

## “The Asian and Latino Thing in Schools”

### Academic Achievement and Racialized Privilege

*I guess in Alhambra you only have a choice—a “choice,” and that’s in quotations—between Latinos or Asians.*

—Nancy Tran,<sup>1</sup> former student, Alhambra High School

*[I]n this concert [of reproduction of capitalist relations], one ideological State apparatus certainly has the dominant role, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School.*

—Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”

IN THE SPRING of 2005, Alhambra High received the Title I Academic Achievement Award, which recognizes schools with low-income student populations that have made progress in closing the achievement gap.<sup>2</sup> Principal Russell Lee-Sung arranged a meeting with student government leaders to announce the good news. One of the students present at the meeting was Robin Zhou, an inquisitive, first-generation Chinese American senior, who began to wonder why this gap—a persistent discrepancy in test scores and grade point averages between Alhambra’s Asian American and Latina/o students—existed in the first place. The results of his speculations ran in Robin’s monthly school newspaper column, “Nerd Rants,” on March 22, 2005. Following the headline, “Latinos Lag behind in Academics,” he wrote that “Hispanic students” were not “pulling their weight” and attributed the cause to cultural factors, suggesting that Asian parents “push their children to move toward academic success,” while Latino parents “are well-meaning but less active.” Zhou also attributed the disparity to what he called a “deliberate segregation” of students into two groups, AP/honors and regular, beginning in middle school, and closed with a

stern remonstrance for lower-scoring students to take the gap seriously: "Those who casually dismiss their own inabilities that place them on the bottom end must be forced to understand that those are not empty numbers, but are indicators of the brightness of their futures." Even though he stated that he was not "suggesting that brown people cannot think on the level of white and yellow people" but that he felt the difference in test scores had to be addressed, the column, along with a subsequent news article that ran in a local newspaper a week later, set off what Lee-Sung described as a "firestorm" of controversy among students, teachers, administrators, and parents.<sup>3</sup> The incident was a flashpoint—a moment of racial formation—that both revealed and called into question existing regional racial hierarchies and their sometimes uneasy relationship to national ideologies. It also illuminated the important role of school, as a key institution of civil society, in mediating this relationship.

The year Robin wrote his column, Alhambra High was 90 percent Asian American and Latina/o, with Asian American students making up 48 percent of the student body, and Latinas/os 41.5 percent.<sup>4</sup> In the heated dialogue that followed, it became clear that much more was at stake than raising test scores and grade point averages. In fact, Robin's column exposed to public scrutiny a socioacademic order dramatically bifurcated by race. Students, teachers, and administrators' attempts to resolve the crisis revealed how national ideologies intertwining race, individualism, and merit deeply shaped participants' ways of making sense of racial and ethnic hierarchies. Simultaneously, "common sense" ways of making sense of the existing socioacademic order were elucidated, ruptured, and reproduced. Various participants' struggles to articulate something different indicated forms of thinking that eluded hegemonic purview—what Raymond Williams has described as structures of feeling or "meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt," which are as yet ideologically unthinkable but perched "at the very edge of semantic availability."<sup>5</sup>

In discussions of family and life histories in the West SGV, high school frequently emerged as a key period during which social relations were solidified and established, and achievement in academics and extracurricular activities often became a marker of one's perceived ability to succeed and prosper. Students' ways of making sense of the social order were tied intimately with the particular regional context in which

they were growing up—in a majority–Asian American and Latina/o, immigrant, metropolitan suburb in which the alignments of race and privilege were neither fixed nor clear cut. The nuances of the students’ reactions to and interpretations of the social order around them speak to the ideologically formative moment in which high school takes place, where societal orders and mores are being taught but have not yet been internalized as common sense, taken-for-granted truths. However, at the same time, as young adults, students have begun to develop regionally based forms of common sense, based on what they see and experience in their own lives, in local and familial contexts. Because of the inevitability of the contradictions and crises that arise at such a moment, high school constitutes a critical site for the study of regional racial formation.

Of all institutions of civil society, school occupies the dominant position in contemporary capitalist societies, as the only institution that has “the obligatory audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in the West SGV, while outside of school, interethnic and interracial interactions may happen only unevenly, in the public schools, sustained interethnic and interracial interactions happen every day between students, staff, and administrators. School can inculcate a sense of national culture and ideologies that mold students to enter the working world as productive and loyal citizens. In its capacity as an everyday, “racialized landscape,” school concretizes and normalizes “some prescribed social, racial, class, economic, or political order that not only stands for the past and present, but also inescapably embodies power relations that make claims on the future,” although its norms are “unconsciously promoted and unrecognized as anything other than ‘common sense.’”<sup>7</sup> In other words, because of its central position in civil society, school is uniquely able to normalize stratified groupings under cover of neutrality and egalitarianism. While the effects of such institutions in practice are never uniform or homogenous, looking closely at social dynamics in school allows us to see in sharp relief the ways in which school is fundamental to structuring society along racial and class lines.<sup>8</sup> Concomitantly, school is also a prime locale for the subversion and challenge of hegemonic ideologies; it is both the “stake” and the “site” of ideological racialized, class struggle.<sup>9</sup> Reconfigurations of power can occur, and outcomes are not fixed.

In the regional context of the West SGV, the production of binary discourses of "achievement" at Alhambra High—the racialization of Asian American academic excellence, along with a concomitant racialization of Latina/o academic deficiency—shaped students' experiences to such a degree that it was not merely an explanation for particular outcomes but productive of a social order that valorized Asian American students at the expense of "non-Asians." As a result, Asian American students within this social order often experienced and enacted a distinct form of *racialized privilege*—in which the particulars are predicated by one's racialization, or ascribed group identity, by dominant society. To be clear, I am not suggesting that white privilege is not racialized. However, a concept of Asian American racialized privilege marks a critical shift from thinking about racial privilege as synonymous with whiteness and argues for increased recognition of the effects of racial hierarchies from all positions. Grappling with racialized privilege is necessary and important to understanding how the dialectic between national ideologies and regional racial norms produces complex meanings and outcomes.

### "Our School Does Not Have Very Many White or Black People"

Since the 1980s, students at Alhambra High have been accustomed to a racial/ethnic mix that is overwhelmingly Asian and Latina/o (most recently, 45 percent Asian and 47 percent Latina/o).<sup>10</sup> For Gabriela Fernandez, a nineteen-year-old Mexican American whose family had lived in Alhambra for three generations, since elementary school, the racial/ethnic mix had "pretty much been like, you know, the Hispanic and the Asian and that's pretty much all I've ever seen. And sometimes, [a] Caucasian comes in . . . and you're just kind of like, well, OK, you can come and be my friend too." Gabriela's parents worked as a professional nurse and a meatcutter, making "good money," as she put it.<sup>11</sup>

Annie Liu, eighteen, whose parents are first-generation immigrants of Chinese and Chinese-Korean descent, characterized her perception of the racial/ethnic makeup of the area as a whole:

It's *very* rare you see Caucasian people. . . . Whereas like, if you drive down the street, you'll see a huge group of Latino kids, or a huge group of Asian kids hanging out. So I always felt that this area was more for people who just moved to California from another

country. . . . I don't really know what the appeal of this area is to new immigrants, but if you're looking for a community where you won't feel too, you know, outcasted, I guess this is where it'd be, because you look at the makeup, and it's like, wow, it's mostly Asian and Latino.<sup>12</sup>

Both of Annie's parents attended college prior to immigrating to the United States. Her father worked as a buyer for a department store in Pasadena, while her mother was employed by a Korean airline at LAX.

Twenty-two-year-old Nancy Tran, whose ethno-Chinese parents fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, put it this way: "I guess in Alhambra you only have a choice—a 'choice,' and that's in quotations—between Latinos or Asians."<sup>13</sup> Nancy's mother was a clerk for Los Angeles County, while her father worked 2 a.m.-to-noon nightshifts as a machine operator for a manufacturing company.

In eighteen-year-old Paul Pham's view, at Alhambra High, students who were neither Asian nor Latina/o were so uncommon that "we would probably assume that they were either Asian or Hispanic even if they weren't. I think that would be the way we approached them, until they actually told us." For example, he remembered a few Middle Eastern friends "who were assumed to be Hispanic." He continued, "I know that our school does not have very many white or Black people. And when we do see them, we kind of stare for a second, actually. We would actually go, 'hey, we *do* have them here' [laughing]."<sup>14</sup> Paul's family was also ethno-Chinese Vietnamese and escaped Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia via Vietnam and then Los Angeles. Paul's father worked in an auto body shop, and his mother worked as a seamstress.

Gabriela, Annie, Nancy, and Paul's family histories give a glimpse of the diverse ethnic, transnational, generational, and class contexts in which Alhambra High students lived. Seen in this light, Annie's comment that Alhambra was a place in which new immigrants could be comfortable, where they wouldn't feel "outcasted," and furthermore where they constituted the "norm," expressed a regional ethos in which immigrants and people of color were neither marginal or exceptional (as discussed in the previous chapter). However, the former students' observations, especially Paul's, also suggest a perceived normative, binary aspect to the racial mix of the area. How should we understand the West SGV's apparent Asian American and Latina/o binary, as expressed and experienced by the area's youth? Did it

operate with the same destructive tendencies as other racial binaries?<sup>15</sup> What specific dynamics and meanings emerged from this Asian American and Latina/o-dominated socioacademic order?

### *Producing the "Gap": Alhambra High's Socioacademic Order*

Initially, in elementary school and junior high, people who grew up in Alhambra and Monterey Park enjoyed racially and ethnically mixed groups of friends, regardless of the range of their interactions outside of school. By the time they entered high school, however, their social groups tended to become more homogeneous, and they became more conscious of racial and ethnic dynamics. At Alhambra High, this increased separation was influenced by a tracking system and, after tracking was officially discontinued in the late 1990s, by a conspicuous divide between who took honors and AP classes (overwhelmingly Asian American students) and who took "regular" classes (the vast majority of Latina/o students). Because AP and honors classes as well as many extracurricular activities such as social clubs and student government were so predominantly Asian, for many students, especially those categorized as "high-achieving" students, racially segregated social groups were easily perpetuated and naturalized.

In educational circles as well as popular discourse, distinctly racialized socioacademic orders in school are commonly referred to in the language of the "achievement gap," a term that denotes a consistent disparity in grades and/or test scores between one category of students and another. While divisions are sometimes laid out along lines of gender or other identity categories, over time, the term has acquired distinct racial connotations and most often refers to racial disparities.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s—concurrent with the rise of tremendous struggles over school segregation and desegregation<sup>17</sup>—a considerable amount of popular media and academic research focused on the "achievement gap" between Black and white students. In California, as demographics shifted and white enrollment in public schools declined, attention to the achievement gap focused increasingly on grade and standardized test-score disparities between white and Asian American students on the one hand and Latina/o and Black students on the other.<sup>18</sup>

At Alhambra High, disparities in grades, test scores, and educational outcomes between Asian American and Latina/o students have been

treated as a problem by the school and the Alhambra Unified School District (AUSD) as a whole for a number of years. According to Scott Mangrum, AUSD's director of research and evaluation, part of the district's motivation for discontinuing "ability tracking" (in which students are placed into the same "track" for all their courses across the curriculum) had to do with "overtones" of discrimination, since the lowest track, consisting of courses that did not meet standards for state college and university admission, tended to consist of "all minorities" (by which Mangrum, notably, meant non-Asian students—that is Latinas/os). Indeed, students were keenly aware of the ramifications of tracking. Japanese American Adam Saito, who attended Alhambra High in the mid-1980s, believed that curricular tracking influenced social cliques to the degree that "they usually never mixed. They were like traveling on two different planes within the same geographic location." He recalled being almost the only Asian American in the "industrial arts" (shop) class: "all the kids in that class were from Alhambra" (as opposed to the wealthier Monterey Park hills) and "mostly Mexican guys." The class was "known as juvenile hall in our high school, because the juvie unit was in that class."<sup>19</sup> Adam's recollection of the commonly held association of criminality and failure with the predominantly male, Mexican American shop class students demonstrates a broad awareness among students that curricular choices had broader life implications than "just" school.<sup>20</sup>

To make sure more students were eligible for college by eliminating courses that didn't meet standards for admission to California State or the University of California, detracking meant that the lowest track, or "B-level," courses were essentially eliminated, and "A-level" courses became the current "college prep" (or "regular") courses.<sup>21</sup> In the mid- to late 2000s, however, even though strongly racialized patterns among students who took AP/honors versus "regular" courses and differences in college preparedness persisted, Alhambra had reached a point where it compared somewhat favorably to demographically comparable schools at both the district and state level in several respects. In addition to receiving the Title I Academic Achievement Award (in 2005), as of 2007–8, more Latina/o students at Alhambra met state college and university entrance requirements than the district average, and they performed better on the state high school exit exam (CAHSEE) than Latina/o students as a whole in the district, as well as in the state, by around 10 percent.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, when Robin Zhou wrote his opinion piece in 2005, public response was

such that the "gap" was revealed to be an open wound for which no easy solutions or interpretations could be agreed on. This circumstance was supported and to an extent perpetuated by the specific components of the racialization of academic achievement at Alhambra High.

### The Racialization of Academic Achievement

Since the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared racially segregated schooling illegal, a voluminous amount of scholarly literature as well as popular media has been produced on the subject of group discrepancies in academic attainment. In 2002, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, with its explicit focus on "closing the achievement gap between high and low performing children, especially minority and non-minority students,"<sup>23</sup> testified to the continued centrality and urgency of the issue on a national level. Two persistent discursive threads have emerged over the years: the pitching of problems and proposal of solutions (1) in terms of generalizations about inherent cultural attributes and (2) vis-à-vis studies of individual motivation and families.<sup>24</sup>

Arguments about "cultural deficiency," which contributed to the pathologization of the Black urban "underclass" by disparaging Black families, were most prevalent in scholarly discourse in the 1960s. More recent academic research in education now takes a multipronged approach, encompassing arguments about the psychological effects of racial stereotypes, "cultural mismatch," curriculum and school structure, and teachers' pedagogical practices.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, culturalist and individualist reasoning remains common in education literature and continues to dominate popular discourse. In our contemporary era in which explicit reference to race is taboo, references to culture as an underlying cause for differential outcomes often function as a euphemism for race and continue to reify racial categories and difference as inherent, rather than socially, historically, and relationally constructed. A focus on individual motivation and family dynamics, without attention to larger social and institutional factors, can serve similarly to divert attention from structural and relational factors.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings suggests that it will take more than diversification in research to shift fundamental thinking on the subject, pointing out that most existing work offers only short-term solutions that treat the symptoms rather than the cause. Ladson-Billings argues instead for reconceptualizing the achievement gap



as an "education debt" accrued through the effects of structural inequalities over time (rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon in the present), which can only be paid back through large-scale change.<sup>27</sup>

The racialization of achievement at Alhambra High illustrates how phrases such as *achievement gap* do not merely present a neutral description of facts; they manifest and reproduce ideologies, or ways of making sense of the world. In other words, discourse is not merely representative or explanatory but productive of material conditions and essential to the operation of power.<sup>28</sup> Attaching "common sense" rationales to particular social orders and hierarchies has real effects, ultimately serving to facilitate and justify "who gets what." Indeed, even at the modest scale of Alhambra High, the gap was not merely a problem of some combination of cultural differences, individual motivation, and family environment, but produced by a racialized socioacademic order. "Common sense" arguments involving cultural differences and recourse to the American individualist myth of success served to veil and naturalize fundamentally racial constructions of Asian Americans as high achievers and Latinas/os as academically deficient. These shaped students' experiences to such a degree that they became not merely an explanation for particular outcomes but (re)productive of a social order that valorized Asian American students at the expense of Latinas/os.

*"Because I Was Asian, I Pretty Much Had This Path Set for Me"*

Popular reasoning behind the commonly held stereotype that Asian Americans excel in education is bound up with the Asian American model minority myth. The stereotype employs two seemingly contradictory lines of reasoning: (1) that valuing education is inherent to an essentialized "Asian" culture and (2) that Asians succeed in school because they work hard, therefore embodying the ideal immigrant, minority group by increasing their capacity to contribute productively to American society. If they can do it, the argument goes, why can't Black people, or Latinas/os, or any other marginalized group? However, the second line of reasoning is actually as essentialist as the first, since it depends on an assumption that the Asian work ethic is attributable, again, to an essentialized Asian culture. At Alhambra High, students, teachers, and administrators frequently expressed such generalized cultural explanations, as the following accounts suggest. When Nancy Tran's family moved from a diverse, generally poor

neighborhood in Echo Park to Alhambra when she was in third grade, Nancy observed a difference right away, which she attributed to something "within the Asian community . . . The kids . . . studied a lot more. I think the kids in Alhambra, they just generally work really hard. But it's not true of everyone. Truthfully, I think it's within the Asian community. I think they work a lot harder, maybe because of parental pressure?"<sup>29</sup> Annie Liu counterposed the terms *Asian* and *Western* to describe degrees of commitment to academic achievement. Students in the year following hers, she said, were "even more competitive": some had perfect SAT scores, and all had straight As and were involved in multiple extracurricular activities. "To some extent," she said, they were "even further along than we are—you know, like further 'Asianized' or whatever you want to call it . . . working their butts off to get into a good college." When I asked if she felt that this "Asianized" culture of achievement was generally acknowledged in the area, she said yes, adding, "I mean, whenever I encounter parents who were like, 'oh, as long as they're doing their best,' I think to myself, that's such a Westernized kind of thought, you know?"<sup>30</sup>

Gary Wong, a teacher at Alhambra High who is Chinese American, agreed. It was not wrong, he believed, to say that Asian parents pushed their kids: "They're not satisfied [if] their kids get Bs and Cs. They're satisfied when their kids go to Harvard."<sup>31</sup> Even though Wong, as a teacher, had a detailed understanding of the diverse cultural, economic, and political conditions under which various Asian ethnic groups have immigrated to the United States in the past few decades, nonetheless, like the students I interviewed, he took for granted a shared "Asian" culture undergirding Asian American student success. Any Asian American whose family did not value and push for educational success constituted a deviation from this "cultural script."<sup>32</sup> For instance, Wong asserted that his lack of set college expectations for his own children was "atypical, because my parents were atypical." Because he did not push his sons to go to elite universities, he conceived of himself as deviating from the mandates of "Asian" immigrant culture. Furthermore, he believed that he was this way only because his parents had not performed the usual Asian parental indoctrinations regarding education either. Student Paul Pham had a similar response when asked if he was always expected or encouraged to excel academically. (In his senior year Paul was coeditor in chief of the student newspaper, got top grades in his slate of AP and honors classes, was involved in a biomedical research elective as well as service clubs, and was admitted to Yale and

Harvard, among other elite universities.) Paul answered, "No. Surprisingly not." If he hadn't "achieved" at the level he had, he believed his parents would not have viewed him much differently: "[T]heir expectations of me were not as high as those of other parents—Asian parents." This, to himself and his peers ("my friends tell me this also"), made him "kind of an anomaly, because I achieve, but I'm not pushed to achieve."<sup>33</sup>

For Nancy, Annie, and Paul, as well as their teacher Gary Wong, easy recourse to racialized cultural explanations—referencing a shared Asian culture that implicitly valued education more than other cultures—blocked access to all other explanations. This generalized Asian culture was contrasted against a generalized Western culture, rather than placed in the specific ethnic, racial, and national contexts in which they actually lived. Factors such as a greater amount of social capital or resources derived from "socially patterned associations" on the part of the Asian American students, such as parents' educational attainment and social networks that shared information and facilitated sending students to private tutoring and Chinese language schools, went unacknowledged as contributing factors in the gap.<sup>34</sup>

The effect of such erasures at Alhambra High was an atmosphere in which the brainy, studious Asian student was seen and accepted simply as the truth, showing how racial discourse obscured recognition of substantial social factors and stood in as common sense. In Gabriela Fernandez's opinion, "It was known that the Asian students did a lot better than everybody else. I mean, Asians are smart. Some Hispanics are smart too. But you always see Asians studying, you always see them in the library; they're always reading, they always get As on their tests. So yeah, it was pretty much known around the school that Asians did better in classes than everybody else."<sup>35</sup> This was simply taken for granted; it was, she said, "one of those things that nobody really talked about." In localized common sense, these dynamics seemed so normal that they generally went unremarked. Indeed, the naturalization of a disparity between Asian and Latina/o students even extended beyond the classroom to social relationships. For example, Paul Pham believed that between Asian and Latina/o students "there is sort of a natural barrier. We seem to segregate ourselves naturally, based on race rather than actually acknowledging it." When I pressed him to elaborate, he chose an abstracted second-person phrasing, explaining, "You will tend to ignore the people that do not seem like they have similar backgrounds to you. And not that you would do it on

purpose. You wouldn't go, 'oh, he doesn't look like me, I don't want to talk to him.' Not like *that*. It just happens. You don't do it consciously. It's a subconscious kind of action."<sup>36</sup> Although moments before in the same interview, Paul had described how his exclusively Asian American peer group solidified in conjunction with his entry into an honors/AP schedule of courses in high school, the Harvard-bound senior was unable to offer anything but a common sense explanation for what he saw around him on an everyday basis. Any linkages between structural causes and normalized social orders were obscured by his seemingly irrefutable conviction that "it just happens." The degree to which the discrepancy in "achievement" and a concomitant "segregated" social order were seen as "natural" by both Asian and Latina/o students indicated their acceptance as common sense. For Asian Americans, this amounted to a form of privilege predicated on racial terms.

### *Asian American Racialized Privilege*

Much of the available scholarship on Asian Americans has been informed by a post-civil-rights-era inheritance of seeing Asian Americans as an oppressed group that must therefore be inherently resistant and oppositional to hegemonic claims.<sup>37</sup> However, theories of differential racialization such as Claire Jean Kim's work on the "triangulation" of Asian Americans, Laura Pulido's observations on the relationship between racial hierarchy and class position, and Kandice Chuh's theorization of Asian Americans as an "emerging dominant" suggest a more ambivalent view of how Asian Americans fit into U.S. racial schema.<sup>38</sup> Mia Tuan, in her study of third- and fourth-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans, has posited an Asian American experience of "racial privilege," or "the freedom of not having to think about one's racial background . . . the privilege to be considered 'normal,' to have one's race be irrelevant."<sup>39</sup> Tuan concluded that her respondents who grew up in predominantly Asian-American communities enjoyed this privilege "within the context of their neighborhood," consequently suffered fewer injuries (psychological, emotional, and sometimes physical) and were able to develop greater self-confidence than those who grew up in predominantly white communities.<sup>40</sup> Regarding 1.5- and second-generation Asian American professionals, Pensri Ho describes what she calls "class privileged racialized identity," in which an Asian American identity "rooted in class privilege and Pacific Rim

experiences"—rather than racial oppression and disenfranchisement—is developed during young adulthood.<sup>41</sup> Deviating from Tuan, Ho locates the beginnings of this particular identity formation in the predominantly white or “racially mixed” suburban communities in which her respondents were raised, arguing that these settings enabled them to “accentuate their meritocratic abilities” over racialized differences.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Ho makes the observation that “*regardless of the source of privilege—whether achieved as an adult, acquired through parental efforts or affectation,*” class privilege fueled her respondents’ “confidence and faith in their abilities to shape their own identities.”<sup>43</sup>

Building on Tuan and Ho’s observations, I argue that the social dynamics at Alhambra High can be characterized as *racialized privilege*. Rather than the absence (or “irrelevance,” in Tuan’s words) of racism that the concept of racial privilege implies, racialized privilege foregrounds the centrality of racialized meanings and outcomes—that the circulation of model minority discourse is not merely incidental or external but itself participates in the production and reproduction of privilege. Accordingly, Asian American racialized privilege, in concert with being marked as a model minority, constitutes not a privilege to be considered normal but a privilege to be considered *exceptional* (in comparison to other non-white minoritized groups). The prioritization of exceptional, racialized identity collapses racial and class identities into one another and allows for a subsumption of class differences under presumed racial or cultural commonalities. To reiterate: if (white) racial privilege is “the freedom of not having to think about one’s racial background . . . the privilege to be considered ‘normal,’ to have one’s race be irrelevant,” then (Asian American) racialized privilege is an internalization of privilege accorded to one’s ascribed racial identity, which can lead to a conditional freedom of not having to think too deeply about one’s racial background, and a limited privilege to be considered exceptional. One’s race is not irrelevant but integral. A conception of racialized privilege, like theorizations of white racial privilege, must also take into consideration deep historical contexts, structural forces, and durable material benefits, all of which taken together can ultimately lead to substantial increases in life opportunities as well as insulation from “group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death.”<sup>44</sup> While a conception of Asian American privilege can never be the same as white privilege, which is based on historical and material legacies of white supremacy that are still enacted and perpetuated on an everyday

basis, clearly distinct benefits do accrue from Asian Americans' relatively valorized position in American racial hierarchies at the expense of others.

Under the common umbrella of "Asianness," ethnic, class, and other differences are obscured. For instance, Paul Pham, the ethno-Chinese Vietnamese son of working-class political refugees with few academic expectations for their son, inhabited the same expectations regarding "achievement" as Annie Liu, the Chinese and Korean American daughter of college-educated professionals, whose father mapped out her AP/honors class schedule on an Excel spreadsheet and was deeply disappointed when Annie was not admitted to an Ivy League university. For both Annie and Paul, the subsumption of class and other considerations under racial and cultural expectations meant that "achievement" could become a thing in and of itself, as though to "achieve" itself, albeit with the ultimate achievement of gaining admittance to an elite university, was the goal. Personally, Paul said, he was not "achieving" with the future in mind. "I mean, you might ask someone, why do you want to go to college? 'I want to have a good job, I want to make a lot of money'—that would not be my answer. I don't think I was achieving to get to something, because I don't know what exactly that would be anyway."<sup>45</sup> Annie applied to prestigious colleges "out of loyalty to my parents"; she felt that she had to "try, for them." But when I asked her why she thought this was so important to them, she replied, "I don't *know*. . . . I don't know if it's an American thing, or it's an Asian thing? Because when I talk to my friends in Canada, they're just like, 'there are only a couple universities in Canada'—if you just get into one, you're happy about it. They don't understand the obsession that Americans, or at least Asian Americans, have with Ivy League schools. . . . So I really don't understand what the obsession is about that."<sup>46</sup> Because of the racialized character of "achievement" at Alhambra High—the taken-for-granted idea that academic excellence was natural to Asian American students—neither Annie nor Paul felt pressed to explain their drive to achieve in terms beyond generalized racial or cultural explanations. The form of privilege they experienced through their presumed educational life paths as Asian Americans had buffered them so far from having to think deeply about their place and motivations in American society.

Vivian Louie has argued that the "ethnic-cultural narrative" of Asian immigrant academic excellence offered her second-generation Chinese American respondents "a symbolic safe space from the injuries of race." In light of real racial barriers awaiting them in the workplace, if not in school,

"the supposed distinctiveness of the Asian immigrant ethos which privileges hard work and, above all, a respect and keen desire for education should be of some utility in offsetting these obstacles."<sup>47</sup> However, at Alhambra High, and in the West San Gabriel Valley (SGV) in general, where Asian Americans are a plurality and often perceived as the majority, anti-Asian discrimination was not as pervasive as elsewhere; in turn, the rationale behind embracing the ethnic-cultural narrative for high-achieving Asian American students was harder to discern.<sup>48</sup> When pressed, both Anne and Paul admitted that they did not have a highly developed understanding of their motivations and goals as "high-achieving" students. To Paul, his academic success seemed quite detached from his family's immigrant, refugee, and working-class background. As a result of conversation with her Canadian friends, Annie was able to sense that the "obsession . . . with Ivy League schools" might have something to do with the particular history and position of Asians in America, but this was not yet something about which she had thought deeply. Lia Chen, who attended Alhambra High in the early 1990s and was an honors student as well as senior class president before going on to attend college at Penn State, summed up the general rationale at work: "Because I was a good student, and because I was Asian, I pretty much had this path set for me."<sup>49</sup>

### *"I Always Felt That Outsiderness"*

For Mexican American as well as Asian American students, cultural explanations played prominently in the debate over the achievement gap. However, while Asian culture was valorized—at least in the context of pursuing academic success—what was construed as Mexican or Latina/o culture (often used interchangeably) was stigmatized. While Asian culture was characterized as studious and hardworking, Mexican American students suffered from a "systematic undervaluing of people and things Mexican."<sup>50</sup> Like all processes of racial formation, these racial discourses around achievement were fundamentally relational. This became apparent in the categorical use of the term *non-Asian*, which often functioned as a euphemism for Latina/o. For instance, Annie Liu reported that students who were in sports "have a lot more interaction with non-Asians," while the more "bookish, nerdy activities" such as newspaper, included "a very limited amount of non-Asians." The "rule" for Latina/o students—to *not* excel and progress academically—formed a warped, reverse mirror

image of prevalent characterizations of Asian American achievement. Just as deviation from high academic achievement was considered anomalous for Asian students, interlinked discourses dictated that among Latina/o students, to deviate from the rule of low achievement was to be an exception. While for Asian American students, high expectations generally buttressed their self-images and minimized barriers to academic continuation, for Latina/o students, breaking out of low expectations often proved to be a constantly demoralizing, uphill battle, often causing them to "disidentify"—or detach their measures of self-worth—from academics from an early age.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the Asian American students with whom I spoke, few of whom mentioned any problems with staff or administration, all the Latina/o students and nearly all the teachers and administrators had stories of Latina/o students who were openly discouraged from reaching more ambitious goals. For example, Gabriela Fernandez described her counselor, a Latina/o woman who was widely known to favor Asian students because "they don't talk back to her" and "they get really high grades." Gabriela felt this counselor disliked her and Latina/o students in general: "Other Hispanic students that I talked to that had her were kind of like, why is she like that?" As a result, Gabriela "avoided going to the counselor at all costs. Which is probably the reason why I didn't get to go exactly to a university like I wanted to because I just didn't want to talk to her."<sup>52</sup> When I asked teacher and student activities advisor Matt Ramos about experiences like Gabriela's, Ramos, who feels that many of his Mexican American students regard him as a mentor, acknowledged, "We have discouraging counselors—you know, they have them everywhere. . . . I've heard students say, 'This counselor's ruined my life. They have ruined my life.'"<sup>53</sup> Principal Lee-Sung recounted an incident in which a hesitant Latina student was persuaded by her counselor to take a higher-level math class, but when the student went to the class, "first thing the teacher says is, 'What are *you* doing here? You don't belong in this class.' . . . Just shot her down, just like that." This had everything to do with expectations, he said, adding, "I would bet that [in] that same scenario, [if] an Asian kid walked in with that slip to be in that class, he [the teacher] wouldn't have said that."<sup>54</sup> Student Perla Trejo found that in her AP classes, teachers seemed to expect less from Latina/o students than from Asian American students. "When we answer a question wrong, they say, 'It's OK. You're trying really hard.' It's like, OK, but what's the answer?"<sup>55</sup>



Paul Pham related a similar pattern of expectations among students: if "a person with a completely different background" joined a class or activity that was "mostly Asian," "that person would actually receive a lot of attention—positive attention," simply for showing up at something conceived to be out of the ordinary for a Latina/o.<sup>56</sup> Although Paul interpreted this to have a positive meaning, a more troubling interpretation, in accordance with Claude Steele's concept of disidentification, would be the following: if someone who was "different" (i.e., non-Asian) joined an AP class or a challenging extracurricular activity, she would be greeted with surprise and praise for exceeding expectations of low achievement. Devalued with the stigma of low expectations from the outset, the student would grow increasingly likely to disengage with academics, unless this pattern was interrupted by mentors or other factors that recognized and nurtured her abilities and potential.

Alan Fernandez's account of his academic experiences growing up in Alhambra shows the difficulty of breaking polarized expectations of Latina/o versus Asian students. Alan was told in kindergarten that he "was going to be mentally slow"; from then on, he felt that he constantly had to prove himself to teachers who did not believe in his ability to do well in school. He recalled an instance in sixth grade when his math teacher, a Japanese American woman, would not put him in an advanced class until he consistently turned his homework in early (and correctly)—"and she would be like, really angry, checking it." Although of course we can't really know the motivations of Alan's teacher, the mere fact of her anger—the oddity of it, under the ostensibly heartening circumstances of a student making extra efforts to be placed in a more challenging class—suggests that she perceived his efforts as a transgression of accepted boundaries, perhaps rupturing her sense of (racial) order. By the time he got to high school, Alan was usually the only Mexican American in AP and honors classes populated predominantly by Asian American students and felt that teachers stereotyped both him and Asian American students, in a binary of high and low achievement: "I definitely felt like in the classroom, [the teachers] favored the Asian American students. It was like they stereotyped them, in a way: these are going to be the smart kids. And then . . . they'd look at me like, what are you doing here? I always felt that outsidersness."<sup>57</sup>

Alan also recalled two incidents that occurred with close friends, who were Asian American. First, in his senior year of high school, when he

was admitted to Berkeley and UCLA, "some of my friends were like, oh, I wish I was Mexican, 'cause I could have gotten into Berkeley or UCLA." He remembered with annoyance one friend in particular who had made such comments: Howard, a relatively wealthy Asian American boy from the Monterey Park hills with only mediocre grades, who on several occasions had paid Alan to write his papers for him because he was "too lazy" to do them himself. Howard's professed belief that he too could have gotten into Berkeley or UCLA if he was "Mexican" perpetuated stereotypes of Mexican Americans as inherently academically deficient, indicating that he believed Alan could only have gained admittance under special circumstances.<sup>58</sup> The second incident involved Alan's best friend, who was Chinese American: "When we graduated from eighth grade, he wrote in my yearbook that I was . . . the only smart Mexican he knew, or the smartest Mexican he knew. And I kind of felt like, that sucks, you know, why would he say that? And then I thought about it, and I was like, well, I was one of the few in the class." The friend's comment, as well as Alan's reaction, highlights the difficulty of separating what appears to be everyday material reality from ideological racial "truths" and the degree to which the regional Asian-Latina/o scholastic-racial order had already been ingrained in the two boys by the close of junior high. Alan's experience, as well as the accounts of other former students, suggests that by high school, both Asian and Latina/o students were conditioned to expect bifurcated groupings, separating academically excelling Asians from low- or average-performing Latinas/os. In high school, Latina/o students who attempted to cross the line were often met with surprise, outright hostility, or more subtle forms of disapproval, most devastatingly from teachers and counselors.<sup>59</sup>

Like many schools in the area, until recently Alhambra High had a large concentration of "veteran," predominantly white teachers who exerted a great influence on the school culture.<sup>60</sup> However, as we have seen, racist cultural assumptions and behaviors were not merely the provenance of white teachers. They had more to do with an institutionalized culture, shaped by prevailing national ideologies of race, in which Asian American and Latina/o students experienced differentially racialized patterns of relationships to schooling. This illustrates, as Angela Valenzuela puts it, the ways in which "[a]cademic success and failure are . . . products of schooling rather than . . . something that young people do."<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, essentialist views were difficult to dislodge, even for those who were

critical of institutionalized practices. For example, in contrast to his observations of the obstacles faced by Mexican American students, teacher and activities advisor Matt Ramos offered the opinion that "high-achieving Asian American students" were simply "a different breed altogether." He went on to describe their intensely ambitious approach to learning and high expectations of themselves and others. Ramos, living and teaching in the particular contexts of his area, implied that these dynamics and characteristics were not only regional but racial in nature: you could talk to any activities advisor who worked in the West SGV, he said, "from Keppel to Arcadia to San Marino to Schurr [names of area high schools with similar populations of students] to . . . you name it, and they will all tell you the same thing about how these students are."<sup>62</sup>

School, as a key engine of inculcating dominant national ideologies, constituted the setting in which a regional socioacademic order tied intimately to comparative racial constructions of Asian Americans and Latinas/os in the United States took shape strongly and was internalized not only by its young subjects but by their mentors and peers.

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### The Column Controversy

Until the spring of 2005, however, most of these dynamics went unspoken and generally unacknowledged in any public or community discourse. In the furor that followed the publication of Robin Zhou's column, however, the "common sense" notions supporting the existing socioacademic order were simultaneously elucidated, ruptured, and reproduced. The heated dialogue concerning language, race, and the irreducibility of lived experience to racialized generalizations suggested that many participants sensed that Robin's column was not only symptomatic of the racialized socioacademic order but also a struggle over, and opportunity to shift, discourse<sup>63</sup>—to challenge prevailing common sense and concomitant configurations of power.

### *"Don't Turn This into a Racial War"*

Perhaps no one understood this better than Principal Lee-Sung. In his opinion, the language in which the conflict was depicted was absolutely crucial to the way in which it unfolded. He believed that what might otherwise have been "a very positive thing, a healthy discussion," was

derailed by the way in which local newspaper reporter Cindy Chang portrayed the situation in an article published in the *Pasadena Star-News* a little more than a week after Robin's column. "Latinos object to being called laggards," the front-page subheadline proclaimed. Chang opened with a description of how the column had led to an "uproar" on campus. In the second and third paragraphs, she highlighted how Robin had been "threatened with bodily harm by other students," how a teacher had denounced the article as racist, and that "opinions have generally converged along racial lines, with Asian students agreeing with the gist of the piece and Latinos questioning whether it should have been printed at all."<sup>64</sup> Lee-Sung believed that Chang's focus and choice of words "inflamed the situation. . . . There were a couple quotes on there that really focused on the racial part, the racial tensions. I'm here at the school, and I'm talking to the kids and staff, and you know what, I don't see that. Yes, people are angry about it, but don't turn this into a racial war. Because sure, that's what's going to get the headlines and get picked up on the AP Wire. . . . I was so upset that that's the way the article was written. So it made matters worse."<sup>65</sup> In the thick of the situation, "talking to the kids and staff," Lee-Sung refused to recognize the conflict in the racialized terms in which it was cast by the *Star-News* reporter.

In part, the principal may simply have been fulfilling his obligation as an administrator to defuse conflict. However, his response to the situation also showed a complex understanding of the world in which he lived and worked that precluded its reduction to a formula of racial conflict by mainstream press. Indeed, Lee-Sung knew from his own life the nuances of the region's particular class, racial, and ethnic mix as they pertained to attitudes about education. Raised in neighboring Monterey Park, where he still lived as an adult at the time of the column controversy, he was the child of a Mexican Chinese father who had grown up poor in Texas and a Chinese mother from a wealthy family in China. His father "was very encouraging about what [grades] I got. If I tried my best, that would be fine." But his mother was more demanding: "If I came home with all As and a B, she'd question me. 'What's the problem?'" However, Lee-Sung asserted that while his parents "communicated in different ways," "they both valued education."<sup>66</sup>

As a result of his personal history in the area and his lifelong navigation of Asian and Latina/o identities, Lee-Sung felt that "pretty much my beliefs my entire life" fed into how he handled the situation; he was, he

felt, "the ideal person to be in the middle of this whole controversy." As principal and both Asian and Latino, he was always keenly aware of how his appearance and ethnic identities influenced his interactions with parents as well as students. For instance, various parents' comfort and ability to identify with him were often inflected by what they either assumed or knew about his ethnic/racial background:

Because I appear to be more Asian than Hispanic . . . I've had Asian people come up to me and say things to me [laughing]—"all those Mexicans and blah blah blah" [in disparaging tone]. . . . Sometimes I will say "I'm Mexican also, you know . . . what you're saying is not true"—kind of balance out their opinions. But yeah, they'll confide in me sometimes and say some things that uh, they think it's safe to say, because they think I'm just Asian. . . . What's nice is that once people do realize that I'm Mexican also, a lot of the Mexican parents feel very comfortable talking to me too.<sup>67</sup>

Still, despite feeling that such patterns of identification were "just part of human nature" (that "people will tend to be more comfortable with people that look like then, that [have] the same ethnic background"), he consistently refused to generalize the response to Robin's article as split among racial lines or even primarily racial in nature, maintaining instead that "[t]here is no simple response to this," and that it really was "not along racial lines":

When this article happened, it was amazing. I had people who supported the article and said, "You know what? He's right on. And good for him! He's the only one courageous enough to say it like it is." And I had Caucasian people, Asian people, even Hispanic people saying "Right on!" you know? [laughing] And on the other side, who were saying, "He's racist, he should be disciplined . . . he should get his butt kicked". . . . It was mostly Hispanic, but there were Asians, there were Caucasian people who sided on that end. So it really was amazing that it was not clearly down racial lines.<sup>68</sup>

Lee-Sung, whose own life reflected so well the complexities and particularities of the area's class, racial, and ethnic mix, knew himself that there was no "simple response" to the achievement gap—that the problem

was not reducible to racialized generalizations. What seemed "amazing" to him, perhaps, was that at moments, the community response reflected this complexity as well. Similarly, even though he affirmed that there were "underlying feelings that had not come up" previous to the publication of Robin's article, he was careful to distinguish these from the usual tropes of interracial conflict inevitably resulting in violence. "Did we see any kind of racial problems? No, we didn't. It wasn't like there was tension, people beating each other up just because of their ethnicity. . . . It wasn't a situation that I was concerned that there was gonna be this riot, OK. I never, ever felt that way. There were students that actually wanted to beat up Robin. They were angry at *him*. But it wasn't like the Hispanics were getting together and saying, 'Now we're gonna go beat up Asian people in general.'" Lee-Sung's distinction between the kind of tension that might lead to generalized racial violence and the kind of tension that might lead to personal animosities and heated debate might travel a fine line, but it is essential to understanding how at a regional level, members of racialized groups produce subtle forms of coexistence that cannot be assimilated by dominant racial discourses. The principal, at the center of the controversy, illustrated this, even as he skillfully managed what amounted to a full-blown crisis for the school.

*"Why Didn't We Just Work Harder?": Narratives of Individual Merit and Immigrant Success*

As in racialized discourses of achievement in general, perhaps the most difficult ideological strands to extricate from the column controversy were interlinked narratives of individual merit and immigrant success. Immigrant success narratives, such as the model minority myth, are somewhat contradictory. Although they often rest on essentialist precepts about race and culture, they are also anchored by core "American" principles of individualism and the Protestant work ethic—that anyone can succeed in democratic, capitalist America, if they only work hard enough. In Alhambra, these easily available narratives often made it difficult for students to articulate anything but individualist explanations that discounted structural or institutional factors. The comments of Crystal Tchan, a junior at the time, encapsulated in many ways the pitfalls of individualist thinking vis-à-vis issues of structural racism: "It's clearly an antiracist article; in a sense, I think it should be motivating for Hispanics."<sup>69</sup> Tchan's belief that

the article was "antiracist" was linked to her sentiment that "it should be motivating for Hispanics." That is, racism could be solved if only individuals could be "motivated" to prove it wrong.

In another instance, Principal Lee-Sung described a Latino senior who had transferred from another high school, where he was failing all his classes, to Alhambra. "He says, 'Alhambra is a so much better school . . . so all of a sudden I got my act together.' He said, 'I got my act together. I didn't need my parents or anybody else to tell me.' And he says, 'Now I'm going to graduate, I'm going to go to college . . . but it was all me. . . . One day I just decided you know what, I'm going to start doing my homework, I'm going to start showing up to class.' And he turned his whole life around."<sup>70</sup> Regarding the turmoil over Robin's column, the senior said, "Don't blame our parents, don't blame our culture. Blame us." The student's comments point to the difficulty of making sense of the multiple cultural, historical-structural, and individual factors at play. In Lee-Sung's account, even while acknowledging that Alhambra was "a so much better school," the student still attributed his improved motivation solely to individual factors: "[A]ll of a sudden, I got my act together."

In a comment sheet generated from a meeting between Lee-Sung and a number of students, the same student elaborated in his own words: "Academic progress has nothing to do with culture. . . . I believe that a positive attitude can lead to confidence and personal achievement. And it's also wrong to blame parents who work hard to give their children a better life. It's the student's fault for doing poorly. Hispanics have the ability and potential to succeed just as well as other races. Confidence, support, attitude, and environment all have an impact on achieving success."<sup>71</sup> Even though this student's abrupt academic turnaround happened immediately after transferring to a "much better" school, he still believed that it was the "student's fault for doing poorly." His own experience could have supported a slight modification to his statement—that, indeed, "Hispanics have the ability and potential to succeed just as well as other races, [yet] confidence, support, attitude, and environment all have an impact on achieving success." However, his attachment to narratives of individual culpability seemed to place this larger-scale analysis just out of reach.

Even those who were offended by the column had trouble breaking free of such narratives. For instance, although Gabriela Fernandez was one of the most vocal students protesting the assertions in Robin's

column, she nonetheless believed that everyone had the ability to succeed: "It's all about you . . . and your mind-set. . . . These kids [who] just want to slack off and have fun in high school—what excuse do they have? There really isn't an excuse to not get an education, to not better yourself." Further, reflecting on student protests against Robin's column in which "Hispanics . . . joined together and wore brown shirts," she felt that it would have been more effective to "work harder" to prove that Robin's charges were wrong, rather than uniting on grounds of racism: "I mean, I guess it was a way to unite, but now thinking back on it, it's kind of like, *well*, why didn't we just work harder to prove that that was wrong, instead of just wearing shirts for a day and thinking that that's going to solve everything?"<sup>72</sup> Gabriela and others' attempts to articulate the problem at hand underline the difficulty of disentangling historical legacies of structural racism from dominant ideologies. Through the absence of any reference to inequalities in the structure of institutions themselves, they illustrate how the perception of school as a neutral environment, "purged of ideology," is actually key to its effectiveness in purveying and inculcating ideology.<sup>73</sup> Students at various levels were encouraged or discouraged to "succeed" in ways that served the existing social order, yet these patterns were veiled and cast as individual successes and failures. In fact, the ideology of success depended on the individualization of failure—and, more deviously, via implicating an individual's family background in order to attribute the causes of failure to racial and "cultural" factors.

### *"I'm Mexican, and I'm Lazy": Practices of Disidentification*

One of the most insidious attributes of U.S. racial discourse is its inability to include or account for experiences that fall outside a dynamic of conflict versus assimilation. This is linked to an obsessive focus on singular, essential identities rather than a more fluid understanding of *identification* as a process of multiple alliances that shift with context. Performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz has further theorized *disidentification* as an act of refusal of dominant narratives.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to Steele's concept of disidentification discussed earlier in this chapter, Muñoz characterizes disidentification as a shifting set of practices that, while avoiding fixed tendencies or outcomes, consistently subvert dominant narratives, often through direct acknowledgment and engagement with racial discourses.



In his analysis of queer-of-color cultural production, Muñoz employs Althusser's "ideology cop fable" (in which identification occurs through an act of interpellation, or being hailed), putting forth a "working definition" of queer as the following: "[P]eople who have failed to turn around to the 'Hey, you there!' interpellating call of heteronormativity."<sup>75</sup> Muñoz argues that the artists and performers of which he writes perform dis-identifications in their work, moving *through* racialized stereotypes and narratives in order to subvert them in the end.

Indeed, throughout my interviews, I noticed a quiet but consistent refusal on the part of many of my respondents (such as Lee-Sung, in the previous discussion) to agree with the thrust of questions I phrased, somewhat disingenuously, in the language of racialized conflict. As in Muñoz, in the context of regional racial formation, *disidentification* refers to the ways in which people employ racialized stereotypes and narratives yet come out somewhere unexpected at the other end—a set of practices that expresses and reproduces specific, local knowledges that contradict hegemonic norms. For example, reacting to Robin's column, Gabriela Fernandez noted the irony of a member of one minoritized group using racial generalizations to chastise another: "I mean, I can't just go into a predominantly Asian area and say insurance rates are high because Asians are bad drivers. I can't *do* that. So he can't come into Hispanic territory and say, your parents don't care about your education, that's why your test scores are low. It's the same thing. You have to *live* that life in order to say that you know what's going on with it."<sup>76</sup> By recognizing that "you have to live that life in order to say that you know what's going on with it," she gestured to the inadequacy of normative discourses in describing the particularity and complexity of everyday life in Alhambra as she knew it. She also grappled with the references to racial stereotypes in the column, eventually subverting their meaning in a way that suited her world view:

Who is this *guy*, just making assumptions? . . . Trying to assume that, you know, all Hispanic families have ten kids and are working three jobs and don't care about their children's education? And like, maybe that was true in Mexico for his nanny, but not *here*. I mean, you could still have that ten-people family with the mom working three jobs. But at the same time, if she *is* working three jobs, you can see that she's trying to make a life for her family. Is

that necessarily a bad thing? So that article kind of really rallied a lot of Hispanics together to say no, that's not the way it is.<sup>77</sup>

Gabriela recognized and was offended by the implied racial-economic stereotypes but then backtracked to suggest, in effect, "So what?" Even if they were superficially "true," they did not mean what racial discourses intimidated them to mean.

In a similar vein, sophomore Robert Himenez told the *Moor*, "Most of [the article] is true. I'm Mexican, and I'm lazy. But [the author] shouldn't have blamed it on our parents and ancestors."<sup>78</sup> Himenez, after making the surprise move of admitting the personal "truth" of the racial stereotype, then blocked discursive access to pathologizing the family unit, which, as Althusser has observed, forms the key pairing with school in disseminating hegemonic ideologies in institutions of civil society. Without the ability to generalize via the supposedly neutral institutions of school and family, racial discourse loses its power.

## Conclusion

As of 2008, three years after the controversy over Robin's column, probably the most significant change at Alhambra High was the implementation of open enrollment for honors and AP classes.<sup>79</sup> In the previous system, students had to apply for honors and AP classes, with qualifying grades, test scores, teacher recommendations, and in some cases a specialized exam. In the debate over open enrollment, as in the debate over the achievement gap, the rhetoric of individualism and equal opportunity figured strongly. It was used both in support of and against it, with a circular reasoning that recalled conservative and liberal debates over "color-blind" admissions policies in the 1990s. To "high-achieving" former students Paul Pham and Annie Liu, opposition to open enrollment seemed universal among their friends, classmates, and teachers. Paul explained that he personally was against it, because it would "water down the quality of the students . . . you would not have students who actually met some prerequisites, or have shown some sort of merit that would allow them to be into the class."<sup>80</sup> Annie expressed the following:

[J]ust because you open the enrollment doesn't mean that there's going to be a flood of non-Asians who want to enter AP. I think if

you really wanted to take the class, you would have filled out the application. It's not such a difficult process . . . to start with. . . . If they [Latinos] really wanted to do it, they would just go out and fill out the application and ask the teacher for details. . . . I don't think that was what was holding them back. It was just, if they don't want to take it, they're not going to take it. That's what I felt.<sup>81</sup>

Although Annie agreed in theory that "it's good to give people a chance," like Paul, her belief that the previous system could not be held at fault because it was based on individual achievement prevailed. While Paul and Annie upheld the view that open enrollment would undercut the institution's ability to uphold an equitable system of rewards based on individual merit, teacher Matt Ramos believed that it was the only way to be truly equitable: "If they want to take it, I don't think any student should be denied access to it. Let them prove themselves. If they're failing the class, well, they're failing the class . . . if they can do it, let them prove it."

However, the one thing they all seemed to agree on is that open enrollment was unlikely to effect the desired changes. In Ramos's words, "this open access thing looks better on paper, I think, than it will prove to be any sort of positive result. . . . It's just like saying, 'OK, we're going to go ahead and leave this plate of cheese out for all the mice who are full,' and 'let's see what happens.' I mean, it may be open, but how many of them are going to go in there and do anything?"<sup>82</sup> They all seemed to sense, even if they could not acknowledge it as such, that without any substantive acknowledgment of historical and structural effects on educational equity, real change was unlikely. In the context of Alhambra High, the particular regional demographics—a lower-middle-class to middle-class, multiracial, and majority nonwhite space—might have yielded opportunities to reconfigure commonly accepted racial and class dynamics. Instead, "color-blind" liberal ideologies of individualism and merit, in concert with immigrant success narratives such as the model minority myth, proved impossible to disentangle. Racialized "cultural" discourses of academic achievement and deficiency justified and perpetuated an experience of racialized privilege for Asian American students, continually reproducing a bifurcated school experience for Asian American students in comparison to their Latina/o peers. Yet the controversy over Robin Zhou's column also forced students, staff, and administration to confront socially constructed hierarchies that had previously been accepted as simple common sense. It left a lingering

sense of unease, exposing the fissures between normative racial discourse and more nuanced, regionally based ways of knowing. Even if ideology supporting the reproduction of dominant racial hierarchies remained powerful, the incident showed that at a regional level these racial logics were not forgone conclusions but would be observed and challenged.

Around the same time, nearby, in another civic institution, the Boy Scouts of America, another teenager was also challenging the regionally accepted racial order—with equally complex and revealing consequences.