation would be to consider measures that take into account the varying ethnic identities that exist within college student populations. Southeast Asian Americans will only continue to remain an invisible sub-group of the Asian American community, if they are unable to identify their ethnic identity for their university to account for (e.g., through their college applications). A recommendation that I have would be to implement a requirement that all student serving departments track the race and ethnicities of students who are utilizing their services. For example, college admission offices can add an option for students to ethnically identify themselves and not just limit them to their racial identity. The information could then be used in an annual report that would illuminate the various ethnic groups that make up a college campus. The illumination of these ethnic groups would have to 1) refute the model minority myth for Asian American students because it addresses the false and racist narrative that “all Asians are the same” by demonstrating that the Asian American population is comprised of a plethora of ethnic identities 2) providing the data in an annual report would aid in combating essentialism in discourse around Asian American students because acknowledging the different ethnic groups creates opportunities for an institution to engage in their own research to better understand each ethnicity that is represented in their college, and 3) the data would help to promote racial and ethnic awareness amongst its members (e.g., leaders, faculty, and staff).
Recommendations for Praxis

Within learning spaces, we know that whiteness has created learning hazards and hindrances for the participants (Gusa, 2010). According to the Southeast Asian American graduate students in this study, their experiences highlighted the struggles that they have encountered within classrooms such as that: 1) their instructors struggle to hold space for challenging conversations; 2) their instructors struggle to appropriately navigate challenging conversations, and 3) their instructors struggle to hold students accountable for their learning when it comes to issues around race and racism. To first address these issues, learning spaces must become places of not just learning, but transparency. Faculty and curriculum should encourage the interrogations of the following ideas: 1) how graduate education culture can refute the model minority myth by including Asian American and Southeast Asian American experiences in conversations pertaining to race and racism; 2) how whiteness is being taught to Southeast Asian American students by acknowledging how their approaches to teaching and learning perpetuate notions of whiteness, and 3) how whiteness is being internalized by Southeast Asian American graduate students, which would require faculty provide opportunities and spaces for Southeast Asian American students to process their experiences in graduate school. At the graduate level, it is with hope that students have engaged in the exploration and development of their critical consciousness whether it be through previous courses they have taken, literature that they have engaged in, and interpersonal interactions and relationships that have encouraged them to question racially hostile environments that they occupy. Until higher education can provide fully liberated spaces of learning for not
only their students but for their faculty and staff members as well, learning spaces and its curriculum, and its processes will always remain under the direct influence and supervision of whiteness.

Additionally, since educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students are being disrupted by whiteness, white ignorance, and white fragility, adequate resources are needed to prepare faculty and staff to engage in the dissection of whiteness within learning and on-campus spaces. For example, feelings of isolation are not just limited to international student identity. The need for Southeast Asian American students to assimilate to the academy’s standards and practices contribute to these feelings of isolation all throughout their educational journey. Educational faculty and staff must re-evaluate what it means to create an inclusive, and supportive, educational environment for ethnically minoritized students because such feelings of isolation extend beyond academic spaces, but seeps into their personal lives as well. This may require that faculty members are re-approaching and interrogating the classroom materials that they are using to teach certain subjects from, interrogating their classroom norms and expectations to see if they are perpetuating whiteness within them, and to engage in regular moments of reflexivity so that they are able to create relationality with the spaces that they are occupying and the students that they are engaging with.

Lastly, there needs to be a normalization of transparent conversations around the historic influences of whiteness within academia to better understand how their engagement with whiteness can create educational barriers for marginalized and minoritized students, like Southeast Asian American scholars. To speak about whiteness
and to address its existence should be done by acknowledging that doing so in a way that is harmful could encourage whiteness to become a fixed category of experience; potentially leading to the manifestation of something along the lines of “White Studies” (Ahmed, 2007). Instead, when addressing whiteness in order to create spaces to have intentional dialogue, it is imperative to do so with intentionality and care; doing so will also require that faculty and staff engage in self-reflexivity, which would encourage them to address any existing racial and ethnic ignorances that they may have.

**Future Research**

This research study is a foundational step to encourage an expansion in the exploration of whiteness and the racialized experiences of Southeast Asian American students in graduate education. As a steppingstone, the use of organizational culture, as a theoretical framework, was needed to understand the superficial approaches to race and whiteness that organizations have taken and engaged in. I recommend that future research apply a different critical theory to interrogate whiteness other than what was used in this research study. As described in previous chapters, whiteness in this research study was approached as a socially constructed concept. Whiteness, itself, was not a culture. In literature, critical scholars have perceived whiteness as property (Harris, 1995), which encompasses a person’s rights. “Whiteness as property is not simply metaphorical: access to capital, the distribution of labor, and ultimately freedom itself were all bound by whiteness” (Ray, 2019, p. 30). What Ray’s quote touches on is Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Community Culture Wealth embodies a variety of “knowledges, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and
resist racism and other forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 154). Based on the findings, a lack of cultural wealth (e.g., capital wealth, social wealth, navigational wealth) was noted in the experiences of the six Southeast Asian American graduate students in this study. A further exploration of this theory could provide important information on how to close the gap between students of color pursuing graduate education and white students pertaining to cultural wealth; offering avenues for additional support and actions that can be taken to support the academic success of Southeast Asian American students.

While the findings provide insight for further actions that can be taken in praxis and policy to address the presence of whiteness, the impacts of this study in Southeast Asian American scholarship is merely a ripple. With this study being not just one of the first to explore graduate student experiences of Southeast Asian American students, but to explore the intersection of graduate education and whiteness as well, a deeper look into the topic is not only plentiful but warranted. There is not enough research that illuminates the realities of Southeast Asian Americans in graduate education due to the low numbers of representation that exists. However, this should not ward off researchers. The experiences of Southeast Asian American graduate students deserve to be centered, explored, and encouraged in discourse and additional research can be conducted to explore both at the undergraduate and graduate level.

Additionally, when we continue to refer to previous research around the Asian American experience, we must practice caution as to not perpetuate notions of essentialism, as essentialism is a byproduct of white ignorance (Mueller, 2020). Future research on the topic should consider specifically deep diving into the experiences of
each ethnic identity included in this study. To do so continues to encourage the illumination of minoritized ethnic identities within the Asian race, while combating a grand narrative in discourse by challenging essentialism. An approach to take to address this issue would be to utilize a disaggregated approach when conducting research and data analysis. In addition, doing so allows for an in-depth exploration of lived realities to occur for marginalized and minoritized populations, which continues to promote DEI initiatives in research.

A fifth recommendation for Southeast Asian American research is two-fold. To further expand on how various Southeast Asian American identifying populations come to know and learn about whiteness. This research opportunity could provide insight on how whiteness is learned and preserved in the actions and beliefs of members of the Southeast Asian American community. This could also open the doors for larger community research to understand how, and if, historical influences of various Southeast Asian American families impact their pursuit for higher education and cultural assimilation. Secondly, it is also important for researchers to consider the intersections of identity that exists within Southeast Asian American graduate students. In shared experiences like Alexis, Phil, Rhea, Esmae, and May who spoke about the various roles that they held while being a graduate student, they also spoke about the need to navigate the Western academy and their cultural communities. This included assimilating to the individualistic nature of the academy and code switching to being more community-centered and focused when they are with their families. Code switching for Southeast Asian American students is also an avenue that should be explored to understand the
types of realities that the academy, and the act of code switching, create for Southeast Asian American students.

Lastly, further research can be done to interrogate differing graduate program types and cultures to understand how they engage in, and reproduces, notions of whiteness. Specifically, additional research can approach this topic by doing deep dives of the plethora of fields of studies to further understand the various cultures that could be manifested within colleges and universities around the United States. The findings from this sort of research could provide additional insight in current pedagogical practices that are being implemented within graduate-level courses and classrooms.

Chapter Summary

Chapter five summarizes the findings that were unearthed from this research study and emphasized what can be gained from what was uncovered. Much of the discourse that occurred within this chapter illuminated the need for accountability from leaders, faculty, and staff in higher education to acknowledge, address, and to change the harmful culture that is found in graduate education. Limitations addressed the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ethnic representation in the research study. Recommendations called on federal, state, and institutions to adopt policies and new approaches to racial data collection that combat essentialism and racial lumping; this included the emphasizing of new data measures that accommodated the collective backgrounds of Southeast Asian American graduate students. Lastly, a plethora of recommendations were suggested for future research, including the need to interrogate
whiteness and to expand on the lived experiences of Southeast Asian American graduate students.

**Conclusion**

We know that the Southeast Asian American graduate experiences have been masked due to data aggregation and the mere lack of research on the population (Vang, 2015; SEARAC, 2013; 2019). To combat the existing situation and reality of research around Southeast Asian Americans in post-secondary education, this research study conveys the essence of the educational experiences that six Southeast Asian American graduate students shared. The themes and outcomes that were presented in chapter four bring to light how deeply embedded whiteness is in the graduate education process, and experience, despite how critically conscious the student or program may be. To this end, graduate education culture, and its intersection with whiteness, further supports the idea that many higher education scholars have come to know, which is that the master’s tool cannot dismantle the master’s house (Lorde, 1984).

Within the last 45 years, activist-scholars have envisioned radical reform in higher education to meaningfully restructure the antiquated views on curricula, policies and procedures, and pedagogies originally constructed for and by white men. However, these radical calls for new educational efforts often have been co-opted and systematized by institutions and people in power, resulting in limited progressive aims. Higher education as a whole...may well be performing contradictory functions—for example, bolstering and reproducing privilege and inequality at the same time as they are creating new knowledge of benefit to all… these contradictory functions often are found in the rhetoric of diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence (Harris, Barone, & Davis, 2015, p. 33).

Whiteness has had, and continues, to have an alarmingly deep presence in not just America’s education system, but in the individual cultures of graduate programs as well. To pursue a graduate education means that an ethnically diverse student has to willingly
embark on a process of assimilation and adoption of white ideologies and practices, sacrificing some of the mere traits that make these students unique and desired. This study focused on answering two questions. The first research question raised was how Southeast Asian American graduate students describe their graduate education, and the second asks how Southeast Asian American graduate students describe whiteness, if any, in their graduate education experiences.

Though we cannot infer the findings from this qualitative research study, we now know how whiteness shapes both graduate education culture and Southeast Asian American graduate student experiences, thanks to Alexis, Esmae, May, Nhia, Phil, and Rhea. With that, I emphasize that we cannot sincerely dismantle, disrupt, or change our current systems of oppression until we, as organizations, fully acknowledge our engagement with whiteness. We cannot dismantle, disrupt, or change our systems of oppression until we, as organizations, accept responsibility for our own perpetuation of whiteness in educational spaces.
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In actuality, Southeast Asian Americans have a high school diploma.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Information for Social Media

Public Post: Calling all interested and eligible Southeast Asian graduate students! Please contact me if you are interested in participating. If you are unable to participate, please share this information along. Many thanks!
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer for Social Media

THIS STUDY HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Interrogating Graduate Education Culture Through Southeast Asian Experiences

CALLING ALL INTERESTED AND ELIGIBLE SOUTHEAST ASIAN-IDENTIFYING GRADUATE STUDENTS! I INVITE YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN MY DOCTORAL RESEARCH STUDY, WHICH AIMS TO EXPLORE THE GRADUATE EXPERIENCES OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS.

CRITERIA

1) MUST BE 18 YEARS OR OLDER
2) MUST SELF-IDENTIFY AS CAMBODIAN, HMONG, LAO, OR VIETNAMESE
3) MUST BE A U.S. CITIZEN, PERMANENT RESIDENT, OR DACA RECIPIENT
4) MUST BE ENROLLED IN A POST-GRADUATE PROGRAM (E.G., MASTERS, DOCTORAL, PROFESSIONAL, OR LAW) AT A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE, NOT-FOR-PROFIT, PWI IN THE U.S. AT THE TIME OF THE STUDY

WHAT TO EXPECT

- PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ASKED TO PARTAKE IN 3 RECORDED INTERVIEWS VIA ZOOM LASTING UP TO 60-MINUTES EACH
- PARTICIPANTS CAN EARN UP TO $15 IN GIFT CARDS FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SUBJECT: Research Study Info: Interrogating Graduate Education through Southeast Asian Experiences

Dear [NAME OF PARTICIPANT],

Thank you for expressing your interest in participating in the research study titled Interrogating Graduate Education Culture Through Southeast Asian Experiences. I am excited to inform you that you have met the requirements needed to participate in this study and I ask that you please contact me no later than [DATE] to schedule your first interview. Before we meet, via Zoom, I also ask that you please complete, sign, and send me the documents attached to this email at least before the start of our first meeting.

What to Expect:

• This study consists of 3 interviews that will be held and recorded via Zoom. Interviews are expected to last up to 60-minutes. It is okay if we do not meet for the entire 60-minutes.

• Questions asked will often revolve around your social, familial, and educational history and experiences, especially at the graduate level.

• Each interview that you will partake in will be audio and video recorded. Not consenting to the recording will not affect your eligibility to participate in the study.
• Completion of each interview will earn you a $5.00 gift card/certificate, which you can expect to receive up to 2-4 weeks after each interview has concluded. The gift card/certificate will be sent via email or through other digital means.

• You have the right to pass on any questions asked, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email or call me at my information below. I look forward to our first virtual meeting.

Kind regards,

Lesley N. Sisaket
PhD Candidate, Higher Education
University of Denver
Email: sisaket.lesley@gmail.com
Phone: 763-498-1138
Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions:

1) Which racial identity do you identify with [check all that apply]?
   - African American
   - Asian
   - Black
   - Indigenous
   - Pacific Islander
   - White
   - Other, I self-identify as _________________________________________

2) Do you self-identify as Southeast Asian? If no, please discontinue with the questionnaire and contact the researcher.
   - Yes
   - No

3) Which Southeast Asian ethnicity do you self-identify with [check all that apply]?
   - Cambodian
   - Hmong
   - Laotian
   - Vietnamese
   - Other, I self-identify as _______________________________________
4) What is your immigration status in the United States of America?

☐ Citizen

☐ Permanent resident

☐ DACA recipient

☐ Undocumented

☐ Not listed, my immigration status is _______________________________

5) What is your age?

☐ 22-26

☐ 27-31

☐ 32-36

☐ 37-41

☐ 42-46

☐ 47-51

☐ 52-56

☐ 57-61

☐ 62+

6) What is your gender identity?

I self-identify as:

7) Are you enrolled in a graduate-level program at a university or college in the United States?

☐ Yes

☐ No
8) What degree-level are you currently pursuing?

- Masters (e.g. Master of Arts, Master of Science)
- Professional degree (e.g. Master of Business Administration, Master of Social Work, Master of Fine Arts, Master of Education)
- Doctorate (e.g. Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Education, Juris Doctor, Doctor of Business Administration)
- Not listed, I am pursuing a/an ____________________________

9) What institution are you currently enrolled at?

- I am enrolled at ____________________________
Appendix E: Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Interrogating Graduate Education Culture Through Southeast Asian Experiences

IRBNet #: 1679758-1

Principal Investigator: Lesley N. Sisaket, PhD Candidate in Higher Education

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Christine A. Nelson, Assistant Professor of Higher Education

Study Site: Virtual via Zoom

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not you may want to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.
**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to deeply understand the culture that exists in graduate education through the specific experiences of Southeast Asian graduate students.

If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to first partake in an initial virtual screening with the researcher to confirm your eligibility to participate in the study before being invited to participate in 3 virtual interviews that will be held, and recorded, using the communications software Zoom. You will also be asked to complete and return a demographic questionnaire to the researcher before the screening. You may refuse to answer any question in the demographic questionnaire.

The interviews will be audio and video recorded and will take place across a 4-month timeframe. Each interview is expected to last up to 60 minutes. After each interview, you will also be asked to verify the information that you shared with the researcher. You can expect the structure of the interviews consist of questions relating to the following topics: social and family history, ethnic identity, and graduate education history and experiences. You may refuse to answer any question during the interview.

**Risks or Discomforts**

There are no expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study. Depending on the information that you choose to share during each interview, feelings of emotional discomfort could arise. In this event, you have the right to request from the research the names and phone numbers of agencies that can support you. You also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences or penalties. Written requests for resource support should be sent to the researcher via email.
All interview recordings will be deleted once the research study has concluded. You have the right to request to view or exclude portions of the interview recording at any time for as long as the recording is in the sole possession of the research during the study’s activity. Written requests should be sent to the researcher via email.

**Benefits**

The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are an individual- and community-level understanding the of the post-secondary and graduate education experiences of yourself and others in the Southeast Asian community. We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your professional or educational standing.

**Confidentiality of Information**

In using pseudonyms for first names and institution names, your data will be confidential. The link between your identifiers and the research data will be destroyed after the records retention period required by state and/or federal law. Identifiable data will be accessible to the primary investigator and their faculty sponsor.

**Limits to Confidentiality**

All of the information you provide will be confidential. However, if we learn that you intend to harm yourself or others, including, but not limited to child or elder abuse/neglect, suicide ideation, or threats against others, we must report that to the authorities as required by law.

**Data Sharing**
De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information (e.g., your name, date of birth) that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information or samples we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

**Incentives to participate**

In participating in the study, you will earn a $5.00 gift card, to any business that offers gift card delivery to be sent via email or through electronic methods, for each interview phase that you complete (up to $15.00 in total). You will be sent each gift card 2-4 weeks after the completion of an interview.

**Consent to video / audio recording / photography solely for purposes of this research**

This study involves video/audio recording, and/or photography. If you do not agree to be recorded, you CAN take part in the study.

_____ YES, I consent to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

_____ NO, I do not consent to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

**Consent to use data in future research**
This study intends to store data collected for future research. Data stored will remain confidential, with the use of pseudonyms and the absents of any identifiers. If you choose to not consent to the use of your information in future research, you CAN participate in this research study.

_____ YES, I consent to the researcher using the data that I have shared in this study for future research, and I understand that the researcher will not require additional consent from me to use the data in any future research as long as I shall give me consent here.

_____ NO, I do not consent to the researcher using the data that I have shared in this study for future research.

**Questions**

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact:

Primary Investigator: Lesley N. Sisaket, PhD Candidate in Higher Education

Email: Lesley.sisaket@du.edu

Phone: 763-498-1138

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Christine A. Nelson, Assistant Professor of Higher Education

Email: Christine.Nelson@du.edu

Phone: 303-871-2487

If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a
participant, please contact the University of Denver (DU) Institutional Review Board to speak to someone independent of the research team at 303-871-2121 or email at IRBAadmin@du.edu.

Signing the Consent Form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Signed by the participant:

Printed name of subject ___________________________ Signature of subject ___________________________

Date ___________________________
Appendix F: Interview One Protocol

Interview Questions #1

1) Do you have any questions or concerns that you would like to raise right away?

2) Can you begin by telling me about yourself?

3) Which university or college are you currently enrolled in?

4) What graduate degree are you currently pursuing?

5) What graduate program are you enrolled in?

6) How has your journey been in this program?

7) What led you to pursue a graduate education?

8) What is your social background like?

9) Can you tell me a bit about your familial background?

10) Do you have any questions or comments before we end today’s interview?

11) Do you have anything that you would like to add that we may not have gotten to talk about today?
Appendix G: Interview Two Protocol

Interview Questions #2

1) Do you have any questions or lingering thoughts from our last interview?
2) How would you describe the graduate program that you are enrolled in?
3) What is the environment like?
4) What is the makeup of the students who are enrolled in your program?
5) Would you say that your program is challenging?
6) What are the expectations that your program has for its students?
7) What are the values of the program?
8) What is the program known for?
9) Why did you decide to enroll in this particular program at this particular institution?
10) How is the student support in your program from faculty, staff members, or other students?
11) How do you feel you are doing in the program?
12) What kind of relationship do you have with other students in the program? Do you feel supported by them or do you find it challenging to build relationships with other students in the program?
13) What kind of a relationship do you have with faculty and staff in your department? How have your interactions been with them?
14) How do you feel about your performance in the program so far? Is there anything that you find is easy about pursuing your post-graduate education? Is there anything that you find challenging?

15) Is your enrollment in the program what you thought it would be?

16) Did you have any preconceived notions before starting it? If so, what were there?

17) Have you encountered any other obstacles or challenges while pursuing your post-graduate education so far? If so, what are they?

18) Have you encountered obstacles or challenges that you did not foresee while pursuing this graduate degree? If so, what are they? If not, why do you believe that may be?

19) Do you have any questions or comments before we end today’s interview?

20) Do you have anything that you would like to add that we may not have gotten to talk about today?
Appendix H: Interview Three Protocol

Interview Questions #3

1) Do you have any questions or lingering thoughts from our last interview?

2) How have you felt throughout this process? What are your thoughts on it?

3) Has your participation in this study influenced or impacted your thinking about your pursuit for your graduate education?

4) Do you have any questions or comments before we end today’s interview?

5) Do you have anything that you would like to add that we may not have gotten to talk about today?