

# The Ambiguous Practices of the Inauthentic Asian American Woman

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*The Asian American identity is intimately associated with upward class mobility as the model minority, yet women's earnings remain less than men's, and Asian American women are perceived to have strong family ties binding them to domestic responsibilities. As such, the exact class status of Asian American women is unclear. The immediate association of this ethnic identity with a specific class as demonstrated by the recently released Pew study that Asian Americans are "the highest-income, best-educated" ethnicity contrasts with another study that finds Asian American women have the highest suicide rates in the United States. To understand these contrasting statistics, this article explores Asian American women's sense of authenticity. If the individual's sense of authenticity is intimately related with one's group identity, the association of the Asian American identity with a particular class ambivalently ensnares her as dichotomously inauthentic—as both the poor Asian American woman who fails to achieve economic upward mobility and the model minority Asian American woman who engages in assimilation practices. Feminist philosophers understand that identities change, but exactly how these transformations occur remains a mystery. The article ends with three speculations on the difficulties for practicing and recognizing individual acts that transform one's group identity.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A 2009 study by the University of Washington found that nearly 16% of Asian American Pacific Island women contemplated suicide, compared with 13% of all Americans (Nikolchev 2010).<sup>1</sup> According to the Department of Health and Human Services, Asian American women between the ages of fifteen to thirty-four, and women over sixty-five consistently have the highest suicide rates. This older statistic starkly contrasts with the Pew statistics released last year that Asian Americans are "the highest-income, best-educated.... They are more satisfied than the general public with their lives, finances, and the direction of the country" (Pew Research Center

2012, 12).<sup>2</sup> With such diverging images of the Asian American community, what can a focus on the Asian American woman, as the subject, contribute to feminist philosophy's discussion about the subjectivity of women? How does this relate to philosophy of race's discussion about the intimate relationship between the individual subject and her group identity?

Any discussions in the United States of minority ethnicities that are not black have hastily turned to culture and cultural differences. Instead of myopically following this well-trodden path, this paper focuses on the relation of class and culture to explore the ambivalent conditions of Asian American women. The Asian American identity has been intimately associated with upward class mobility as the model minority, yet women's earnings remain less than men's and Asian American women possess (or are at least perceived to possess) strong family ties relegating them to the domestic sphere. Under such circumstances, exactly what is the class or model minority status for Asian American women? Does the upward class mobility reflect more the lives of Asian American men? Perhaps a focus on Asian American women and class can shed more light on understanding the function of class for all racial identities.

The first two sections of this article outline current developments in feminist theory, philosophy of race, and Asian American studies. The first section explores why the relation between an individual's sense of self as an authentic subject is intimately wrapped up with one's group identity. This condition of entanglement with one's group identity especially represents the circumstances of minority subjects. The second section explains how the Asian American woman's identification as a model minority ambivalently traps her as dichotomously inauthentic. It establishes a false dichotomy: the poor Asian American woman is inauthentic because of her inability to achieve economic upward mobility following the model minority theory, whereas the model minority Asian American woman is inauthentic because of the assimilation practices demanded for economic mobility.

The final section explores why, although identities change, even after more than forty years since the first articulation of the model minority theory and its subsequent negative reception by the Asian American community, the identification persists. Thus, the paper ends with three speculations on the difficulties of changing over-determinations about one's group identity. Ultimately, individual acts cannot change one's group identity; changing the over-determinations of minority identities requires the cooperation of the greater society.

#### AUTHENTICITY AS A RELATION BETWEEN SELF AND GROUP IDENTITY

Authenticity enjoys a place of privilege in philosophy for it provokes questions circumscribing aspirations to be true to oneself. Importantly, endeavors toward one's true self rely upon self-knowledge and self-development, which both require in turn, counter-intuitively, the process of negotiation, validation, and agreement with other human beings.<sup>3</sup> An understanding of the self as somehow possessing an inner,

essential, static core regardless of one's surroundings perseveres only with the old, largely disregarded, conception of the self and authenticity as individualistic, unique, and separate from a community. Careful readings of even the existential, phenomenological traditions—which especially advocate endeavors toward authenticity—recognize that the self cannot live in a vacuum and does not possess a core but rather develops in negotiation with others and is always in process. The self, as being-in-the-world, becomes in relation with others in the social meaning horizon. One's group sets the parameters against which to compare and to distinguish one's sense of self. Hence in a complicated and precarious way, one's authenticity intimately grows with and against others.

On the epistemic level, Lynn Hankinson Nelson concludes that one knows as a group first, and then claims knowledge as an individual. Nelson writes, “[m]y claims to know are subject to community criteria, public notions of what constitutes evidence, so that, in an important sense, I can know only what *we* know, for some *we*” (Nelson 1990, 255). Nelson persuasively argues that with a coherentist conception of knowledge, claims to know cannot arise initially individually. Even if one discovers or creates something new, the “new” knowledge must undergo community confirmation and justification in order to become accepted as knowledge.

Not only does the self develop in relation to one's group, epistemically, but one's relation with others fulfills a psychic purpose for the self as well. Linda Martín Alcoff argues that every individual “needs to feel a connection to a community, to a history, and to a human project larger than his or her own life. Without this connection, we are bereft of a concern for the future or an investment in the fate of our community. Nihilism is the result” (Alcoff 2006, 207). Individualism—an insistence on valorizing independence, once upheld as a model of human emotional and psychological development—no longer holds an enigmatic status.<sup>4</sup> In other words, one's own aspirations toward authenticity intricately rely—in an epistemic sense and in a developmental sense—upon one's group identity. Hence to be true to oneself requires allegiance and negotiation to one's community, to one's group identity.

Such intimate relations between oneself and one's group identity imply that both positive and negative images of one's group identity empower and disable the individual, the self. These relations of empowering and disabling the self do not necessarily accord neatly with positive and negative images of one's group identity. Group identities develop from forces and members both internal and external to the group. Under such circumstances, to avoid experiencing one's group identity as externally defined and possibly oppressive, participating in forming one's group identity, by engaging in discussions about representations of one's group and social/political policies affecting one's group, facilitates achieving authenticity for oneself.

With such intimate relations between oneself and one's group identity, the two dynamically and hermeneutically affect each other. For example, active identification and engagement from individual members empower, enable, and change the group identity as a whole. Alcoff writes that such individuals' investments in their group identity crucially build political actions that benefit the group as a whole. Alcoff agrees with sociologist Manuel Castells, who “describes identity as a generative source

of meaning, necessarily collective rather than wholly individual, and useful as a source of agency as well as a meaningful narrative" (Castells 1997, 40).<sup>5</sup> The empowerment and the narrative of the group build from individuals who actively align with the group and participate in group identity-formation. Dialectically, the empowerment of the group promotes the agency of individual members. Such dynamic and hermeneutic relations and tensions between the individual and the group identity illustrate the complexity of developing one's sense of authenticity.

The need for political engagement among group members to create their own identity is especially urgent when one's group identity is over-determined, if no longer publicly maligned. A defining condition of minority existence is a reductive treatment as indistinguishable from one's group identity. Frantz Fanon famously said it best when he claimed that he is held responsible "for my body, my race, my ancestors" (Fanon 1967, 112). Although overt racism or sexism does not persist based on one's group identity, a continuing defining condition of minority existence is that of being held as representative of the group. More recently, Donna-Dale Marcano explains that after a history in which individual members were reductively undistinguished from her minority group identity, the individual's acceptance into society cannot be conditioned upon dissolving any affiliation with her minority group identity. Universalizing claims of equality and acceptance into the greater society conditioned upon the racial minority's ceasing to participate in the practices of one's group identity are tantamount to yet another form of discrimination. Marcano explains within the framework of Jean-Paul Sartre's text, *The Anti-Semite and the Jew*, that the anti-Semite does not recognize the Jew as an equal man, while the democrat recognizes the Jew as a man but reproaches the Jew "for willfully considering himself a Jew" (Marcano 2003, 218). Under these circumstances, Marcano evokes W. E. B. Dubois's invocation to conserve a notion of race (219). For the minority, the group identity not only over-determines the individual identity, as Fanon makes clear, but after such a history, demanding that minority individuals disaffiliate from their group identity cannot suffice as an easy solution.

Complicating this situation, the debates from second-wave feminist theory that led to the third wave attest to the history of contestation about group membership, about who belongs and does not belong within a group, by people both external and internal to the group—even with the inescapability of over-determined/linked fate associations with the group identity for gendered and racialized subjects. Membership in the group is at times metonymically conditioned; groups may prioritize certain group features, and de-emphasize or not accept other features. For example, historically, racialized identity groups have especially refused to recognize divergent sexual orientations.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty does not lie solely in the question of intentional attempts at exclusion, or occupying different social/economic positions with their attendant levels of access to power, but includes the epistemic difficulties of determining which identities and which differences matter at any one time—for these decisions guide the projects of the group. Because of the malleability of delineating differences depending on the project at hand and the current circumstances, the question of which differences matter and do not matter remains up for negotiation. These

difficulties raise the question of whether group identity necessitates exclusions. These contestations over group membership not only raise repercussive questions about individual and group empowerment, but because of the dynamic relation of oneself with one's group identity, ultimately these contestations raise questions about an individual's sense of authenticity.

#### ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND CLASS

As a minority population, the Asian American community in the United States experiences its own specific set of over-determinations.<sup>7</sup> Today, the discussion circumscribing the Asian American identity centers on the myth of the Asian American as a model minority (see Jo 1984; Ngo and Lee 2007). William Petersen first coined the term in a *New York Times Magazine* article in 1966. Karen Hossfeld defines model minority as the belief that “lifestyle patterns and cultural values of some racial minority group (Asian) are more conducive to successful integration into the mainstream U.S. economy than those of other groups (African Americans and Latinos)” (Hossfeld 1994, 70). The most dangerous consequence of the model minority myth is that it promotes *intra*-minority conflict. Asian American scholars have argued that belief in the model minority theory promotes the idea that no institutional barriers exist to prevent economic advancement within the United States. Accepting this idea positions the minority populations who experience difficulty in advancing economically as solely culpable for the obscurity. Ultimately, the model minority theory pits Asian Americans against African Americans and Latin Americans. This remains the greatest danger with the model minority theory, but within this paper, I discuss the model minority theory's impact on the subjectivity of Asian American women.

The description of the group identity as a model minority originated from sources outside of the group, but members within the group have internalized the theory (Park 2011). The myth of the Asian American as a model minority has captured the American imagination and media so thoroughly that most of the current news about the Asian American community centers on the concerns of upper-middle-class Asian Americans—such as students not gaining entrance into Ivy League universities or professionals experiencing the glass ceiling effect (Golden 2012). Of course these continue to be important concerns, but such attention obfuscates the class diversity among Asian Americans—ignoring the lives of lower-middle-class and poor Asian Americans.

The recent ascription of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) identity group especially captures the difficulties of cultural diversity for intra and inter-group negotiations about which differences matter and do not matter. In addition to questions about individual membership in a group, debates persist concerning the categorization of sub-minority groups (South Asian, South East Asian, and Middle Eastern Asian) within the broader minority group AAPI. But there is very little discussion in regard to Asian Americans and class diversity. Admittedly, the popular imagination

and media eschew anything concerning poverty—unless it is highlighting the escape from poverty in rags-to-riches narratives. Perhaps discomfort with poverty in general explains the limited attention to the circumstances of Asian Americans living in poverty, even as the Pew report depicts such a possibility as an oxymoron. Some of the class division among Asian American communities correlates more or less with the state of development of their countries of origin. Some of the division traces the periods of immigration from the recently immigrated to those who have resided in the United States for several generations. Some of the division originates from one of the major bases of the United States' policies on immigration: labor needs that have diverged from manual to professional labor at different periods in the country's history.

I focus on Asian Americans living in poverty not solely to draw attention to this population group, but also to highlight the curious phenomenon of a racial identity's association with a specific class. Racial identities and gender identities have come to be understood as social constructions rather than as natural phenomena. As socially constructed differences, why are these identities so intimately associated with a particular class? The usual focus along the black–white binary places African Americans as poor and white Americans as at least middle-class,<sup>6</sup> and similarly, women as poorer, men as richer. Refusing the facile idea of a culture of poverty, turning to Asian Americans and their association as economically upwardly mobile may shed light on why racial and gender identities are so closely coupled with particular classes.

So does upward economic mobility accurately depict Asian Americans? The statistics do not lead to an unequivocal answer. According to the 2009–10 census data, poverty rates for Asian Americans are not comparatively high, even during the recent economic recession. Asian Americans in poverty hover at 12.1%, compared to 9.9% for whites, 26.6% for Hispanics, and 27.4% for blacks (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2011, Table 4). Without offering poverty rates, and instead focusing on the percentage with bachelor's degrees and median household income, as earlier stated, the Pew Research Center declares the Asian American community as “the highest-income, best educated.” As far back as 1984, Moon H. Jo wrote that census statistics do not really capture the economic well-being of Asian Americans. Jo provides quite a few arguments for this position; I list only three of the more persuasive here: 1. Asian Americans experience a higher percentage of under-counting because of their language differences; 2. The census numbers reflect household income, and a greater number of household members earn income in Asian American households<sup>9</sup>; and 3. Ninety percent of Asian Americans live in metropolitan areas, and nationwide comparison figures do not adequately depict the cost-of-living differences between metropolitan and rural areas (Jo 1984, 589–90). Hossfeld also adds that the theory of the model minority that developed in the late 1960s was not a coincidence but rather resulted from changes in immigration laws reflecting the United States' need for skilled laborers. The Asian American immigrants from this period arrived educated and skilled. These immigrants originated from middle-class families and did not actually climb the economic ladder, but rather merely maintained their original class

level. Yet based on this immigrant population, the model minority theory was formed mistakenly, attributing economic mobility to a population group who merely maintained their economic status. Let me add to these arguments three additional considerations. First, if we break down the Asian American population to specific countries of origin, the numbers vary widely. According to Ngo and Lee, the average per-capita incomes of at least three Asian American populations—Hmong (\$6,613), Cambodian (\$10,215), and Lao (\$11,454)—were lower than those of the Latin American (\$12,111) and African American (\$14,222) populations, based on the 2000 census (Ngo and Lee 2007, 421). Second, the Economic Policy Institute published this year that, for the “second year in a row, Asian Americans had the highest percentage of long-term unemployment.... In addition the study found that Asian Americans continued to have a higher overall unemployment rate compared with similarly educated whites” (Kang 2012, 14).<sup>10</sup> Third, as mentioned in the introduction, the highest rates of attempted and successful suicides occur among Asian American women. Although income has not been correlated with suicide rates, considering the difficulties of immigration and poverty, I take some liberties in assuming a correlation. These additional numbers from different sources complicate the picture of how Asian Americans actually fare economically.

Amid these questions about whether Asian Americans are model minorities, I am concerned with a special consequence of this myth in light of the discussion in the first part of this paper in that a reality of minority existence is the immediate association of the individual identity with the group identity. I find particularly troubling that Asian Americans' close class association, juxtaposed with the minority identity's cultural affiliations, produces a false dichotomy that makes difficult if not forecloses the development of a sense of authenticity for the individual. In light of the position that one's sense of authenticity is dynamically and hermeneutically associated with one's group identity, the false dichotomy encourages if not establishes an ambivalent understanding (from people both within and outside the Asian American identity) and discourages an ambiguous understanding of the identity. I follow Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (who follows Melanie Klein) distinction between ambivalence and ambiguity. Ambivalence coheres with psychological rigidity: “[a]mbivalence consists in having two alternative images of the same object, the same person without making any effort to connect them or to notice that in reality they relate to the same object and the same person... ambiguity... consists in admitting that the same being who is good and generous can also be annoying and imperfect” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 103). The false dichotomy promotes an ambivalent reaction to one's Asian American identity as either a model minority or as culturally isolationist. The class and cultural associations of the Asian American identity work against each other to make obscure a sense of authenticity coherent with both characteristics of the group identity. To make this point clear, I trace each incoherence in turn.

First, the identification of the Asian American community as the model minority applauds their ability to climb the economic ladder and to harness the opportunities of capitalism. Such ascendance in class requires cultural assimilation. Minority populations regard assimilation with suspicion because assimilation does not simply mean

adjusting well to the culture of the United States, but covertly entails neglecting, if not abandoning, the practices of one's cultures of origin and conforming to the practices of the majority culture. In the United States, this is the culture of whites. As such, Sarah Ahmed writes, "you can move up only by approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body" (Ahmed 2007, 138). Climbing the economic ladder constitutes the definition of success in the United States. Hence the depiction of Asian Americans as successful immigrants for economically advancing—for assimilating—implies applauding them for giving up their ethnic cultural practices in order to survive if not thrive in this new country. Essentially, Asian Americans sell out.

The assimilation demanded for economic upward mobility results in the invisibility of Asian Americans. Arisaka writes, "[i]f they are assimilated, they are invisible as a group in the dominant culture as well as to the oppositional, 'racial minority' cultures" (Arisaka 2000, 214).<sup>11</sup> Scholars of Asian American studies have written extensively on invisibility as a regularly occurring phenomenon specifically of the Asian American community as a minority community in the United States (Yamada 1983). The possibility of achieving a sense of authenticity appears dim among these model minority but cultural "sellouts" in this condition of invisibility.

Alternatively, the Asian American community is identified with persisting strong ties to their cultures of origin, so much so that they face accusations of insular, isolationist practices. Under this identification, because of their isolationist practices, Asian Americans lag behind in political participation in the United States. The insularity of the Asian American community has been pointed to as ultimately one of the reasons, if not the main reason, for inter-minority conflict, particularly in the analyses of the Los Angeles riots of 1992. So, in contrast to the invisibility of the assimilationist Asian Americans, the isolationist Asian Americans facilitate their own exoticism and their own hyper-visibility.

Who are these isolationist Asian Americans? If the assimilated Asian Americans are economically upwardly mobile, then the isolationist Asian Americans must be the less economically mobile—those likely to live in poverty. For after all, within these circumstances, if economic mobility requires assimilation, those who do not assimilate cannot participate in upward mobility. Here I want to point out that because women (especially women with hyphenated identities or from immigrant communities) are perceived as responsible for keeping alive their culture and so are more often burdened with continuing the practices of their cultures of origin, these isolationist poor Asian Americans are likely to comprise a specific gender—women.<sup>12</sup> In failing as a model minority, these isolationist, poor Asian American women, also face dim prospects of achieving a sense of authenticity.

These two close identifications and over-determinations of the Asian American community lead to a dichotomous framework—a false dichotomy. Asian Americans who do not assimilate and who live in poverty closely align with authenticity through their group identity in the sense of culture, but the isolated and poor Asian American affiliates less with authenticity in the class criterion as a model minority. The assimilated Asian American, however, more authentically follows the group identity as a model minority, but less closely coheres with the cultural practices



associated with the group. The false dichotomy invites ambivalent responses to the Asian American identity.

The Asian American woman whose group identity is dichotomously over-determined—as either assimilating and successfully climbing up the economic ladder or persisting in practicing her culture of origin with the consequences of isolation and poverty—faces a scenario in which all the available choices trouble her relation to her group identity, and to her ultimately developing a sense of personal authenticity. Is the poor Asian American woman's sense of self structured through the understanding of the temporariness of her condition of poverty such that she will eventually conform to the majority culture's practices? Or, in realizing, through recognizing the dismal statistics on class mobility, that poverty is not temporary, does her sense of self become significantly damaged in facing the likelihood of failing as a model minority? Without poor Asian Americans, will the cultural significance of the Asian American identity disappear as an identifying feature of the group? What is the sense of self for the economically successful Asian American woman who conforms to the majority culture and lets go of her original cultural practices? Women carry the primary burden of culture, and women earn less than men; so are Asian American women more likely to be poor, tradition-bound, and isolated? If both practicing one's culture of origin and economically climbing is impossible, considering that succeeding as a model minority promotes the invisibility of one's identity, must one choose poverty and hyper-visibility to strengthen one's group identity? For the Asian American woman endeavoring toward an authentic sense of self in both its class and cultural ascriptions, neither option allows for developing a coherent identification with one's group identity. If the social empowerment of the group identity relies upon individuals identifying and participating in the formation of their group identity, the series of compromised choices within the group identity's class and cultural over-determinations clearly have disenfranchising political implications.

Recall that the condition of minority identities is that their individual identities are undistinguished if not reductively collapsed to their group identities. With such intimate associations, the solution to escaping the false dichotomy of the group identity cannot only consist of distancing oneself from one's group identity. Instead, for the minority individual, for the Asian American woman to develop a sense of self true to herself—a sense of authenticity—she must work with and on the group identity to encourage and to develop understanding of the group identity.

#### THE INAUTHENTIC ASIAN AMERICAN WOMAN'S AMBIGUOUS PRACTICES

Feminist theory has advanced from speaking about subjects as essences or following a substance ontology toward theorizing subjects as in process—as socially constructed through practices that condition and make subjectivity possible (Young 1997, 32). With the understanding that historico-material circumstances condition subjectivity, feminist theorists recognize the fluidity of identities and subjects as situated within contexts and relations. The framework shifts away from static conceptions toward

temporal conceptions (Alcoff 2006, 151).<sup>13</sup> I think too much recent work stops here on context and ambiguity. Earlier feminist work had already explored contexts in terms of margins as both a place of oppression (in the sense of marginalization and not receiving central attention) and a place of possibilities (in the sense of the plurality of choices available in the margins) (hooks 1990; Bar On 1993). Ambiguity and open-endedness are valuable, but absolute open-endedness does not exist for socially constructed subjects. Moreover, absolute open-endedness does not in itself free but can feel daunting. I am suspicious about whether the emphasis on context and ambiguity suffices to actually change identities, especially over-determined identities. Upon recognizing that historico-material circumstances condition identity but that identity can dynamically develop, the theoretical work cannot stop with the emphasis on context and ambiguity; rather the difficult work for over-determined women of color now lies in determining which actions, and eventually practices, are available, effective, or transformative of the group identity. For Asian American women's identities to break out of the ambivalence of isolationist, poor, hyper-visible, exotic, and inauthentic *or* assimilationist, upwardly mobile, invisible, and still inauthentic, Asian American women need to engage in actions that change their group identity. Surely if identities/subjectivities change, actions to defy the over-determinations and to change group identities are already occurring! Nevertheless, it has been quite difficult to change over-determinations about any racialized minorities. To understand this difficulty, I list three especially prominent problems with changing one's group identity.

A structural reason exists for the difficulty of changing the group identity, or at least complicating the group identity enough to see the diversity and complexity in the lives of Asian Americans. First, with the postmodern clarification of the social constructedness of identity and subjectivity, agency becomes difficult. Historico-material circumstances not only construct identity and subjectivity, but these conditions also make available only certain actions. Young explains the very real weight of the historico-material conditions of society that admit a specific set of actions. She writes, "[t]he milieu is the already-there set of material things and collectivized habits against the background of which any particular action occurs" (Young 1997, 25).<sup>14</sup> Any act from such positions cannot derive solely from some internal force of will and intent, but must also be conditioned by the situation from which one acts. Within these available actions, Judith Butler famously clarified the demand that such actions be repeated and the force of repeated actions.<sup>15</sup> In light of the social forces that make available only specific actions and hence force repeating such actions, the social construction of identities and subjects does not immediately open numerous venues for Asian American women to change their dichotomously over-determined group identity. Although the present understanding of identities as socially constructed recognizes identities as fluid, these changes cannot be absolutely novel or revolutionary.

Second, a psychological reason prohibits engaging in actions to change one's group identity. The depth of the social constructedness of the subject lies in the subject's internalization of the existing meanings and stigmas about one's group identity. Actions born from positions of less power, if not a place of oppression, often have

been described as defensive, petty, cunning, passive-aggressive, and born from jealousy.<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche comes first to my mind for references to the cunning woman. In phrases like, “[w]hat inspires respect for woman, and often enough even fear, is her nature, which is more ‘natural’ than man’s, the genuine, cunning suppleness of a beast of prey” (Nietzsche 1966, 269). Nietzsche refers to the ways in which women—because society conditions them to be slaves—act from places of insecurity and defensiveness. As a result, if women act at all, they act tentatively and cautiously, never quite trusting their decisions and actions. Women’s actions occur in stealth; their actions are hidden to prevent foreclosure from acting at all. Such covert actions have been characterized as passive aggressive. Social conditions restrain their actions to those that irk and poke their opponents, but never openly exhibit their challenge of the system, the masters, the men with whom women have complicated relations of care, dependence, and resistance. Their slave mentality and slave morality prevent women from forthrightly articulating clearly outlined positions. Nietzsche writes with contempt that women are “cunning,” not really intelligent, not truly moral, and not completely sincere. The social constructedness of subjects affects the very psychology of subjects.<sup>17</sup> Such internalization of slave mentality and slave morality appears unavoidable for poor Asian American women living in relation to Asian American men within the dominant white culture and not meeting the challenges of capitalism. Not only are Asian American women’s actions limited within the historical-material milieu, but also they are not likely to be transformative.

Third, because of the group identity’s relational status with members of society, a difficulty external to the self exists. Feminist and race theorists have abundantly clarified that perception and representation do not occur in neutral ways but within social constructions and as a function of the existing horizons of social meaning. Perception does not convey some objective access to the empirical world but transpires through negotiations with members of society. Because people occupy varied positions of power within the social network, those with positions of greater power are afforded greater affirmation of their visions of the world. Feminist theories have unearthed a history in which men’s perceptions dominated over women’s perceptions because of and as a sign of men’s positions of greater power in society. Feminist film theory has especially excavated how men’s perceptions prevailed to such an extent that women have internalized males’ ways of seeing. Second-wave feminists have demonstrated how white women see only reflections of themselves and cannot see the differences of women of color (Rich 1979; Silverman 1997). When perception does not provide access to the real and instead only narcissistically self-affirms and/or reflects dominant meaning systems, even if Asian American women act in defiance of their over-determinations, these actions may still go unrecognized. For the Asian American woman who recognizes the dichotomous over-determinations of her group identity that prohibit developing a holistic sense of authenticity with her group identity, even if she desires not to facilitate existing stereotypes—such as to attempt class mobility without assimilation, or much more radically, to attempt to halt the forces and desires of capitalism and question some of the cultural practices of her culture of origin—her acts still may be read as occurring only within the existing dichotomous stereotypes.

Other members of society both internal and external to the group may still perceive the actions as lying solely somewhere within the false dichotomies.

I do not want to end on such a negative note. Feminist theorists have not passively accepted this depressing and debilitating situation.<sup>18</sup> Somehow, history shows that identities do evolve and individuals do challenge the status quo. In regard to the first difficulty of agency as socially constructed subjects, feminists have challenged the idea that the subject acts only through repeating available actions. Theories of oppression, including Marx's, argue that even in the worst conditions of oppression, the oppressed somehow develop a class-consciousness and overturn their conditions of oppression. Even Jean-Paul Sartre, in his emphasis on the force of the other's gaze, admits of a dimension of the subject that escapes the force of the gaze. Defiant actions may escape notice within the present normative system, as Sarah Hoagland explains, in that women's actions against the system of heterosexuality through sabotage may defy comprehension (Hoagland 2008, 519–38). The exact ontological status of this separate dimension of the subject and the origins of actions that challenge existing social constructions remain contested, but that such actions occur and that identities change holds true.

#### A LITTLE PHENOMENOLOGY ON THE RELATION BETWEEN ACTIONS AND MEANINGS

Since even in light of these three difficulties—in which the social-structural or historico-material conditions permit only certain actions, the subject's internalization of existing social meanings, and the difficulties of seeing actions as defying the existing meaning systems—somehow identities do change, a little phenomenological analysis may be helpful here. Phenomenologically speaking, in order for a subject's hard-won actions to stabilize into the social meaning horizons, the actions must evolve into practices. For the actions to be stabilized into practices, they cannot remain isolated actions made by unusual women under exceptional circumstances; rather, they must be repeated in "regular" circumstances. Isolated actions do not create new meaning. Because the actions occur within a social milieu, others must recognize the meaning of the actions. I have already pointed out that there are difficulties of recognition and the likelihood of misrecognition. Only through repeated actions can meaning become ossified enough to be generalized and ultimately enfolded into the social meaning horizon by falling *below* the radar of resistance. Hence the dilemma and the tension, for although feminist theories of identity understand that identities, subjects, practices, and cultures change, acts need to ossify, to temporally stabilize, to effect such change. Actions need time and reiteration to transform into practices. Perhaps the stealth under which women are said to operate makes sense.

At the heart of this tension between acts and grasping the meaning intended by the acts lies the further complexity that the subject of the act may not completely comprehend and foresee her own intended meaning. Because of the difficulties of self-understanding, individuals may act with an explicit intention in mind and host other unconscious intentions. The acts' meaning ultimately escapes the subject herself.

Of course, she cannot fully control the acts' ultimate meaning in society. Under such circumstances, actions—if recognized, repeated, and settled into practices—may ultimately develop into meanings the subject did not originally intend. The eventual meanings of a woman's actions result from negotiations and judgments with other members of society. Much like epistemic claims that require group confirmation, because the repetition of actions by members of society sediments the acts' meaning into the social horizon, the meanings of the acts, as well as their expressions, take on lives of their own.

Asian American women do not only ambivalently assimilate or practice their cultures of origin; they do not only ambivalently economically succeed or isolate themselves into poverty and political disenfranchisement. Together, both options foreclose the possibility of an authentic relation to the Asian American group identity. Asian American woman's actions could be criticizing, choosing, and mixing cultural and class practices in order to forge new identities and subjectivities. Asian American women living in poverty may act for the simple goal of survival, and at times survival in itself challenges injustice. Survival as a driving force should not be underestimated. Poor Asian American women's actions require more than a hasty reading; they can ultimately surprise and lead to interesting circumstances. Pausing to recognize the phenomenological structure of meaning-making—how new meaning enters the world—demands recognizing the interrelatedness of the complicity and the role of other members of society. Much like an individual's sense of authenticity develops in coherence with one's group identity, the meaning of individual actions ultimately forms in time with the perception of and acceptance by other members of society. The recognition that the Asian American woman chooses and blends cultural and economic practices opens up the possibility of achieving a sense of being true to herself.

In the intricate and delicate relation between group identities and individual subjectivities, especially for minority identities, I aim to loosen the over-determinations of the Asian American woman's identity, particularly as it relates to class, to facilitate reinterpretations both internal and external to the group of what it means to be an Asian American woman. The immediate affiliation of a race with a class not only complicates African Americans' and Latin Americans' group identities in their immediate association with the lower class; it also poses problems for the Asian American group identity, because it establishes a series of false dichotomous associations. As members of American and immigrant communities, Asian American women negotiate quite a few concerns, including the desire to live.

#### NOTES

I want to thank Howard McGary for encouraging me to think more about the relation between the self and one's group identity. I also want to thank Donna-Dale Marcano for encouraging me to submit to this special edition of *Hypatia*.

1. See also Qi 2010 and Noh 2013. Noh writes that from “1981–2010, API females had the highest rates of suicide across race from ages 5–9 and 70+ and the second highest rates from 20–69.”

2. Although Asian American scholars participated in preparing this report, the community did not receive the report with enthusiasm. See Hing 2012 and Liu 2012.

3. Charles Taylor stipulates the conditions for authenticity: “Authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality and frequently, (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we say, that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue.” Taylor recognizes that features of A and B conflict, but authenticity requires keeping the tensions between the two alive and requires an antisubjectivist bent (Taylor 1991, 66). This is not to suggest that one’s group identity normalizes the self. The direction of influence flows bi-directionally.

4. Iris Marion Young writes, “[t]he discourse of liberal individualism denies the reality of groups” (Young 1997, 17).

5. Alcoff cites Castells 1997, 7.

6. Recall that Audre Lorde writes about the African American community’s antagonism over her insistence on being recognized simultaneously as a black woman and a lesbian. She writes, “[t]he need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people” (Lorde 1993, 119). Lorde explains that group membership conditioned upon metonymic acceptance of only certain aspects of her identity weakens her sense of self and ultimately undermines her motivations for actively participating in her group identity (120). See also Woo 1983, 145; and Lugones 1990, 146.

7. As Yoko Arisaka writes, “during the era of ‘yellow peril,’ the ‘morality of Asian women’ was used as a basis of exclusion under US immigration policies” (Arisaka 2000, 212). More specifically in regard to philosophy, David Haekwon Kim writes, “Asian American students and professors might be viewed as lacking the sort of nuanced social sensitivity crucial for rich and humane analyses of human nature and society... as lacking the charisma to lead effectively in the classroom” (Kim 2002, 26).

8. The class association with African Americans is so immediately made in our society that to create some distance between racial identity and poverty, June Cross and Henry Louis Gates’s documentary, “The Two Nations of Black America,” insists on the existence of middle- and upper-class African Americans (Cross and Gates 1998). See also Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker’s documentary, “People Like Us: Social Class in America” (Alvarez and Kolker 2001). The affiliations with gender and class are not as immediate, but considering the persistent earnings differential between men and women, gender and class associations obviously exist as well.

9. The recent Pew Report’s numbers attest to this differential.

10. Of the Asian American unemployed, 48.7% in 2011 and 50.1% in 2012 remain unemployed long-term, 27 weeks or longer. In 2012, Asian Americans had a longer long-term unemployment rate than African Americans (Kang 2012, 14).

11. Arisaka continues to argue that, at least for Asian Americans from East Asia, Confucian sensibilities of “harmony with others,” “repose,” and “respect for others”

encourages assimilation and invisibility: “in fact, invisibility is not a problem at all; if anything, it is a sign of success” (Arisaka 2000, 216). Arisaka concludes that assimilating and desiring invisibility are an Asian cultural practice. I disagree. Such reductive association of all Asian culture with Confucianism and the desire for invisibility constitutes a highly selective reading of the cultural practices in Asia from a particular time. Jo provides at least two historically specific segments of an Asian population who did not follow such Confucian aspirations. He writes, “in fact many first-generation Japanese Americans grew up during the Meiji period in Japan when rebellion and revolt were common phenomena... the 19th-century Cantonese peasants were a worldly, rebellious, and emotional lot” (Jo 1984 586–87). Through these examples, Jo reminds us of “the existence of profound cultural conflicts within the various strata of the Asian community.” He concludes, “the culture of an ethnic group or of a society can be selectively presented and variously interpreted according to the predilections and objects of the superordinate group” (586).

Ngo and Lee’s article on the South East Asian population provides an account of one of the more outrageous manifestations of too quickly assuming knowledge of culture and turning to culture as an explanation of Asian American assimilation (Ngo and Lee 2007). Too many of the social scientists turned to culture as the explanation for the contrary positions that the Vietnamese were assimilating well and the Hmong, Cambodian, and Lao were not assimilating well, and then later, the completely opposite depiction. Such analysis demonstrates that too easily referencing culture can only be inconclusive if not misleading. The analyses they highlight clearly exhibit essentialistic tendencies.

12. Uma Narayan writes about “the problematic roles assigned Indian women in attempts to ‘preserve Indian cultural identity’ in Indian immigrant communities” (Narayan 1997, xi.)

13. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone argues for understanding even embodiment as inherently dynamic. See Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 336.

14. Positionality does not entail a lack of agency; see Alcoff 2006, 148.

15. Alcoff argues that although Butler precludes a substance metaphysics, Butler does not avoid a process metaphysics à la Whitehead, Spinoza, or Bergson, “wherein reality is described as a primordially dynamic, ever-changing present” (Alcoff 2006, 157). Process metaphysics can still oppress, “[g]iven the fact that processes are not random flux but organized patterns, processes can then invite comparison with those same regulatory practices that Butler views as the techniques of oppression” (157–58).

16. I cannot help but think of Mitt Romney’s characterization of the 99% as jealous.

17. The remarkable parallel characterization of Asian Americans in the 1970s in the ideology of the “yellow peril” as sneaky, cunning Asians shows the popularity of the idea that those who occupy oppressed positions develop defensive and cunning psychological mechanisms. See Arisaka 2000, 212.

18. Lugones 2003 informs my thinking on this question.

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