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Intimate Differences: Cultivating Recognition and Multiracial Solidarity in a Philadelphia School

Abstract

In a post-civil rights era, it is clear that the abolition of Jim Crow laws was limited in what it could achieve. Inequalities persist, race relations remain tense, and people of color still struggle to live out their full humanity. Promoting “minority recognition” and “diversity” represent our current attempt to move beyond Jim Crow and have become two of America’s most vaunted liberal values. These appear writ large in K-12 and higher education settings where scholars, practitioners, and administrators attempt to put these values into practice by instituting new policies and programs. Yet institutions remain incredibly resistant to change. As protests wage on across American campuses, students of color express disconnect between the stated values of institutions and their own lived experiences. Instituting new policies and programs around recognition and diversity have their own set of limitations and have not achieved the desired result.

This dissertation intervenes in the conversation by providing an ethnographic example of how one institution, founded by activists, put these values into practice in ways that move beyond formal policies and programs, and beyond a superficial recourse to our common humanity. The school in which I conducted fieldwork focused instead on everyday rituals, embodied practices of interracial care, and bearing witness to irreducible differences to construct solidarity between Asian and black students, who constitute the majority of the student body. These intimate, even familial, forms of interracial sociality begin to trouble common understandings of recognition- and diversity-work. At its heart, this dissertation is a study of ethics and activism, and how people imagine and enact more just and liberating futures.

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INTIMATE DIFFERENCES:
CULTIVATING RECOGNITION AND MULTIRACIAL SOLIDARITY IN A
PHILADELPHIA SCHOOL

Roseann Liu

A DISSERTATION

in

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2016

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INTIMATE DIFFERENCES: CULTIVATING RECOGNITION AND MULTIRACIAL
SOLIDARITY IN A PHILADELPHIA SCHOOL

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Roseann Liu

To Stan Liu, with love and appreciation.

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ABSTRACT

INTIMATE DIFFERENCES: CULTIVATING RECOGNITION AND MULTIRACIAL SOLIDARITY IN A PHILADELPHIA SCHOOL

Roseann Liu

Kathleen D. Hall

In a post-civil rights era, it is clear that the abolition of Jim Crow laws was limited in what it could achieve. Inequalities persist, race relations remain tense, and people of color still struggle to live out their full humanity. Promoting “minority recognition” and “diversity” represent our current attempt to move beyond Jim Crow and have become two of America’s most vaunted liberal values. These appear writ large in K-12 and higher education settings where scholars, practitioners, and administrators attempt to put these values into practice by instituting new policies and programs. Yet institutions remain incredibly resistant to change. As protests wage on across American campuses, students of color express disconnect between the stated values of institutions and their own lived experiences. Instituting new policies and programs around recognition and diversity have their own set of limitations and have not achieved the desired result.

This dissertation intervenes in the conversation by providing an ethnographic example of how one institution, founded by activists, put these values into practice in ways that move beyond formal policies and programs, and beyond a superficial recourse to our common humanity. The school in which I conducted fieldwork focused instead on everyday rituals, embodied practices of interracial care, and bearing witness to

irreducible differences to construct solidarity between Asian and black students, who constitute the majority of the student body. These intimate, even familial, forms of interracial sociality begin to trouble common understandings of recognition- and diversity-work. At its heart, this dissertation is a study of ethics and activism, and how people imagine and enact more just and liberating futures.

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CHAPTER 1
THE QUEST FOR EQUALITY

The 1954 landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, ruled that segregated schooling was inherently unequal, sending a major victory to the civil rights movement. Over sixty years later, American schooling clearly remains a central arena in the fight for greater racial equality. How to accomplish this is less clear. Desegregation was once the ideal for creating a more just educational system, but the rise of the charter school movement has changed all that. Charter school legislation provides a vehicle for social change by allocating power to individuals and organizations to design schools around particular themes and to target particular populations.

This has led to an increase in various types of identity-based schools, cleaving along the lines of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and language (Minow, Shweder, and Markus 2008). It has, ironically, also led to the racial resegregation of schools, causing some to decry charter schools as a setback to the progress made since *Brown v. Board of Education* (e.g., Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang 2010). However, because court-mandated desegregation (Minow 2008:29) and even voluntary desegregation (e.g., *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701 [2007]) have largely failed, racial integration is a bygone solution to the perduring problem of inequality. Yet, concepts like *diversity* and *inclusivity* remain important American liberal values and continue to be promoted in

public schooling. At the same time, pursuing a politics of recognition,¹ seen in the form of identity-based schools, has become a viable approach to advancing social justice today (Minow 2008:29).

In theory, “minority recognition” and “diversity” seem to go hand in hand. In practice, however, these two progressive American values sit uneasily together. For many, focusing on the culture and language of a national minority represents social progress toward public recognition of a historically marginalized group. It dislocates the hegemony of white supremacy. And yet the focus placed on a particular group also challenges inclusivity, especially of a diverse student body often composed of other marginalized minority populations. These schools then represent a central tension in American education today: how to advance equality by recognizing a particular minority group, while still promoting a diverse and inclusive school community.

My dissertation investigates this tension through an ethnographic study conducted at the Folk Arts and Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) located in Philadelphia’s Chinatown. FACTS was founded in 2005, based upon the struggle to provide Asian immigrant families the educational services denied to them by the area’s public school, including bilingual education and bus services (Liu 2012). To that end,

¹ To be clear, this is a term derived from scholarly literature (e.g., Honneth 1999) and not a term that the three FACTS’ board members who read and gave me feedback on my dissertation used to describe the school’s practices. In fact, they didn’t like my use of the term because they felt like it was overly simplistic. However, I chose to keep this term in the first section of my introductory chapter because it is more widely legible to a scholarly audience. As such, it provides my readers with a useful *introduction* to the broader issues I am engaging in. It true that “recognition” scarcely begins to describe the practices I observed at FACTS. Though I do not critically assess this term in this section, throughout the rest of the dissertation I unpack the school’s various practices and therefore problematize what recognition means and looks like in different contexts. When I use the term “recognition,” let it be clear that this is an analytical framework that I am applying to the ethnographic context and not an emic term that they used to describe their own practices.

much of FACTS is designed to teach about Asian American history, struggle, and traditions—that is, to uplift the Asian American experience that has long been denigrated in American society. Because of this, the school places an emphasis on recruiting Chinese, Cambodian, Indonesian, and Vietnamese students.

However, this tells only a partial story of what FACTS is about. The school’s significant population of black students is in fact intentional, not accidental, for it is also concerned with seeking justice for all racial minorities and building solidarities that cut across racial lines. FACTS serves 450 students from grades K–8. During 2011–2012, 70% of students identified as Asian, 19% as black, 6% as multiracial, 3% as Latino, and 2% as white. FACTS was founded with the express intention of providing a liberating approach to education by both affirming Asian experiences, culture, and history, *and* building an antiracist, multiracial community. Because of its intentionally dual—if not at times dueling—pursuits, FACTS provides a fertile ground for understanding how activists, through the institution of a school, navigate the tension of promoting recognition and multiracial diversity to further social justice.

Let me be perfectly clear about what this dissertation *is* and *isn’t*. Someone quickly skimming through this might think that my dissertation mainly argues that when activists seek to uplift a specific minority group (Asian American in the case of FACTS) this ineluctably compromises inclusivity and marginalizes other people of color (non-Asian students in the case of FACTS). Someone giving this dissertation a cursory read might also assume that an irreconcilable tension is produced in advancing both these goals and that this then produces irreconcilable tensions among different students at FACTS. Sure, “Black-Asian tensions at school” might be headline grabbing, but this

could not be further from what I am arguing. Such a finding would be incredibly simplistic and betray everything I learned at FACTS.

Instead, I learned that despite the inherent tension that is produced in attempts to advance both these goals, FACTS remarkably created a setting in which students of all races and ethnicities felt both affirmed in their own heritage *and* a deep sense of connection to other students and other people's struggles for freedom. So how did FACTS manage to create such an institutional setting? ***My dissertation argues that repetitive daily and annual rituals trained school members' bodily and speech habits in ways that cultivated intimate solidarities among them. These ritualized practices centered on bearing witness to one's own experiences of oppression and listening intently to one another.***

This is a much more measured and nuanced argument. It doesn't tweet well. Nonetheless, it provides grist for the mill for people who are concerned with issues of racial equality. In efforts to advance racial equality, it is often assumed that you can only do one or the other successfully. That is, you can either focus on the advancement and recognition of one group, *or* you can foster cross-group alliances. The case of FACTS shows how this is not necessarily a compromise that needs to be made. Rather, with a great deal of intentionality, both can be done well in tandem.

Finally, this dissertation was written during turbulent times in America. The deaths of African Americans, police brutality, protest, and civil unrest appear daily on the news. These events led to the specific assertion of *black* humanity as embodied in the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter. At the same time, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has garnered multiracial support, forging solidarities across racial lines. The tension between

advocating for black lives, specifically, and forging broad-based political solidarities is a challenge negotiated by this movement in its hope of securing full rights of citizenship for African Americans. My dissertation sheds light on this tension by illustrating ways of advancing specific group rights, while forging multiracial solidarity.

From Integration to Recognition

Over sixty years ago, when the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDEF) mounted a case in *Brown v. Board of Education*, it encountered a problem in how to represent notions of race and culture. For this, LDEF leaders drew on the work of Franz Boas, widely regarded as the father of American anthropology (Baker 1998). One of Boas's lasting legacies was disentangling the assumed isomorphism among race, culture, and language. His imbricated theories on race and culture posited race as a social construction, on the one hand, while advancing the notion of cultural relativism on the other (the idea that cultures should be seen relative to one another as opposed to being ordered hierarchically). However, to build a successful case, LDEF selectively drew on Boas's theory of race, while jettisoning the idea of cultural relativism (Baker 1998). Practically speaking, the idea that race is socially constructed meant that there was no biological or "natural" reason why students should be segregated. This lent legitimacy to LDEF's position that schools should be racially integrated.

But for LDEF leaders, embracing cultural relativism presented a problem to their political agenda of assimilation. If, as Boas argued, cultures should be viewed relative to one another, and not as more or less advanced, this would have logically meant embracing an African heritage that was viewed as backward and unassimilable to the

American way of life at the time (Baker 1998). This was a much harder sell to make. The extended debate over African (dis)continuities was ultimately a concern over nation building, and the “place of black folk in New World states after...Jim Crow” (Thomas 2009:213). All this paved the way for a dominant political paradigm that favored an assimilationist approach to the nation-building project. Racial integration in schools was then part-and-parcel with moving that project forward.

While an assimilationist, or “melting pot” view dominated the civil rights period, the late 1960s ushered in an era of identity-based movements, continuing to the present day, that promotes racial and ethnic pride. Employing a politics of recognition (cf. Fraser 2008; Honneth 1995), minorities claim cultural citizenship—that is, “the right to be different...without compromising [the] right to belong” (Rosaldo 1994:57). This political position found traction in the national charter school movement, which began in the 1990s and now numbers over five thousand schools (Center for Education Reform 2011). Funded by public money, charter school laws allow private citizens and community organizations to design their own school, providing an opportunity for social justice groups to enact their understandings of equality, including one that is based upon the recognition of difference. One-quarter of the nation’s charter schools in the United States are designed with special populations in mind (Nelson et al. 2000:42), including schools like FACTS that seek to broaden understandings of what it means to be “American.”

In the case of FACTS, these futures are constructed through asserting notions of cultural citizenship and reimagining race relations. Because social justice-based charter schools are founded with the express purpose of redefining what the “good life” looks

like, which is another way of saying they are reimagining what the future *should* look like, they are key sites for examining moral education. This research examines the norms and values that are uplifted at FACTS, as well as the practices that are used to inculcate understandings of cultural citizenship and to promote a racially diverse intimate community.

Problematizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Scholars have used the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP) (cf. Ladson-Billings 1995b) to refer to a set of pedagogical approaches that seek to promote cultural citizenship in school settings. This curricular approach seeks to further social justice for minority students and is premised on the notion that students have a right to “see themselves in the curricula,” and are more successful when they do so. This basic belief challenges a long history in American education in which minority students were expected to drop off their cultural practices at the door as they entered the classroom and conform to mainstream standards. The implicit, if not explicit, message being sent was that their practices and values had no place in the “real learning” that occurred in classrooms. CRP addresses the long-standing devaluation of minority cultures through providing a curriculum that reflects and incorporates elements of their “home culture.” By doing so, scholars and practitioners of CRP intend to instill in minority students a sense of cultural pride.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is incredibly popular among scholars and practitioners. Some even consider it a game changer because it shifted the conversation from what was “wrong” with minority students to how education could be made more

relevant to students. An education professor friend of mine, upon hearing me talk about my dissertation, jokingly admitted that she often automatically offered up the suggestion that CRP was the answer to many of our urban education woes. “You just need culturally relevant pedagogy,” she reenacted in a deliberately flippant manner to point out the axiomatic belief, especially in education circles, in the promises of CRP.

Yet for all its gains in advancing social equality, there are many questions that remain. This becomes abundantly apparent in a diverse context in which students come from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. During my fieldwork, reflective staff and faculty often thought long and hard about which practices, which histories, and which traditions to emphasize. These considerations are further complicated when taking into account the fact that each student is “multicultural,” influenced by many different cultural elements—from “traditional” to “popular”—thus further complicating questions about what cultures adequately reflect minority students.

While CRP has undoubtedly advanced equality in education by expanding the topics taught in schools and addressing aspects of the *formal* curriculum, the literature largely leaves unexplored how *informal* pedagogy also contributes to students’ sense of culturally belonging in schools. By focusing on *habits of mind and body*—aspects of informal pedagogy that are taught ritually and repetitively at FACTS—my dissertation encourages us to examine unexplored ways of cultivating intimacy, belonging, pride, and solidarity among students of color.

This draws on the work of John Jackson (2008) who points out that though we live in a post–Civil Rights era in which racial discrimination is no longer enshrined in

law,² people still act on implicit racial bias and still express these views in the sanctity of their most intimate, often racially homogenous, social circles. Changing the composition of people who are in one's most intimate social settings, and learning deeply from them, then begins to address the more tacit forms of racial discrimination that permeate this post-Civil Rights era. To argue for building intimate and convivial interracial relations is not to say that change on policy and institutional levels is no longer necessary. Quite the contrary. The case of FACTS shows us how intimacy can be built into institutions, which are known to be incredibly resistant to change and not particularly felicitous at fostering intimacy because of its formal strictures. My dissertation builds on this work by arguing how institutions can be sites for promoting interracial intimacy.

Problematizing *Diversity*

Similarly, usage of the term “diversity” requires unpacking. Diversity, as a value, holds cachet in liberal progressive institutions and schools. When public schools proudly refer to themselves as being “diverse,” or when universities tout that they are working toward creating a more “diverse” faculty, mostly they are referring to changing the demographics of the institution. While this is laudable, what happens beyond the numbers, once diverse people are part of the same institution? How is diversity enacted in community? While institutions may consider allocating resources to different groups of people, there is little thought given to what practices actually build a diverse community. Diversity, then, should not be considered “finished” simply because

² Though legalized racial discrimination under Jim Crow was struck down, a number of policies and laws continue to disproportionately punish black people: examples include the Rockefeller laws and President Bill Clinton's “three strikes” bill.

different people come together in the same institutional setting. Cultivating a diverse community should be thought of as an ethic that requires corporeal practice. FACTS' focus on cultivating a multiracial family, through training students' habits of mind and body—e.g., listening intently, sharing vulnerably, speaking with sincerity, communicating care through one's body language—sheds light on this issue.

At FACTS, assiduous practice and performance of daily and annual rituals developed an intimate multiracial family. Rather than rely on abstract universalities that attempted to transcend difference, the school emphasized the embodied and *irreducible* differences that existed among school members. Students were expected to not only respect these differences but to also move outside of their comfort zones and engage with these differences. For example, a teacher proudly pointed out how one of the best and most engaged student leaders in the lion dance ensemble was a black girl. Despite these differences, FACTS emphasized a commitment to caring for one another that was expressed through corporeal acts such as making eye contact, avoiding “inappropriate” wisecracks and laughter, attentive listening, mirroring the speaker's affect and emotions, and other acts that indicated sincere care.

Interestingly, according to interviews with parents and students, this set of practices and dispositions was also put in the service of cultivating a cosmopolitan social persona. Avoiding inappropriate laughter, displaying a sincere desire to learn about other cultures, being able to engage with people, ideas, and settings that were unfamiliar not only built a multiracial family but were also seen as useful to students aspiring to the professional class. This was not an intentional aspect of the school's design, and in fact, the three board members who gave me feedback on my dissertation felt that this

rendering of their school was unrecognizable to them. Nevertheless, parents and students communicated to me that these sets of practices taught students to be comfortable with being uncomfortable—practices they needed to learn how to display in whatever professional careers they hoped to have in the future.

Lastly, notions of diversity often conjure up romanticized ideas of living harmoniously together, transcending our differences. This dissertation deconstructs categories such as “minorities” and “people of color.” It examines the fault lines that exist among different races and ethnicities and the challenges that remain in constructing an intimate, diverse school community.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Goes Global

The shift to promoting ethnic identity in the 1960s was a direct response to how *culture of poverty* (cf. Lewis 1959) narratives became insinuated into education discourse to denigrate black culture specifically, and minority cultures in America more generally. Briefly, this theory espoused that poverty was the consequence of set of (sub)cultural traits manifested as family dysfunction, disorganization, and inability to delay gratification. These traits were supposedly passed down from one generation to the next. Although many social scientists roundly critiqued this theory for its culturalist explanation that “blamed the victim,” (e.g., Butterworth 1980; Goode 2009; Hannerz 2004 [1969]; Leacock 1971; Stack 1997) the logics of culture of poverty already gained a serious foothold in the minds and imaginations of policymakers and ordinary citizens (e.g., Harrington 1974; Moynihan 1965; Glazer and Moynihan 1970)—one that has been

difficult to dismantle even today. In education circles, these came to be known as “deficit models” because of the underlying presumption that low academic performance was the result of students’ deficient home culture.

The theory and practice of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), popularized in the 1990s by Gloria Ladson-Billings, was a frontal attack on deficit models of education. Ladson-Billings defined CRP as a “pedagogy of opposition...specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (Ladson-Billings 1995a:160) that promotes students’ cultural competence and integrity. As evident through a second-edition printing of her book, *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings’ (2009) work has received widespread support in K–12 classrooms across America, and in the halls of academia. In fact, in courses I’ve taught to in-service teachers, they often regard CRP as good, commonsense teaching. Indisputably, these teachers either claim to practice CRP or endeavor to do so. Much like the related ideas of “multiculturalism” and “diversity,” CRP has been axiomatically regarded as advancing equality. Only recently have scholars revisited the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy to critically assess the limitations of CRP in a contemporary context.

The *Harvard Educational Review* organized a symposium in Spring 2014 that was dedicated to providing a “loving critique” (Paris and Alim 2014) of culturally relevant pedagogy. Contributors to this symposium noted that the popularity of CRP did not translate into more thoughtful instructional practices, for much of what gets trafficked under the pretense of CRP can be considered misuse and abuse (Ladson-Billings 2014; Paris and Alim 2014). Paris and Alim (2014) argued that being culturally “relevant” was

often misunderstood by practitioners and scholars as incorporating students’ “traditional” cultural heritage practices into school programs. They argued that this was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of culture as bounded and static, rather than dynamic, fluid, and ever changing. This led to the unintended consequence of essentializing culture, and an inability for CRP to “remain dynamic and critical in a constantly evolving global world” (Paris and Alim 2014:85). Chapter 3 of my dissertation examines how FACTS’ (re)definition of the folk arts shows how focusing on tradition can be non-essentializing, and what the unique affordances of this approach are. These affordances—that is, viewing folk arts as living tradition, as collective action, and as antiracist pedagogy—are often missed in critiques of curricular approaches that focus on tradition.

Paris and Alim make two other important points that are especially relevant to the focus of this dissertation that I wish to highlight. I quote them at length here to preserve their generous tone, and to make their logical connections clear.

For too long, arguments for including the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of communities of color in classroom learning have been centered on the importance of honoring and valuing our communities. Although we believe in and build on the research and theory that have shown us that there is inherent value in fostering a pluralist society through education, we also highlight a wholly instrumental, contemporary rationale for CSP. Given current U.S. demographic shifts toward a majority multilingual, multicultural society of color (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006; Smelser, Wilson, & Mitchell, 2001; Wang, 2013) embedded in an ever more globalized world, cultural and linguistic flexibility is not simply about giving value to all of our communities; it is also about the skills, knowledges, and ways of being needed for success in the present and future. As our society continues to shift, so does the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988). Increasingly, we can no longer assume that the White, middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being that were considered the sole gatekeepers to the opportunity structure in the past will remain so as our society changes. CSP, then, is increasingly needed not only to promote equality across racial and ethnic communities but also to ensure access and opportunity [Paris and Alim 2014:87].

First, they make the normative argument that CSP should be employed to give students of color the set of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in today's multilingual and multicultural world. Second, they note that shifting the purpose of CRP is all the more necessary given the unstable, if not declining, hegemony of white, middle-class linguistic and cultural skills today (Paris and Alim 2014:89).

Let me address the first point. Paris and Alim note that the primary purpose of CRP, from its inception until now, has been to recognize, honor, and celebrate communities of color that were historically marginalized within American public education. While they maintain that there is “inherent value in fostering a pluralist society,” they also call attention to, and advocate for, an “instrumental rationale” (Paris and Alim 2014:89)—that is, to help students develop the “skills, knowledges, and ways of being needed for success in the present and future” in an “ever more globalized world” (Paris and Alim 2014:89). Like the participants in my study, CSP was seen as a strategy for developing in students the skills, body of knowledge, and “ways of being” that would give them a leg up in a globalized labor market. I draw on Paris and Alim’s article, then, not only to build my thinking about culturally relevant pedagogy, but also as a “data point” for understanding the changing role of CRP.

Turning the analytical lens “inward”—at discourses produced about culturally relevant pedagogy that emerge from the academy—reveals some of the important ways in which CRP is being repurposed in this contemporary global moment. According to Paris and Alim (2014: 89), “CSP, then, is increasingly needed not only to promote equality across racial and ethnic communities but also to ensure access and opportunity”—

particularly, as it relates to higher paying, knowledge-based jobs that expect its employees to display some familiarity with diverse cultures. I wish to pause here for a moment and linger on the significance of this societal shift in focus—that is, from thinking of culturally relevant pedagogy as a tool for advancing social justice, to one that improves an individual’s life chances. This can be characterized as a shift from minority recognition based on group rights, or the “collective good,” to one that advances the individual by providing her with access to opportunity structures. My intent is not to adjudicate whether this shift is a “good” or “bad” thing, but to mark what globalization (and discourses about globalization) “does” in specific contexts, and to note the incredible transitions that have occurred over the last decade that have made these changes possible.

The second point that Paris and Alim make is regarding the shift in the “culture of power” (Delpit 1988) that destabilizes “White, middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being that were considered the sole gatekeepers to the opportunity structure in the past” (Paris and Alim 2014:89). Findings from my ethnographic study support this observation. Non-heritage families at FACTS expressed their excitement and desire for their children to learn Mandarin and also about Chinese cultural practices, traditions, and history. For those with no Chinese or Asian heritage connection, the interest in Chineseness, and more broadly in cultures that are different from their backgrounds, was not idiosyncratic to FACTS. Rather, the proliferation of Chinese culture and language schools across the nation signals the broader interest of racially and ethnically diverse parents to have their children learn cultural aspects of a new global power. FACTS’ founders had very different intentions—they taught

Mandarin and a number of Asian traditional practices because, as one founding teacher stated, they wanted the school's students, a majority of whom are of Asian descent, to find "[their] own experiences reflected inside the schoolhouse." Nevertheless, the intentions of the school's founders differed from the rationalizations of parents and students. This highlights the changing terrain of the "culture of power," and the cultural practices that are deemed important to know and learn.

Some may view the declining hegemony of white, middle-classness, and the elevated status of a minority culture as a mark of social progress. There was a time not too long ago, certainly within my own lifetime, when it did not hold such cachet. Yet before we launch into unbridled celebration, I wish to make the obvious (but no less important) point that not all minority cultures are equally valued. Since the increased status of Chineseness is integrally tied to the global marketplace, the extent to which particular cultural practices and knowledge are valued depend, in large part, on which nation-states hold power on the international stage. The rules of the game may be different, but because this shift is market oriented and market driven, there continue to be "winners" and "losers." There are new forms of cultural capital beyond white, middle classness, but the system of values, overall, continues to reflect ongoing global inequalities. While Chineseness is now more highly valued globally, what of other marginalized groups and their practices? How do these shifts index new global hierarchies of power, and new inequalities?

Ordinary Ethics as a Conceptual Framework

This dissertation argues that FACTS walks a delicate tightrope between uplifting Asian American heritage and traditions while simultaneously fostering an inclusive, diverse, multiracial community through rituals that train school members' habits of mind and body to express love for oneself and others. I do this through drawing on the principle concept of *ordinary ethics*³ (cf. Lambek 2010), especially as it relates to the following: the value of instilling cultural pride in students through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, the way in which CRP is creatively retooled by parents and students to meet individualized purposes and goals, and the cultivation of an intimate multiracial “family.”

The study of ethics has traditionally been the province of moral philosophers. They have often approached this topic through focusing on aspects of thought, abstract standards, and rules of conduct derived from authoritative traditions (Das 2010:376). Axel Honneth, well known in the field of moral philosophy, attempted to uncover a universal moral grammar, proposing that the struggle for recognition was the basis for conflict in society. According to this logic, the inverse of this was also true: conferring recognition was thought to mollify social conflict and promote social justice. He writes, “Every unique, historical struggle or conflict only reveals its position within the development of society once its role in the establishment of moral progress, in terms of recognition, has been grasped” (Honneth 1995:168). Recognition, then, is seen as being central to the moral development of civilization. The attempt to reveal a deep underlying

³ See second to last section of this chapter (“A Note on Terminology”) for an explanation of the differences between analytic and emic terms.

moral structure does not, however, take into account the surprising, indeterminate, and seemingly contradictory moments of ethical self-fashioning that take place.

As Lambek (2010:12) argues, “ethics is not [only] a matter of smoothly following the rules” but of “freedom and creativity.” In this vein of thinking, the framework of *ordinary ethics* draws on Foucault’s (1990; 1988) understanding of ethics as intentional self-fashioning. Ethics are the practices, demeanors, attitudes, self-discipline, and work performed to transform oneself into a moral being. Foucault’s “ethical turn,” best captured in his later works, can be described as a move away from understanding how the power of discourse and disciplinary institutions produce subjects, to a focus on how the individual constitutes herself as a moral subject. This ethical turn is, at once, both somewhat contradictory to his previous writings on knowledge and power and also complimentary to his former articulation of how the modern human subject is produced (Robinson n.d.). Understanding ethics as an agential process of self-making serves as a corrective to his former writings that were critiqued for being “too structural.”

This approach also contributes another vantage to the study of ethics by moving away from the search for a universal moral grammar or a focus on abstract principles, to an examination of everyday ethical practices. Anthropologists taking this approach have emphasized how self-formation can be studied through “dilemma, reasoning, decision, and doubt” (Laidlaw 2002:315), expressed through mundane thoughts, actions, and language (e.g., Das 2012; Dave 2012; Lambek 2010; Mahmood 2012). As Veena Das (2010:398) poignantly argues, focusing on universal abstractions are “[s]o totalizing that they leave little room for an exploration of the moral projects people might pursue because they assume that all the steps are already taken or that following rules is like

following a pre-given grid.” “[W]hole areas of moral life remain obscure if our picture of morality remains tied to some version of following rules” (Das 2010:376).

The study of ethics, then, should not only examine rule following but also the attempt to change the rules, or ethics vis-à-vis activism. Studying queer activism in India, Naisargi Dave writes:

People are drawn to activism because they have an ethical orientation to the world. They act because they nurture ethical ideals of what the world *ought* to look like. They act out of conflicted beliefs in the possibility of justice. They act in part because they desire the practice of new freedoms that they can only yet imagine, but still strive to enable [2010:371].

This usefully describes the intentions behind the founding of FACTS by a group of activists who envisioned that the school would serve as a vehicle for reimagining education for students of color, and the role of the Chinatown community in the Greater Philadelphia region.

In an interview I had with one of the school’s founders, who was also a board member, I asked her to describe the mission of the school. Her answer to my question clearly expressed that the school’s goals went beyond providing students with strong academics. She talked about how the folk arts was a vehicle for “bridg[ing] the gaps between generation, the gaps between countries of origin and this country.” The school sought to “inculcate values of social justice, and community, and leadership...so that it’s more of a whole child education, not just focused on academics—What does it mean to be moral? What does it mean to live a good life?” Following on the heels of these questions, she suggested that the “good life” had to do with “giv[ing students] a sense of

who they are in terms of where they come from, whether it's from another country or not." She explained:

[T]he assimilation process is a very painful process. I think it cuts people off from who they are, and sometimes it makes people a pale shadow of who you are when you're not really connected to your culture of origin, or your family of origin. So the school's really unique in that sense. It's like, "Yes we want you to have these tools for your success, for your family, and for your community, *and* for you to feel completely proud of who you are no matter where you come from, despite whatever racism, or anti-immigrant things that students are facing in their lives" (emphasis added).

By posing questions about the good life in relation to the school's mission, she was suggesting that FACTS was engaged in a moral undertaking that sought to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, such as the desirability of unilineal assimilation.

Moreover, by connecting the "good life" with "giv[ing] students a sense of who they are" this board member was also challenging the common view that the "good life" is equated with the accumulation of material possessions.⁴ Applying the framework of *ordinary ethics* then allows us to see how FACTS, through ritual and repetition, advances alternative understandings of what it means to live a fulfilling life and worthwhile life. The following subsections discuss the ethics—that is, the everyday ritual practices, the cultivation of habits, and the use of affect—that helped the school advance its dual mission.

⁴ Other board members did not agree with this characterization of FACTS because of the common association of the "good life" with notions of material affluence. As can be expected, different founders and board members had different ways of understanding what the school sought to do and used different language to describe the school. I chose to quote this board member because it imbricates with the analytic framework I used to make sense of what I saw at FACTS.

Ethics and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Much of the literature about culturally relevant pedagogy is explicitly linked to the value of social justice and developing cultural pride. Culturally relevant pedagogy can then be thought of as an ethical practice that nurtures these particular values. This section focuses on formal ways (e.g., the curriculum and programs) in which these values were inculcated into the school, and the later subsections focus on how informal interactions accomplished this. The school cultivated social justice and cultural pride through formal programming that included learning Mandarin, instituting Black Heritage Day, Asian American Heritage Day, and folk arts ensembles such as African dance and drumming, Chinese lion dance, step dance, and Indonesian dance, among other things.

Through applying the framework of ordinary ethics, this dissertation also highlights the unexpected ways in which CRP is being mobilized for still other purposes. Parents and students at FACTS discussed how the school's programs promoted both social justice/collective action *and* individual social mobility. I am specifically thinking of how CRP that focuses on Chinese and Southeast Asian cultural practices were creatively repurposed by non-heritage families, most notably, the school's black families. It's not that these families were opposed to social justice for Asians, or Asian cultural pride. In fact, many of the black students I spoke with had a much deeper and better-articulated understanding of anti-Asian discrimination than I could have expressed at that age. But for non-heritage students, this instructional practice did not align well to the value of developing Asian cultural pride. Social mobility was a significant reason for why they valued FACTS.

CRP that was not particularly “relevant” to the school’s non-Asian students was nonetheless viewed as helping students develop a “new” set of cultural capital—that is, the dispositions, knowledge, and habits of cosmopolitans necessary to strive for the upper middle class. I use scare quotes around the term *new* to highlight that some features are actually a continuation of processes that have already been previously noted and also to draw attention to what is actually “new” about these processes today. Worldliness and cosmopolitanism have long been valued as features of the ruling class. Likewise, education has long been seen as a tool for developing cultural capital and a pathway for social mobility.

However, what is “new” is the heightened consequences of being cosmopolitan (or not). The ability to speak another language (especially one that is valued on the global market), to talk knowledgeably about different cultures, and to engage people who are different is linked to the very future one hopes to construct for oneself—the kinds of jobs that are attainable, the kind of people you can socialize with, and the kinds of neighborhoods you can live in. What is also “new,” then, is that Chineseness is increasingly viewed as being desirable, and performing it counts toward the acquisition of cultural capital. Lastly, what is “new” is the way in which CRP is revised from its original intentions. The tighter connection made between cosmopolitanism and social mobility has manifested in CRP being repurposed by students and parents for the sake of acquiring a particular skill set, *in addition to* its original intention of promoting recognition of a national minority and social justice.

These findings then point to how ethical practices are realigned from the original moral values it is intended to produce. As scholars utilize the framework of ordinary

ethics to highlight the “freedom and creativity” (Lambek 2010:2) of fashioning oneself through ethical practices, it is important to take note of how “freedom and creativity” also aptly describes the process of repurposing those ethical practices to suit a different set of values and aspirations. Ethical practices are unstable, refusing to be tied down to any singular moral value and instead serves the purposes of competing moral values.

Ethics and Forming the Habits of a Multiracial Family

Since the late 1980s, tensions between blacks and Asians in metropolitan areas were reported in the media (Yang 2015). The 1992 Rodney King verdict that led to the LA riots and included the destruction of many Korean-owned businesses fueled the appetite for this storyline—one that unfairly depicted Asians as hardworking victims and blacks as unruly and violent perpetrators. More recently, these tropes have been re-circulated in the unrest over the non-indictment of a police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, and the upheaval in Baltimore over the death of Freddie Gray from spinal injuries he received while in police custody. In both these events, a number of Asian-owned businesses incurred property damage.

An NPR story entitled, “Baltimore Unrest Reveals Tensions Between African-Americans and Asians,” aired on April 30, 2015, claiming, “Many Asian-owned businesses were targeted for destruction.” A few Asian American pundits refuted this, arguing that these were trumped-up claims: “A misleading, hyperbolic and dangerous distraction, one that shifts blame away from the real issues” (Yang 2015). Yang (2015) further argued, “Reinforcing the tired narrative of black-Asian interracial tension generates heat, but not light.” Although Yang criticized the media’s one-sided coverage of these events that mainly focused on instances of interracial tension, rather than

examples of peaceful coexistence and even friendly relations, he conceded, “There were then—and still are—legitimate issues that exist between immigrant storeowners and the largely African American customers they serve that are rooted in extensive cultural differences.”

Setting aside an argument over whether the root cause is “cultural” or structural, even those critical of the media’s depiction of race relations between blacks and Asians, including the people that I met at FACTS, observed that there remains room for improvement. FACTS’ construction of another trope—the trope of a multiracial family—begins to disrupt the “tired narrative of black-Asian interracial tension” (Yang 2015). Teaching students how to care for one another, and to consider as family those who looked different from oneself, set forth an alternative way of imagining black-Asian relations—one that was not only convivial but also familial.

Applying the framework of ordinary ethics in this context helps us see how care and the construction of kinship are ethical practices employed at FACTS to further the values of diversity, interracial harmony, and even intimacy. Lambek (2010:15) argues that since “care signifies...looking after or looking out for, the well being of others...[it] is central to what anthropologists have constructed as the domain of kinship and serves to remind us that kinship is fundamentally a realm of ethical activity.” This was obvious at FACTS where the construction of a multiracial “family,” as students and teachers often referred to themselves, was painstakingly fostered through disciplining⁵ students’

⁵ There were objections to my use of the word *discipline* because of its association with punishment. But I have chosen to keep it here because it expresses precisely what I wish to convey—that is, the repetitive, focused, and intentional efforts of students and teachers to cultivate radical love, cultural pride, and a

mundane, everyday behaviors toward one another so that an ethic of care pervaded students' interactions.

It is often presumed that practice or action come from belief. But as Saba Mahmood (2012:227) argues, "Belief does not precede (or is the cause of) these outward devotional practices but is the product of their apt performance." FACTS' focus on disciplining students' habits of interaction worked to produce in them a value for diversity and difference, not from a distance, but diversity up close and intimate. Teaching students how to care for one another, especially in cross-racial relationships, took aim at small and seemingly insignificant interactions: paying attention when someone spoke, giving affirmation, making eye contact, and stifling the reflex to laugh or make light of a situation. Cultivating these small habits were the basis for instilling in students the belief in the good of engaging with others unlike oneself, particularly across racial lines.

While the scale of these changes falls short of constituting a social movement, these small acts of kindness and care were most certainly aimed at social change and most certainly constituted a moral project, for "morals striving shows up in everyday labors of caring for the other" (Das 2010:399). These practices attempted to create a different kind of future. They attempted to create an interracial sociality that was different from the animus between blacks and Asians often portrayed in the media—

multiracial school family. My use of the word discipline is closely related to the kind of rigorous practice involved when someone strives to become accomplished at something. Those who aspire to be good pianists, dancers, and soccer players submit themselves to hard work and discipline. Similarly, because all of the students I met aspired to the school's values of "car[ing] for one another," "help[ing] ourselves and our community," "honor[ing] their own cultures," (School Pledge), they submitted themselves to the hard work and discipline it took to embody those values.

whether real or overblown. This new interracial ethic not only transformed relations among students but also carried the potential “for intimate aspirations to be realized by all who have to re-create their relations around” (Das 2010:378) these new FACTS friendships, namely parents, and friends outside of school. It is then through “attention to the apparatuses of everyday life”—in this case, habits, endurance, and acknowledgment—that we understand “how everyday life might provide the therapy for the very violation to which it has suffered” (Das 2012:146). In other words, promoting everyday attempts at care and conviviality among students of different races sought to heal the everyday interracial hurt caused by misunderstandings, distrust, and violations.

Ethics, Affect, and Bearing Witness to Difference

The construction of an intimate multiracial family was made possible not only through disciplining habits of interaction among school members but also through bearing witness to one another. According to Michalinos Zembylas (2006), bearing witness is the process of telling one’s subjective story of oppression and pain, in a diverse setting, for the purpose of healing, paving new ways of enduring together, and imagining a more livable collective future. In this way, bearing witness is undoubtedly an ethical practice, anchored in an attempt to envision life differently. This concept borrows from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theory of affect, wherein affect denotes potential, the power to transform, the process of becoming, and the “capacity to affect or be affected” (Massumi 1987:xvii). In that sense, affect does not necessarily refer to emotion, sentiment, or feeling, but *can*, so far as emotions, sentiments, and feelings are concerned, have the capacity to transform others. Because affect is “a process in which one body

acts upon another” it is unequivocally corporeal, as well as relational (Zembylas 2006:309).

Since schools and classrooms are one of the few places where people from different backgrounds and stations in life encounter one another, Zembylas (2006) sees these pedagogical spaces as especially ripe for engaging in issues of difference. He refers to bearing witness in instructional settings as *pedagogical witnessing*. An important aspect of pedagogical witnessing is having “others” present. “Others,” here, refers to several things. Most basically, it refers to having co-witnesses, or someone other than oneself, to be hearers of the story and to make a potential point of connection through it. But it also refers to either an unfamiliar “other,” or an “other” that is all too familiar because of a shared history of conflict, struggle, and hostility.

At FACTS, having racial “others” present occurred during professional development sessions and also in students’ poetry slams that plumbed the depths of their identities. Telling one’s story of embodied difference engages hearers in re-conceptualizing the “other” as subject, or the perspective-taking idiom known as “stepping into someone else’s shoes.” Though this “risks incorporating the Other within the self” (Zembylas 2006:319), Zembylas urges educators to tap into the field of affect when providing opportunities for people to bear witness to injustices and traumas, “not because knowledge of it ‘installs the proper guilt,’” (Zembylas 2006:322) but because “examining affect enriches the possibilities for affective connections that engage someone in modulations of otherness.” These “modulations of otherness” (Zembylas 2006:322) form the basis for radical new possibilities.

This radical openness, in the case of FACTS, can be characterized as creating new possibilities for relating to one another across differences. These new possibilities were premised upon speaking truthfully and honestly about the irreducible differences that existed among members of this multiracial family, developing a sense of response-ability (Zembylas 2006) to one another, and forging a commitment to figuring out the future together. This approach stands in contrast to shallow “feel good” versions of multiculturalism that limit the scope of talking about difference to foods and other politically correct and emotionally neutral topics. It also stands in contrast to attempts at minimizing difference through recourse to our common humanity, or our common national identity as invoked by the term “Obama’s America”—a reading of how the president is re-envisioning America to be more inclusive than ever before, and to heal racial divides by enlisting the ties that bind us as Americans (cf. Reifowitz 2012).

Because at FACTS, pedagogical witnessing occurred in the context of consistent, trusting, and long-standing relationships, it minimized the reification of otherness that can often occur in recognition-based approaches but also in forms of bearing witness in which a person swoops in to tell a compelling story of oppression and swoops out, ultimately leaving a lingering one-dimensional taste. At FACTS, the most painful aspects of difference were laid bare, among family members, for the very purpose of developing real and enduring interracial intimacy.

Ethics and Multiracial Coalitions

As an approach to building multiracial solidarity, bearing witness to difference was a robust alternative to political correctness and abstract references to humanity. The way that members at FACTS mobilized this practice, it also guarded against the tendency

to obscure structural differences that exist among people of color (POC). Because inattention to these differences often occurs in multiracial coalitional efforts, the case of FACTS provides a useful example for learning how to avoid the tendency to gloss over structural difference.

This broader tendency exists among multiracial coalitions that are concerned with making everyone “feel good,” and where mere suggestion that some forms of oppression are more perduring and entrenched than others can be subject to castigation. Or, as Jared Sexton (Sexton 2010:47) argues, “the silencing mechanism par excellence in Left political and intellectual circles today [amount to]: ‘Don’t play Oppression Olympics!’” Sexton refers to the refusal to admit to the specificity of anti-blackness as *people-of-color (POC) blindness*. Similar to how colorblindness refuses to see that race systematically conditions people’s lives, POC blindness does not see that race, even among marginalized people, conditions lives differently. It “presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy—thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others” (Sexton 2010:48).

Because bearing witness at FACTS is predicated on telling stories that emphasize the irreducibly different experiences of racism, it recognizes that anti-Asian and anti-black discrimination take on different forms. That is, even though they come from the same structural foundation of white supremacy, not all experiences of racial oppression are equal. While acknowledging this, the process of bearing witness also indexes the discrepant histories that create different racialized experiences. In other words, by admitting that people-of-color experience racism differently, it also admits that various

forms of racism are structurally different. FACTS' approach to bearing witness worked against POC blindness because it created a school culture in which people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds felt comfortable sharing honestly and openly, *including* about things that might otherwise be awkward to say in mixed company. For example, one teacher talked about how, because of slavery, the experience of being black in America was unlike the experience of being Asian.

I am not concluding that multiracial coalitional-building is a politically useless endeavor. Bringing about more equitable social change requires many imaginative ways of forging political solidarities. I am offering POC blindness as part of my conceptual framework because it provides a useful caution that should be heeded by those wishing to build multiracial coalitions. *Multiracial solidarity*, like its close cousins—*diversity* and *inclusivity*—are often uncritically examined liberal values. POC blindness provides an important and more nuanced way of understanding the challenges that exist within such attempts. Because the *raison d'être* of multiracial coalitions is racial justice, understanding the POC blindness literature, and the case of FACTS furthers this goal by warning of the pitfalls that exist in forming such coalitions. It is in this spirit of critical engagement that I ask the following research question: *As part of the school's ethical attempt to envision and enact a more racially just tomorrow, how do FACTS' school members mitigate the tension produced by its dual mission to cultivate Asian American recognition, on the one hand, and diversity, inclusivity, and multiracial solidarity, on the other?*

Methodology

Not Another School Ethnography

In 1996, Philippe Bourgois, well known for his ethnographic work that highlighted the human costs of structural inequality in communities ravaged by drugs and violence (cf. Bourgois 1996a; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), issued a provocative critique of education ethnographies:

Perhaps the greatest weakness of education ethnographies...remains their arbitrary focus on a single institution—the school—and worse yet, the classroom within the school. Safely denouncing the hidden curricula of repressive pedagogies, most of the radical ethnographers fail to venture into hallways, playgrounds, or the surrounding streets, tenements and housing projects [Bourgois 1996b:251].

Three years later, Bradley Levinson published a rejoinder addressing some of Bourgois's most stringent critiques. In the essay, he maintained, far from being arbitrary, "Schools are terribly important sites for the production of knowledge and symbolic value" (Levinson 1999:595), and "sites of cultural production and identity formation" (Levinson 1999:596). While the anthropology of education, and the anthropology of media share a common interest in youth cultural production, ethnographies of youth and media seem to imply that media, in a postmodern age, has become a more "powerful locus of identity formation than schools" (Levinson 1999:596). Instead of being trapped in a scholarly kerfuffle over whether schools or media are more powerful regimes for the construction of identity, Levinson (1999:596) suggests, "the point is to analyze precisely what *kind* of power they have...[and how this gets] taken up by social actors."

My decision to conduct a "school ethnography" hits on this point that Levinson articulates about the centrality of schools as powerful sites, not only for identity

formation but also, in this case, for forging new lifeworlds, new forms of interracial sociality, and new visions of justice—that is, the stuff that ethics and morals are made of. Yet I do so in a way that pushes us to think of schooling and its relation to power and identity formation, in a somewhat different direction than is customary.

A number of ethnographies that have taken schools as serious sites of fieldwork have done so through the Foucauldian lens of governmentality to show how schools, among other institutions, serve as regulatory regimes (cf. Ong et al. 1996). Foucault's theory reworked Althusser's (1971) more abstract notion of ideological state apparatuses by explaining how power is exercised through institutions that communicate models of normality. Schools, in this regard, produce normalized models of citizenship in students. But because charter schools are decentralized, these kinds of schools no longer simply assimilate students into a homogenous view of American citizenship. Far from being arbitrary, I conducted a school ethnography to better understand how schools today serve as vehicles that challenge dominant notions of citizenship, and are tools that activists use to socialize the younger generation in building a more racially just tomorrow. FACTS' founders, many of who identify as activists, sought to imagine and promote a more racially just tomorrow through combatting anti-Asian discrimination and making a place for Asian American students in Philadelphia to feel comfortable and call home. At the same time, building a more racially just tomorrow also entailed promoting alliances and a collaborative spirit among people of different races.

But perhaps the most serious criticism, I see, of school ethnographies is not that most of the fieldwork is conducted in a school setting. Rather, there is a tendency to compartmentalize what is observed in schools in such a way that it becomes disconnected

from political economy and social history. This delinking hamstrings the ability of educational ethnographers to speak to issues of broad concern, and to engage scholars outside of education in our work. School ethnographies require contextualization at various scales—global, national, regional, and local—in order to draw out the rich implications of our fieldwork. This dissertation then attempts to recuperate the genre of school ethnography by creating these linkages and connections.

Invoking the “I” in Fieldwork

I first set foot in FACTS at the end of the 2010–2011 school year to conduct an interview and to attend their graduation. I found it strange that even then, when I knew no one, I was so moved by the sentiments in the speeches, and the warmth of the singing. Little did I know then, that these annual and daily rituals served as the backbone for fostering feelings of intimacy and trust within their multiracial school family. In spring 2012, I co-produced a short film that introduced me more broadly to the teachers at the school. When I returned in the fall of 2012 for my first “official” day of fieldwork, I was filled with anticipation. A few of the school’s teachers greeted me with “Welcome back!” This felt rather anticlimactic to me, for it seemed to portray the day as *just* a continuation of what had already begun. So I tried to explain that this was, in fact, the *beginning* of my “official” year of fieldwork. I wanted to mark my so-called arrival in the field. This distinction was clearly lost on them, as my words were met with vacant stares and indifferent “okays.” I quickly corrected myself of that bad habit, and from that point on, I approached fieldwork as an opportunity to build on the relationships that were already underway and to forge new ones.

I was interviewing Michelle, a Jamaican mom, about her children's experiences at FACTS. While she had wonderful things to say about the school, she suggested that I talk to other black parents, who were perhaps more critical, to get a fuller perspective. Michelle said that if they harbored negative feelings it might be difficult for me to get the real story from them, because, she cautioned, "You represent FACTS. You are Chinese...you look Asian Chinese." She advised me to get an introduction from someone they knew and trusted like the dean of students, who is African American. Though I didn't end up taking her piece of advice, partly because of logistical challenges, and also because I wanted to create my own relational inroads, I seriously considered her warning. I thought about how my looking "Asian Chinese" influenced what people of various races were willing to say, and what they withheld. This is not to say that relationship-building came automatically with Asians, or that it was a seamless encounter. In fact, some Asian students, as well as one adult quite pointedly, but not unkindly, proclaimed that I must be "rich" because I had the luxury of "volunteering" my time at the school without getting paid. Michelle's cautioning served as a general acknowledgement that race, class, and gender—and the way we "differently (and even idiosyncratically)...inhabit these overly reified social categories" (Jackson 2004:37)—mediated how people "read" me.

To overcome some potential disconnections based on these readings, my overall approach to doing fieldwork entailed creating a high level of comfort so that people would not feel judged by what they said. This sometimes involved divulging information, even if only briefly, about my own background as a first-generation college student, being a product of the NYC public school system, or growing up in a working

class neighborhood. Opening up the “black box” of the ethnographer allowed people to understand the commitments that motivated me to do this work. I cringe at how instrumental this sounds, especially in the context of a methodology section that requires me to spell out how I got the “data,” when “data” refers to people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. But because this is my general approach toward interacting with people in everyday life, it was, in many ways, a continuation of everyday life.

Getting to these levels of comfort meant finding different points of connection with different people. With teachers this sometimes meant recalling my own teaching days in New York City schools and sympathizing with them about the demands of the profession; with parents with young children, this entailed exchanging information about summer programs, or how I recently got “sassed” by my older daughter; with the middle-school boys, this meant talking up my husband’s basketball prowess; with middle-school girls, this involved telling them about how my husband and I got together, or where I procured the dress I was wearing; with middle-school youth in general, this almost always meant hanging out together in a friendship group instead of one-on-one; and with people who made a reference to God, I let them know that I attended the church where many of the school’s special events were held each year.

In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 78 people across the school. In almost all cases, formal interviews were conducted once, and in a few instances the interviews were conducted over the course of a few meetings. They generally lasted for about a half hour to an hour. The people I interviewed included teachers, board members and founders, parents, students, and alumni. They represented the diverse racial and ethnic makeup of the school, with an overrepresentation of black students and parents

because of the unexpected responses I got from them initially. I approached these interviews expecting them to express outrage and discontentment over the primacy afforded to Asian, particularly Chinese cultural practices. Instead, because so many of these early interviews were overwhelmingly positive, even if they noted the lesser focus on black history and traditions, I conducted more interviews, and talked with some people again, to ensure that I was not missing out on more critical perspectives.

Volunteering my time at FACTS had its pros and cons. Because I had no formal title or role in the school, introducing myself to people, and explaining my reasons for being there, always felt more complicated and less legitimate. However, this allowed me the flexibility to float around the school, which was especially key at the beginning, when I wanted to see as many different classrooms and events and meet as many people as possible. The lack of a formal role also allowed me to (re)define myself in relation to different people. In one context, I could draw on my previous teaching experience to be helpful to a teacher. In another context, I could serve as less of an authority figure and more as an older sister to the middle school students (even though I was the same age as some of their parents, they initially assumed I was in college).

Much of my time there was spent negotiating my role as a floating helper during formal class time and as older sister/friend during informal free time. I especially observed subjects in which issues of race, culture, and difference were discussed in the upper-elementary and middle-school grades, like in social studies and English language arts. I was also interested in how various identities were enacted, performed, and explained by students, which I observed during lunch, recess, and other periods of downtime. I spent time in faculty meetings, professional development days, observing

events from the ritual calendar and daily rituals, watching basketball teams play after school and attending field trips.

One instance when this role shifting went awry was when I was asked to watch the class for a few minutes until the substitute arrived. Immediately after the principal left, Jamir and Caleb, two reputed class clowns who I got chummy with over the course of the year, seized the opportunity to create some youthful raucous. Caleb pulled the curtains to the hallway closed in what I interpreted as an effort to conceal what was about to happen in the classroom. After each attempt I made to keep them open, he repeatedly re-closed the curtains. Jamir proceeded to go around to different cliques, provoking their ire by using a feather to tickle various parts of their face. Someone else began to get up on a desk. I saw flashes of the classroom quickly devolving into chaos, and me getting kicked out of the school. Though I could have taken up the role as teacher to manage this behavior, I was uncertain if this would compromise the older sister role that I had been cultivating among students. I ended up saying just enough to get the students in some order, and thankfully the sub arrived soon after.

Invoking the “I” in Analysis

In an article that discusses the possibility of using video technology during fieldwork to rethink the relationship between ethnographer and informants, John Jackson (2004) argues that a more “rigorous reflexivity” than is traditionally conceived in the social sciences is necessary. Demographic categories, like *Asian*, *professional middle-class*, and *woman*, are often invoked in methodology sections to explain how one’s social standing influences the ethnographer’s biases and relationships in the field. However, to simply “grocery-list” (Jackson 2004:37) one’s social identity as a “technique for

exposing one's ideological cards...is to come dangerously close to making little more than empty autobiographic gestures" (Jackson 2004:37). Citing Ruth Behar's (1996) notion of the vulnerable ethnographer, Jackson (2004:37) argues that reflexivity "is not reducible to social taxonomies." Instead, "we are charged to dig deeper, to find out how differently (and even idiosyncratically) we inhabit these overly reified social categories...[and to] trouble the very categories themselves" (Jackson 2004:37). I applied this approach not only to fieldwork, but also to how my previous experiences, and my experiences during fieldwork, shaped the analysis and writing of this ethnography. I tell two stories by way of engaging in a more rigorous reflexivity.

My first full-time job was at a Bronx charter school that served predominantly African American children. I was motivated to work there because of indignation of educational inequalities and because of a naïve understanding of people-of-color solidarity. It's embarrassing to admit it now, but at the time, I thought that because I had black friends, had taken courses on multicultural education, and had experienced racism, that I would fit seamlessly into the school. I was quickly disabused of this simplistic coalitional mentality. During that year, my students asked me questions like, "Do you work at a nail salon?" and "Do you do karate?" There was also a small group of parents that questioned whether I was fit to teach. As rumor had it, they were trying to get me fired. Some parents thought my "cultural background" made me too strict, while others thought that it made me too lenient. In hindsight, their concerns were based on the inconsistent teaching styles I exhibited as a first-year teacher. But they interpreted my inexperience through the lens of widely circulating stereotypes about Asian discipline, on

the one hand, and Asian passivity, on the other. Far from rolling up our sleeves to fight racial oppression together, I was the “other.”

This experience made me both optimistic to see the possibility of people-of-color solidarity forged and also keenly aware of the challenges. I have, therefore, resisted telling a totalizing tale of either triumph or failure. Rather, my aim has been to elucidate both moments that point to new possibilities for interracial sociality and instances that challenge these attempts. Teaching at the Bronx charter school also made me acutely aware of the experience of being a double-minority—that is, being a minority in American society, and in the school context. So when the school’s black students talked about the discomfort of sometimes being oblivious to certain Chinese cultural references, I identified with them...perhaps, I even over-identified with them, laminating my experiences onto theirs. Early on during fieldwork, I was set to tell the story of black students’ outrage over their misrecognition and outright marginalization in a majority-Asian school. While they noted the school’s emphasis of Asian cultural practices, saying that they were outraged would have been a mischaracterization. Importantly, it would have also missed out on their desire to learn about different cultural traditions and practices and their motivations for doing so. Being aware of how this previous experience has shaped me has allowed me correct my “blind spots.”

The second story involves how my relationship with the school’s board members has shaped my analysis and writing. It was a Friday in February 2013 when I was quite literally called into the principal’s office. She was there along with two other school leaders. Although I gained formal permission from the principal to conduct research, board members had questions about my project—and rightly so, since they carry a

responsibility to protect the school's best interest. *What's it about? Where is she going to publish? When? Does the school get to provide input before its published?* The backstory to this deluge of questions came a couple of months before. In November 2012, I contributed an article for a magazine that was publishing an issue on Philadelphia's Chinatown. In the hullabaloo of getting the article out, I neglected to mention the school's founding partners, one of which (AAU) played an important role in Chinatown organizing. Though I vetted the article with two other people from the school, neither I, nor anyone else, caught this oversight. This was an "erasure of history," I was told by the executive director of AAU. My early (mis)representation of their school led some board members to be wary.

During that meeting with the principal, she took out a printed e-mail I had sent to the board chair that had notes written in the margins such as "This is inaccurate" and "I wouldn't say that." I began to justify, almost sentence by sentence, how I came up with each interpretation of the school. Almost everything that I had written came from interviews with people who knew the school's vision well. I received some sympathetic nods. The principal then suggested we come up with a protocol for reviewing my work to alleviate the board's concerns, including the opportunity for board members to give me chapter-by-chapter feedback. I suggested having regular meetings, and perhaps even writing an executive summary. "They probably won't want to read my entire 200-something page dissertation," I lightly joked. The principal then said some board members were likely to read "every page of your dissertation."

The foreboding expectation that my dissertation would be scrutinized has remained with me throughout the writing process. At times, this has helpfully prodded

me to perform analytical due diligence, to consider different perspectives, and to write a more nuanced story. At other times, it has made me overly concerned about events that might portray the school in a negative light. In those moments, I have relied on trusted friends, advisors, and the words and actions of people I met at FACTS to tell this story as earnestly as possible. In the end, despite the initial intent to give me chapter-by-chapter feedback, no one from FACTS read or provided written feedback of the earliest drafts of my dissertation. This is partially because changes in school leadership meant that asking me for drafts of my dissertation probably just fell between the cracks. Quite frankly, I also didn't persist in following up on this since I was reticent of receiving feedback while I was still in the process of working out the finer nuances of my arguments, which were still subject to change.

Once I had a more complete draft of my dissertation, I initiated contact with two board members and met with them in July 2015 to discuss the process of getting feedback and incorporating it into subsequent drafts of my dissertation. I sent them the first complete draft and met with three board members and the new principal in August 2015 and received verbal feedback. After that meeting, they provided extensive chapter-by-chapter written feedback. Then in November 2015, along with members of my dissertation committee, I met with the three board members to discuss the substance of their critiques in an attempt to come to a mutually agreed upon way of incorporating their feedback into the final draft of my dissertation. It is safe to say, this dissertation has been through a rigorous feedback loop, and that customary understandings of "member checks" do not even begin to describe the process.

history, with a lower case “h”

My dissertation interest actually began with Philadelphia’s Chinatown. I moved to Philadelphia from Flushing, Queens, in 2005. I was no stranger to Chinatowns—my father was a chef in New York’s Chinatown during my early childhood, and in my high school years, Flushing began to be dubbed by some as Queens’ Chinatown because of its growing Chinese population and the many Chinese restaurants that dotted downtown Flushing. When I came to Philadelphia, I attended (and still do) a church that was initially established as a community center in 1941. Special events sometimes included Powerpoint slides of grainy, black-and-white pictures that referenced in passing the role of the center and church in the community’s history. The more I learned about Philadelphia’s Chinatown, the more it appeared to me that there was a story that many of its community members ached to tell. Perhaps New York’s Chinatown was too large and too unwieldy, I was too young and politically unaware at the time, or cultural politics just played out differently, but the Philadelphia case seemed compelling to me in a way that New York didn’t.

For one, progressive Asian American activism—a politics that looked beyond Asian American rights—seemed to have a long and rooted history in Philadelphia. I was critical of groups that advocated for justice but remained in the comfort of their “Asian American bubble.” What I encountered in Philadelphia was refreshingly different. The history of progressive Asian American activism in Philadelphia’s Chinatown, and its contemporary mobilization, was really the starting point of my dissertation interests. Though the focus of this project eventually changed, this history—particularly, Chinatown’s struggle against urban “development,” how the community was being

positioned vis-à-vis broader visions of Philadelphia, its role in the political economy of the city, and how these propelled activists to envision and intentionally construct a different future for their community—significantly informs this dissertation.

Conducting this dissertation project entailed learning about the history of Chinatown. As my friend, Savannah Shange, pointed out, there's a difference between telling a broad sweeping "History," and writing a local, highly contextualized, contemporary history, with a lowercase "h." My choice of telling the *history* of Chinatown acknowledges that there are many different versions of this story; it attends to spatial and relational details; and it focuses on a local community as a starting point to understanding its relation to the city and similar processes occurring across the nation. By prioritizing the local community as a starting point, I hope to elucidate in richer detail how decisions from on high come to impact everyday people "on the ground."

In writing about the history of Chinatown, I draw on Nicholas Dirks's (2002:48) encouragement for scholars to "historicize the archive." He argues that though secondary sources are presumed to be "contaminated by interpretation and selection" (Dirks 2002:48) primary sources are not often afforded the same healthy skepticism. The archive is often assumed to be unbiased fact, "the only space that is free of context, argument, ideology" (Dirks 2002:47). Rather, the archive itself, and the documents that constitute it, reflects the political interests of those who created it in the first place. Though Dirks makes this argument in the context of state archives, and my own historical research has led me to examine texts that are stored and created by local, community institutions, I nevertheless found his argument to be a useful one in approaching historical research. In particular, it has led me to consider not only the content of activist-produced

texts, but why the production of these texts was necessary in the first place and what political interests they furthered.

My existing membership at the Chinese Christian Church and Center provided initial entrée and community credibility to institutions like the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC). Through volunteering for one of PCDC's film projects that entailed interviewing Chinatown old timers, I gained access to old photos, videos, and documents, all of which informed my understanding of Chinatown—a few of which I directly used in my history chapter. Additional primary sources were found at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies whose archival collection was acquired by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania when they merged in 2002; Asian American United's digital archive of the Yellow Seeds newspaper from 1971 to 1975; and Philadelphia newspapers from 1983 to 2000, the period in which the construction of the Pennsylvania Convention Center was announced, and a proposal was made to construct a downtown ballpark near Chinatown. In addition to these sources, in 2015 Kathryn Wilson, a professor of history, published a book entitled, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown*: this book helped me piece together many of the seminal events that catalyzed Chinatown's history of activism.

A Note on Terminology

The language of *ordinary ethics*, and other terms drawn from the literature (e.g., culturally relevant pedagogy, bearing witness, recognition) were not terms that people at the school used. These terms were derived from literature. Whenever anthropologists apply theoretical frameworks to understand what they observed in “the field,” it is never

a perfect match. But this is precisely the unique value of ethnography. It allows us to see where the gaps are between theory and practice and to construct better theoretical tools for describing and understanding complex social worlds. I often tell my undergraduate students at Swarthmore College: “Don’t try to shoehorn ethnographic experiences into theory.” The ways in which ethnographic substance *do not* fit theory in a neat and tidy way provides an opportunity to push theory in new directions. It strengthens the explanatory power of theoretical frameworks. Using theoretical terms is necessary though because a dissertation is a work of scholarship that seeks to engage a scholarly audience. My use of theoretical terms to describe the school created some friction though since board members felt like I wasn’t adequately describing their school using their emic terms. I address this critique in three ways.

First, by writing detailed ethnographic accounts of the school’s practices, the quotes and descriptions themselves reveal the mismatch between scholarly terms and practice. That is, although the terms may not be familiar to people at FACTS, the ethnographic descriptions should resonate with practitioners at the school (even if they would have taken a different analytical tack, or drawn a different conclusion—this is the very subjective nature of ethnographic work). Second, I attempt to parse out what terms are derived from the literature, and what terms school members used to describe their practices, throughout this dissertation but particularly in this chapter. For example, instead of saying, “FACTS confers recognition to marginalized students,” I revised sentences to read more like this: “Scholars refer to recognition as a way of conferring greater representation to marginalized groups. FACTS reflects its students of color through...” Third, because qualifying every sentence by stating whether the term is emic

or etic decreases readability, I also provide the table below that lists the main terms that I used and the kind of language that FACTS used to describe their practices:

<u>Etic Terms</u>	<u>Emic Terms</u>
Recognition	Uplifting cultural heritage
Ordinary ethics; morals; good life	Values
Multicultural education; CRP	Folk arts education; antiracist pedagogy

Finally, in one case, the differences were so substantive that it warranted the addition of a whole new chapter. As board members pointed out, a folk arts education is very different from what people commonly think of when multicultural education comes to mind.

Because of that, chapter 3 focuses on parsing out these differences and what they mean for advancing the school's dual goals.

Overview of Chapters

In all truth, if I were to take part in the grueling work of establishing a school, it would look like FACTS. The more I learned about the school, the more impressed I was with its sophisticated and complex understandings of social justice. As an Asian American, I wholeheartedly identified with the need to advocate for this minority group. Moreover, having lived in Philadelphia for the last 10 years, I have garnered a better understanding of the urban political landscape and how the scant political power of Asian Americans necessitated groups like Asian Americans United (AAU).

Moreover, my racial politics and understandings of social justice run broader and deeper than my commitment to Asian Americans. This, in large part, has to do with my belief that Asian Americans have benefited from the advances of the civil rights movement and that understanding anti-Asian racism hinges on an understanding of the

paradigmatic case of anti-black racism. All that is to say that I approach studying the tension that exists in FACTS not as someone who stands above these issues, or even as a dispassionate observer. Rather, I am cheering for the school and for what it is trying to accomplish. It is in this spirit that I have written this dissertation, and it is in this spirit that I hope it will be read.

This dissertation argues that America's two vaunted liberal values of recognition and diversity produce a tension in attempts to build interracial coalitions. In the case of FACTS, this is mitigated, intentionally, through constructing an intimate multiracial family that entails disciplining students' body, ways of thinking, and comportment to convey care for themselves and for others. It is mitigated, unexpectedly, through the rationale that learning to be familiar with the unfamiliar cultivates global cosmopolitans that are befitting of the professional class.

Chapter 1, "The Quest for Equality," provides the background for understanding the rise of these American values, the *ordinary ethics* theoretical framework for examining my research question, and a methodological discussion that focuses more on issues of reflexivity and positionality and less on quantifiable numbers in order to move away from positivist assumptions that still undergird much of the social sciences today. All these sections collectively argue for the significance of my research question and how the case of FACTS speaks more broadly to issues of perduring concern regarding how to achieve racial equality today.

Chapter 2, "Origin Stories," is a local history of Chinatown activism particularly as it relates to competing visions of the neighborhood and how it stood against notions of a "modern Philadelphia" predicated on corporate business and tourism. As the title

alludes, by chronicling Chinatown history, readers will have a better understanding of the school's origin stories—that is, how incursions to Chinatown space articulated founders' concern with promoting Asian American activism and multiracial solidarity. Both of these were foundational to the establishment of the school and its political philosophical approach that continues to guide its daily practices and that animates the central tension in the school.

Chapter 3, “This is ~~Multicultural~~ Folk Arts Education,” discusses the unique characteristics of folk arts education and how it differs from popular understandings of multicultural education. I discuss how feedback from board members catalyzed the addition of this chapter. In doing so, I also touch upon the politics of ethnographic representation and the always-fraught nature of these endeavors. By treating these feedback meetings as “*all* part of the ethnographic process,” as one of my committee members likes to remind me, I highlight how ethnography is not an undertaking to objectively describe the world but rather a process of negotiation. It is *one* among many possible renderings of a small corner of Philadelphia. I also discuss how, far from the caricatures that educational and anthropological literature make of folklore (and its cognates—folk life and folk arts), FACTS founders defined this in ways that were non-essentializing, that emphasized tradition as practiced and living, and that viewed folk arts as a basis for collective action and antiracist pedagogy.

Chapter 4, “Rituals of Multiracial Kinship,” closely examines FACTS' intentional practices for mitigating the tension produced by its focus on Asian Americans and multiracial solidarity. It argues that the school carefully cultivated an intimate multiracial school “family” by assiduously disciplining students' corporeal acts and modeling what

interactions between people, including people of different races, could or should look like as expressions of care. These prefigurative models of race relations were substantively different than black-Asian relations observed in South Philly and broader American society. I also discuss how a social studies unit was designed to create a parallel between Chinatown (an iconic Asian American community), and South Central Philly (a historically black neighborhood) and served to create a sense of shared history and intimacy among students.

Similarly, Chapter 5, “Bearing Witness to Difference,” continues to discuss the school’s intentional practices of cultivating an intimate multiracial family through examining the practice of bearing witness. This practice can be described as telling one’s own personal story of oppression in a way that plumbs the depths of difference that exist among school members. Bearing witness stands in contrast to other approaches to dealing with difference: most notably, recourse to our common humanity and politically correct stances that simply skim the surface of difference. Despite, or maybe even in light of these differences, FACTS members created a commitment to collectively imagining and enacting more convivial forms of interracial sociality that served as a prefigurative politics of race relations.

Chapter 6, “Making Global Cosmopolitans,” discusses the surprising way in which black families repurposed the school’s dual goals. Instead of being outraged or even miffed by the school’s special commitment to Asian American families, black parents and students suggested that being in an Asian-majority school and its emphasis on Asian (particularly Chinese) traditions and language, equipped students with the cultural wherewithal necessary for aspiring to the professional class. The emergence of

China as a global superpower further played into the rationalization that attending FACTS would provide them opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.

Chapter 7, “The Cunning of Coalition,” suggests that, generally speaking, challenges remain in building multiracial solidarity, but that FACTS provides a hopeful example of the possibilities. In aspiring to build multiracial coalitions, particularly among people of color (POC), many groups and movements fall prey to conflating the discrepant histories that POC come out of, or represent the conditions of national minorities as structurally equal. Specifically, obscuring the singularity of anti-blackness and the legacy of slavery that creates these conditions would compromise the progressive politics and the goal of liberation that undergird attempts at building multiracial coalitions. FACTS’ school community culture that encourages members to speak freely and openly, and to speak to different embodied experiences of oppression and the different histories that make for these experiences, facilitates acknowledgement that anti-black racism is unlike anti-Asian racism. These practices provide a model to avoid flattening the category of “people of color” in the hopes of building cross-group solidarities.

Chapter 8, “Inscribing New Futures,” teases out the political implications of the practices I have described for building cross-race solidarities. I discuss the potentialities of bearing witness as an alternative approach to dealing with difference. I suggest paths for future research, as well as articulate what I hope young educators and activists will derive from this dissertation in their hopes of inscribing a different, more liberating future.

CHAPTER 2

ORIGIN STORIES

This history chapter explains how the school’s founding was born out of events related to the incursion of Chinatown space and large-scale urban development projects that sought to make a “modern Philadelphia.” Through chronicling moments of Chinatown activism and situating them in Chinatown and Philadelphia politics, this chapter discusses the various visions of the community that were animated over the course of several decades. This brings into relief the school’s “different vision” of Chinatown, which countered a prevailing narrative that the community was important mainly because it served the city’s interests in promoting business and tourism. Challenging this vision of Chinatown, the founders of the school, who were also local activists, focused on the rights of Asian Americans to self-determination, and of asserting Chinatown as a *community* (i.e., not simply a tourist destination). This vision of *community* is what the school’s founders refer to as folk life, characterized by face-to-face interactions, everyday life, and traditions passed down. At the same time that Asian American recognition was emphasized, this history also reveals a long-standing concern with forging alliances with other marginalized communities. By providing a genealogy of the school’s political philosophy—and its understanding of social justice that dually focused on Asian American recognition, on the one hand, and a concern for other groups, on the other—this chapter teases out the tension that existed within the school’s founding history. In other words, these are the origin stories of FACTS.

American Cities, Capitalism, and Highways

After World War II, Philadelphia garnered the reputation of a blighted city in decline. This was in large part due to concomitant factors related to the restructuring of industries, postwar decline in manufacturing jobs, and suburbanization. As the middle class moved out to the suburbs, the city and its businesses suffered. During this period, two major department stores—Lit Brothers and Snellenberg—closed down, and Gimbels was considering relocating out of the city (Artigas and Wang n.d.). It was remarked that the heyday of city living seemed to be over (Twenty-Five Years (almost) after the Chinese Wall 1976).

Heralding a new redevelopment plan for Center City, Edmund Bacon, an urban architect and planner who served as the executive director of the Philadelphia Planning Commission from 1949 to 1970 (Artigas and Wang n.d.), sought to carry out on his master vision for the city. These large-scale transformations of the city included the development of Penn Center (a four-block downtown business district bounded by JFK Boulevard, Market Street, and 15th to 19th Streets) (Penn Center, Philadelphia 2015), Market East (a shopping district running along Market Street between 9th and 12th Streets) (Market Street, Philadelphia 2015), Independence Mall (a three-block area of the Independence Historical District bounded by Race Street to the north, Chestnut Street to the south, and 5th to 6th Streets) (Independence Mall, Philadelphia 2015), Penn's Landing (a waterfront area along the Delaware River on the east side of the city) (Penn's Landing, Philadelphia 2015), and Society Hill (a neighborhood roughly bounded by Walnut, Lombard, Front, and 8th Streets that was one of the first urban renewal programs that focused on historic preservation selectively) (Society Hill, Philadelphia 2015; cf.

Bacon 1959; Knowles 2009). The enormous scale of these projects, and its effects on the people it displaced, cannot be understated. A 1964 *Time* cover story featured Bacon and his urban renewal projects. The author of the article likened the process to “emergency surgery,” because “considerable pain is involved, and sometimes shock,” and the “inevitable destruction of healthy tissue.” Bacon’s plan drastically reconfigured the infrastructure of the city, earning him the moniker, the “Father of Modern Philadelphia.” Referring to Bacon’s redevelopment of Center City, Kathryn Wilson, historian of Philadelphia’s Chinatown, noted the following: “At heart, this plan, like many of the period’s urban-renewal schemes, ‘sought to replace social and geographic history of the city with a mythical future’ that was scientific, corporate, and efficient” (Wilson 2015:65).

Despite the scale of urban change that occurred during the postwar period, Philadelphia was not a unique case. Cities and metropolitan areas across America were drastically transformed during this time. Robert Moses built a system of highways in New York that entailed the “total engineering of...the whole metropolitan region” (Harvey 2008:27). Edward Logue, their Boston counterpart, likewise favored major public projects, building and rebuilding sites that included Faneuil Hall-Quincy Market, Government Center, and Scollay Square (Dunlap 2000). David Harvey (2008:33) has referred to these processes of urban restructuring as *creative destruction*—processes by which the destruction of old buildings, streets, and infrastructures make way for the new. “Violence is required to build the new urban world on the wreckage of the old” (Harvey 2008:33).

As massive changes were wrought to urban infrastructure, society, and politics in the 1940s, these changes succeeded in propping up a capitalist system that was weakened during the Great Depression era of the 1930s when high rates of unemployment created social discontent, and surplus products went unabsorbed (Harvey 2008:26). Just as World War II provided a boost to capitalism by absorbing capital-surplus as a result of military production, the grand plans to utterly transform cities across America continued to power capitalism. While *creative destruction* refers more specifically to physical transformations, it is just as apt to speak of the creative destruction of former ways of life and political commitments. These newfound commitments included protecting a particular quality of life and the right to individual private property over and above the collective good.

Suburbanization not only transformed physical infrastructures but also created new ways of life, personas, and ethics (Harvey 2008:26). The so-called good life now consisted of home ownership, refrigerators, air conditioners, two cars in the driveway, the unparalleled consumption of oil and other natural resources (Harvey 2008:26), and periodic shopping excursions to the city to acquire the best new products. Concomitant with these changes, politics shifted to conservative republicanism as the defense of individual property and goods overshadowed values of community, collective action, and the common good (Harvey 2008:26). Saddled down with debt in order to satiate consumerist appetites, it was reasoned that workers were less likely to go on strike for fear of loss of pay and their jobs (Harvey 2008:27).

Cities were re-created as epicenters of tourism, fashion, food, and a consumerist lifestyle. Bacon and other city planners imagined that middle-class suburbanites would

be the main drivers of a thriving urban economy (Artigas and Wang n.d.). They could come into the city, indulge in these delights, and retreat back to the safety and greenery of suburban living. The main urban planning obstacle was to find a relatively quick and easy way for suburbanites to enter the city, spend money, and leave (Artigas and Wang n.d.). Construction of an integrated highway system was proposed as the very solution to this problem. Bacon's master plan for Philadelphia relied on car accessibility to Center City by way of highways. Since the mass production of cars in the 1920s, automobiles became a part of everyday life for the middle class. Stanching the effects of suburbanization and revitalizing the city center then required accommodating this new car-based lifestyle.

In 1945 the Philadelphia City Planning Commission first presented the idea of the Vine Street Expressway (I-676) that would run along Vine Street from the western end of the city near the Philadelphia Museum of Art, to the east side of the city, cutting through the northern boundaries Chinatown (Vine Street Expressway [I-676 and US 30] n.d.). Estimated to cost \$26 million at the time (Vine Street Expressway [I-676 and US 30] n.d.), it was intended to be the northern part of a planned highway loop that connected the Schuylkill Expressway (I-76) to the west, the Delaware Expressway (I-95) to the east, and the proposed Cobbs Creek Expressway (I-695) to the south, running across the city along South Street (Cobbs Creek Expressway (I-695, Unbuilt) n.d.).⁶ Although the Center City highway loop was an integral piece of Philadelphia's postwar development

⁶ The I-695 was never constructed due to community protests and opposition. Interestingly, the shared history and community opposition to this extensive highway loop—the I-695 in the case of South Philly, and the I-676 in the case of Chinatown—was used by teachers at FACTS to highlight the black and Asian community's shared struggle and served as a point of solidarity.

plan to draw people back into the city (Vine Street Expressway [I-676 and US 30] n.d.), the funding to complete these projects were lacking and did not materialize until more than a decade after it was initially proposed.

In 1957 the Vine Street Expressway was again proposed but this time as part of the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 (Louis Berger and Associates, Inc. 1998). The word “defense” appears in the title of the act because some of the money came from defense funding and because having an interstate highway system was rationalized as a defense strategy that allowed military forces to quickly mobilize in the case of an attack (Congress Approves Federal Highway Act, June 26, 1956, HISTORY.com n.d.; Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 2015). When President Eisenhower signed the bill into law, federal funding to the tune of \$25 billion was authorized for the construction of 41,000 miles of the interstate highway system that would eventually stretch across the 48 contiguous states (Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 2015). Ninety-percent of the cost of constructing the Vine Street Expressway was funded by federal money, and the rest was apportioned between state and municipalities (Vine Street Expressway [I-676 and US 30] n.d.). With the infusion of federal money, construction of the Vine Street Expressway began in earnest.

The construction of this integrated highway loop, among other highways built across the country, contributed to temporarily calming the crisis of capitalism. That is, to maintain its own survival, capitalism has a “perpetual need to find profitable terrains for capital-surplus production and absorption” (Harvey 2008:24). The immense infusion of federal money for the development of interstate highways absorbed capital-surplus, which in the process stabilized employment, and amassed significant wealth for

capitalists with the means to take advantage of the situation. This is one of the reasons why Harvey (2008:24) argues that “urbanization has always been... a class phenomenon.” The dynamics of class conflict can be observed through the literal rebuilding of the city, and in how the city itself is a site for various means of producing and absorbing surplus-capital. Capital accumulation lies in the hands of the few, while the labor of the masses are exploited.

Moreover, class conflict is made manifest in urban restructuring when considering whose interests are prioritized in these schemes. In Bacon’s urban development plans, the interests of the middle class are privileged over those of the poor and working class. Suburban middle-class consumers were imagined to be the main beneficiaries of the construction of the Center City highway loop. The urban and metropolitan landscape was transformed to meet the needs of this group. Buildings were torn down and rebuilt at the expense of those remaining in the city—that is, those who were predominantly minority, poor, and working class.

It then comes as no surprise that these urban renewal plans touched off a series of protests from members of communities that were either at risk of (or had already experienced) displacement as a consequence of making a “modern Philadelphia.” In many instances, the violent creative destruction of communities was carried out under the auspices of eminent domain (Community Displacement in Philadelphia 2015). These government-initiated and funded projects created a recipe for the conflagration of competing interests and claims. Standoffs between community members and the state were waged not only on the grounds of the physical landscape but also, importantly, on issues pertaining to the rights of minorities and the working class in an espoused

democratic nation. This included the right to self-determination and the right to living a particular way of life that entailed “social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values” (Harvey 2008:23).

The Save Chinatown Movement

By the time the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was finally repealed in 1943, Philadelphia’s Chinatown grew and transitioned from a bachelor society to a more “family-oriented community as enlisted Chinese servicemen brought ‘war brides’ to America” (Balch Institute 1998). During this time, various social, cultural, and religious organizations were established to meet the community’s growing needs including the Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church and School (1941), Chinese Christian Church and Center (1941), Chinese Gospel Church (1952), the Chinese Benevolent Association (1951), and the YMCA also known as the Chinese Cultural and Community Center (1955) (Balch Institute 1998).

However, even as the Chinatown population grew, its geographic boundaries were hemmed in, significantly hindering its expansion. In the earliest threat to Chinatown’s existence, Independence Mall, which began development in 1963, displaced 25% of Chinatown’s homes and businesses that were located east of Ninth Street (History of Chinatown n.d.; Wilson 2015:73). Cecilia Moy Yep, a young Chinese American widow with three children at the time, was right in the crossfire of construction. Between 1960 and 1966, her and her neighbors’ homes were systematically cleared out and acquired by the city without notice of what the larger plans were or residents’ rights (Wilson 2015:74). Yep explained:

[It was] the early 1960s [when] a lot of the properties on the east side of Ninth Street were taken, commercial, residential. People were relocated without knowing what their rights were. We were just told the city was just taking their property, knocking them down, and we all had to move. We had no relocation rights. . . . [T]hey just said, ‘You have to move, and this is what we’re giving you for your property. If you don’t like it, take us to court.’ [Wilson 2015:74]

Ignoring the city’s demand to vacate, Yep stayed put. “I refused to move, because basically there was no place to move to. There was no decent affordable housing in Chinatown. Most of the houses were over a hundred years old” (Wilson 2015:74). Yep recalled the systematic acquisition of properties on Ninth Street. “I was the only house standing on the whole block from Race to Filbert. From Ninth to Eighth. My electric bill was unbelievable—300 something every month. My gas bill, to try to heat that place for the kids.” Proudly, she recalled how her situation was referred to as “‘Chinatown Alamo’ because it was the only house standing on the whole block. And I refused to move out of it” Wilson 2015:74).

On the southern border of Chinatown, Market Street East development served as a shopping destination, especially with the construction of the Gallery Mall later on. But according to most Chinatown community members, news of the impending construction Vine Street Expressway was what really galvanized Chinatown because it meant the immanent destruction of a key community institution. As construction moved forward with the Vine Street Expressway, Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church and School (HR) was slated for demolition. HR served as one of Chinatown’s only recreational spaces, hosting basketball games, community meetings, weddings, and funerals (Yee 2012:25). When Chinatown community members first caught wind of the fate of HR during a public meeting at the Free Library in 1966, they were informed that it would be

razed in order to create a depressed highway, complete with service roads and ramps, even wider than the 12-lane Vine Street (Yee 2012:25). This catalyzed the community



Figure 1. Children protesting the proposed demolition of Holy Redeemer School, Apr. 8, 1966. Permission and Source: *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

into action, and “HR became the icon of the Chinatown struggle” (Yee 2012:25). In a photo, dated April 8, 1966, children are seen marching outside of HR, carrying signs that read, “Save Holy Redeemer,” “Where will I go to School?” and “What about me?” (Figure 1).

This was Chinatown's foray into community organizing, and there were many lessons to learn. As part of the mobilizing effort, the Committee for the Preservation and Advancement of the Chinatown Community was formed as an arm of the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA). CBA was the "traditional governing body" (Yee 2012:25) of Chinatown and mainly consisted of first-generation Chinese immigrants. In 1969, the committee broke away from CBA, was incorporated as a non-profit organization, and became the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC). Cecilia Moy Yep was instrumental to the founding of PCDC, and in 1976 she became its executive director. PCDC's first task was to gain approval from the older generation, represented by CBA, to serve as the recognized voice of Chinatown in matters of urban development. Though some conflict emerged over whether such an "Americanized" organization should represent Chinatown, in large part PCDC became Chinatown's mouthpiece because of the English fluency and higher formal education of its leadership and members (Yee 2012:25). As the default leader of the Save Chinatown Movement, PCDC built a coalition of people and organizations that stretched across barriers of language, religion, politics, and generation.

Though this coalition organized around the struggle for urban space, it is important to remember that their claims were also connected more broadly to issues of cultural citizenship, and to self-determination. According to Wilson (2015:63), the Save Chinatown Movement was part of a "larger movement that defined Chinatown's claims to land and resources in the context of citizenship, history, and cultural worth" (Wilson 2015:63). Saving Chinatown was not merely about the survival of brick-and-mortar institutions, or having the "individual liberty to access urban resources" (Harvey

2008:23), but more centrally about the “right to change ourselves by changing the city” (2008:23).

This message was apparent in artifacts from 1973—a year that Mary Yee, a central figure in the movement, referred to as “momentous” (Yee 2012: 29). In a bilingual English and Chinese flyer that advertised an Easter rally and town hall meeting to protest construction of the Vine Street Expressway, a sentence on the one pager read: “As taxpayers, the community has the right and the responsibility to determine its future.” (Figure 2). Touching upon a similar theme that highlighted the rights of tax-paying citizens, another protest sign in a photo read: “Your Taxe\$ at Work.” In this

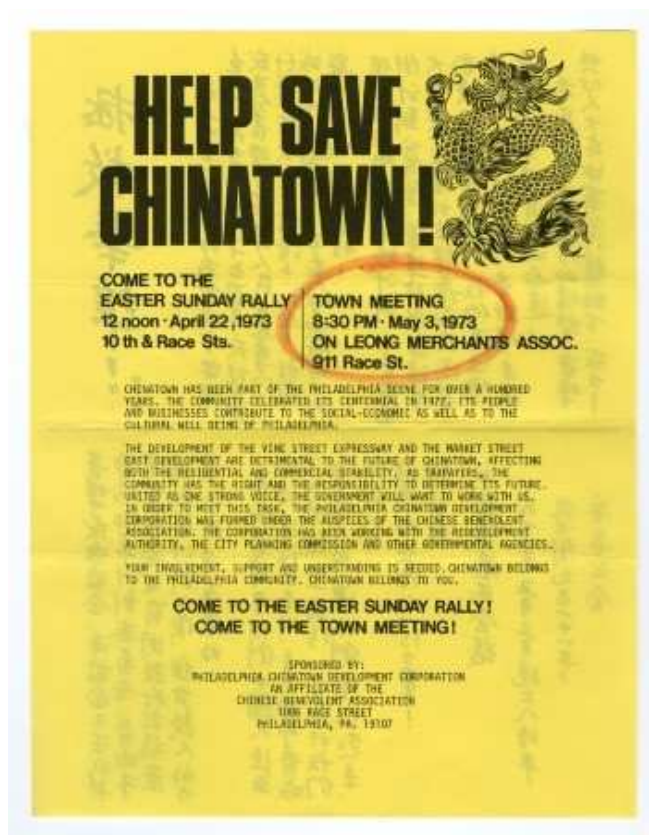


Figure 2. Bilingual English and Chinese flyer advertising Easter rally and town meeting to protest Vine Street Expressway plan, 1973. Permission and Source: Rev. Dr. Yam Tong Hoh Papers. Historical Society of Pennsylvania

surreal photo, dated August 3, 1973, 18 people sit atop a heap of rubble as the imposing jaws of an excavator hover ominously over them, threatening to swallow up the protestors in one mouthful (Figure 3).

The emphasis on being taxpayers, which appears in these protest paraphernalia, were meant to both encourage Chinatown community members to claim the rights of citizens in a democratic nation, and also to point out to public officials the discrepancy between the ideals of democracy and its reality, especially for marginalized groups. In an ideal democratic system of government, citizens are afforded equal rights and have a say in determining their own future. The government is expected to work *for* the people and



Figure 3. Protesters sit on top of a pile of rubble in Chinatown, Aug. 3, 1973. Permission and Source: *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

represent the will of the people. In practice, the decision to construct the Vine Street Expressway and the proposal to bulldoze HR was depicted by protest leaders as stomping on Chinatown's "right and responsibility to determine its future" (See Figure 2, Easter rally advertisement).

Protest leaders explicitly framed their message in these terms. In an archival video from the 1973 Easter Rally, banners and yellow balloons billow in the wind as a young woman is seen standing on a stage, delivering an impassioned speech (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Screenshot from video of protest leader during the 1973 Easter rally. Permission and Source: *Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation*.

In an excerpt from the speech, she argues the following:

Now saving Chinatown is not just an issue of preserving a number of houses and businesses that just happen to be Chinese. More significantly, the movement is based on the issue of self-determination—that is, the right of the Chinese

community to take part in making decisions that affect it. We see this as democratic right long recognized in principle in the tradition of American government. However, the course of events in the last six years has demonstrated to us, that rather than being a right duly granted to us, it is a right that we must struggle to exercise (PCDC 40th anniversary video).

She ties the instrumental goal of “preserving a number of houses and businesses” with the broader ideological goal of self-determination—“that is, the right of the Chinese community to take part in decisions that affect it.” Moreover, by stating that these homes and businesses are not incidentally Chinese, or in her words, they don’t just “happen to be Chinese,” she maintains that the movement is about claiming rights for ethnic minorities in America. She further states that this “democratic right [is] long recognized *in principle* in the tradition of American government” (emphasis added) to point out the contradiction that exists between the espoused value of cultural pluralism in Western liberal nations like America, and the racial barriers to becoming *true* citizens (cf. Hall 2002). In practice, rather than according equal rights to all citizens, some citizens are valued over others. The course of events related to the Vine Street Expressway reveal how, for Chinese Americans, it is not a “right duly granted to us, it is a right that we must struggle to exercise.” Because racial and ethnic difference is the basis for exclusion, it also forms the basis for claiming equal rights. Advancing social justice is articulated in terms of claiming rights for racial and ethnic minorities in a democratic nation—a claim that both the radical, and the moderate factions of the coalition deployed.

For example, PCDC, the more pacifistic and accommodating group in the coalition, asserted community members’ rights based on democratic principles. In a

“Statement of the Chinatown Community—October 1973,” PCDC articulated the following:

We believe that the highway and urban renewal projects surrounding Chinatown, as presently conceived, would only act as a noose—preventing expansion and growth according to the needs of the Chinese community. We ask that Chinatown be accorded its rightful democratic demand to be able to participate in the decision-making process which directly affect it.

This excerpt articulates the image of urban development plans acting as a “noose” around Chinatown, “preventing expansion and growth...of the Chinese community.” The imagery of the noose circulated in other protest artifacts as well. The community’s “rightful democratic demand to...participate in the decision-making process” makes allusions to how, in a democracy, this right should be afforded to all citizens, including ethnic minorities.

While maintaining this right to difference, PCDC takes an integrationist approach. It positions Chinatown as integral to Philadelphia, stating that it is a “significant part of the City’s social fabric and [that it makes] a worthy contribution to its commercial life” (Statement of the Chinatown Community, October 1973). PCDC continues to align Chinatown with other communities around the city by stating, “Our goals are no different from those of other communities” (Statement of the Chinatown Community, October 1973). It then lists issues of common concern across communities including the opportunity for residential and commercial growth, community facilities, and “resources to plan for the future” (Statement of the Chinatown Community, October 1973). In yet another part of the statement, PCDC allies Chinatown with modernist notions of “progress.” In response to charges that leverage stereotypical understandings of Chinese

culture as traditional, and therefore anti-modern, PCDC asserted the following: “Recent events have led people to believe that the Chinese community is against progress—against the City’s attempt to promote commerce and revitalize the inner core. That is untrue” (Statement of the Chinatown Community, October 1973). By resolutely asserting that it is not against “progress” or the “revitaliz[ation] of the inner core,” PCDC is arguing for a voice in the process. In other words, it is advocating for Chinatown community members’ democratic right to representation in a political economic system that is left largely intact.

In contrast, the Yellow Seeds—the more radical and self-proclaimed militant group in the coalition—struck a far less conciliatory tone. Established in 1971, according to its inaugural publication, Yellow Seeds provided services to the Chinatown elderly such as English tutoring and legal aid; they also published the only bilingual Chinese-English newspaper in the Philadelphia area (1972–1977). They were of course also known for the protest material they produced during the Save Chinatown movement. In another artifact from 1973, a map depicts these urban development plans as a “noose around Chinatown” (Yee 2012: 24), with the following message at the top: “Save Chinatown!! Stop the Cultural Genocide!!” (Figure 5). This intentionally provocative message conveys that urban development plans were killing off the social and cultural life of this community. The visual representation, combined with text, provided a graphically effective means of rallying community members because it conveyed the violence and creative destruction wrought to Chinatown and the Chinese community in Greater Philadelphia.

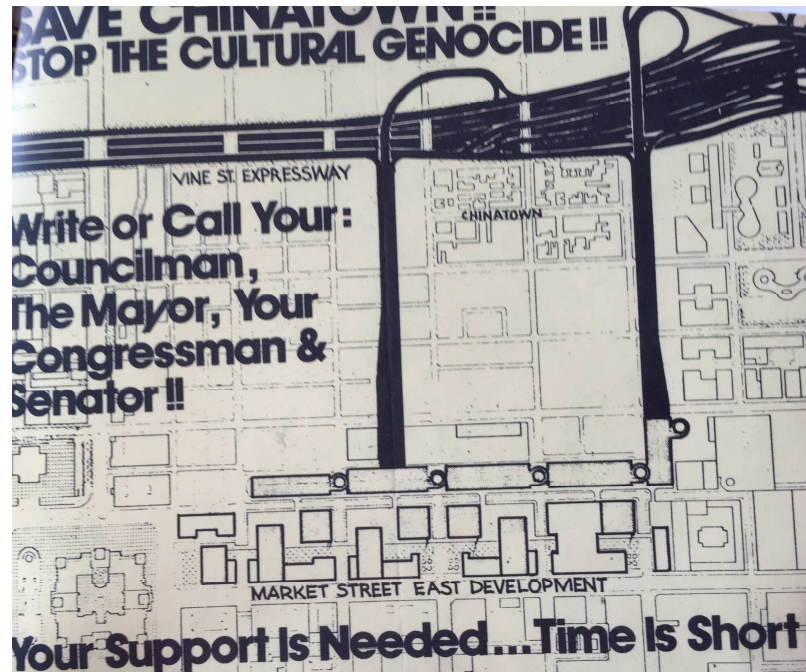


Figure 5. Protest paraphernalia and claims of cultural genocide against Chinatown, 1973. Permission and Source: *Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation*.

In

a broadside flyer produced by Yellow Seeds (Figure 6), like PCDC, it draws on the notion of minorities “stand[ing] up and fight[ing] for their democratic rights. It asserts, “Decent housing is a democratic right!!” The Yellow Seeds, however, took a more anti-capitalist stance decrying the very premise of revitalizing the inner core by making it a center for commerce and big business.

These projects are all geared to bring in more people from the suburbs to buy merchandise from the big department stores like Gimbels. Market St. East is just a new huge complex of business to which the Expressway and the Commuter Rail Tunnel will funnel in more and more shoppers so that big business can make more and more profits. We can see from this that the Government is a tool of the monopoly capitalists to protect them and their profits... In the long run Chinatown will gain nothing unless the people stand up and fight for their democratic rights. The capitalistic system under which we all live understands only one word—profits—all at the expense of the working class who creates and builds everything. We cannot rely on misleaders like PCDC, CBA, or T.T. Chang to lead us in these struggles. Their blind faith in the government and the legal system will only lead our struggles down a dead end. Our true rights can only be

won through a change in our system brought about by the militant action of the working class [Yellow Seeds broadside flyer].



Figure 6. Yellow Seeds broadside protesting the Vine Street Expressway, Apr. 1973. Permission and Source: Balch Institute

Though agreeing on the point that Chinatown community members needed to exercise their democratic rights to participate in determining its own future, the Yellow Seeds were clearly at odds with PCDC’s position that tended to toe the political line. It opposed big businesses and distrusted community leaders, who they believed would lead them “down a dead end.” Instead, they advocated for solidarity among the working class and among other minority groups.

According to the Balch Institute, the slogan for this broadside read, “Same Struggle, Same Fight.” Yellow Seeds members saw a connection between the Save Chinatown movement and the “social justice struggles of African-Americans, Latinos,

and other ‘minority and working people.’” In one of the earliest publications that included a mission statement, Yellow Seeds stated that it sought to “participate in all the struggles for the promised—yet denied—democratic rights of Asian people in this country.” Yet they understood that this required “unit[ing] with all oppressed people...[and] work[ing] together with other Third World organizations and progressive white friends on various projects” (Yellow Seeds, undated).

As Tamara Nopper (n.d.) notes, the organization was an important forerunner to progressive Asian American activism. As such, Yellow Seeds heavily influenced Asian American United’s (AAU) political philosophy. Both organizations worked to advance Asian American rights, while simultaneously cultivating “broader multiracial coalitions” (AAU website). It is apparent that Yellow Seeds served as the intellectual and political progenitor of AAU when noting that Mary Yee served as founder of both organizations and that AAU was chosen to inherit the Yellow Seeds archives. An understanding of the role that the Yellow Seeds played in the Save Chinatown Movement then informs an understanding of the mission and work of FACTS.

“This Is, Was, Will Be Chinatown”

Since the Save Chinatown movement of the 1970s, the community continued to work to define itself against efforts to be defined by urban developers. By the 1980s the proverbial noose around Chinatown was once again being tightened and threatened to cut off its growth. Although 1980 census records showed Chinatown’s Asian population as only consisting of 972 people, an immigration influx that occurred just a few years after the census was taken led some community leaders to estimate that the actual population

was double that number (Robb 1984). Despite an increasing population, there was less and less housing available to Chinatown residents. In 1983 a dispute broke out between Chinatown, and its neighbor to the east—the Pennsylvania College of Podiatric Medicine (Russ March 17, 1983).

At issue were a few parcels of land on the east side of 9th Street between Race and Cherry that both parties wanted to purchase from the Redevelopment Authority. The

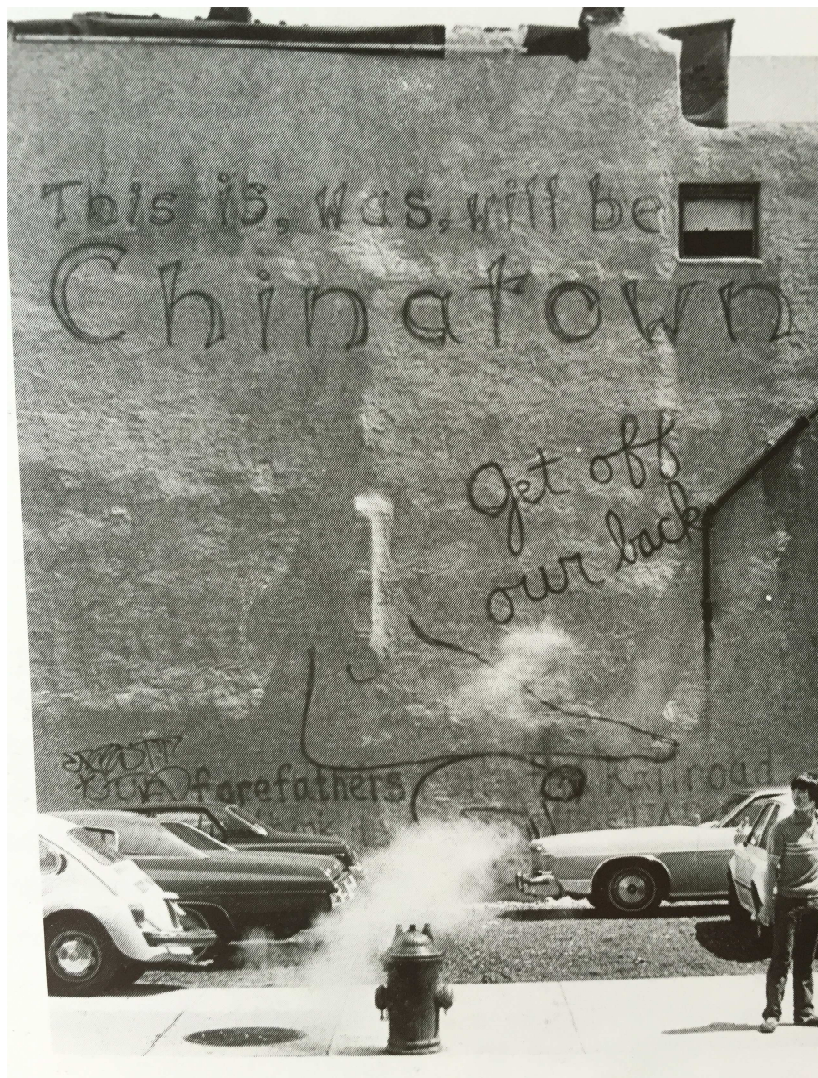


Figure 7. Wall at Ninth and Race Street with a message to the College of Podiatric Medicine, Aug. 24, 1983. Permission and Source: *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

fact that Chinatown was even engaged in a bidding war with the College of Podiatric Medicine provoked the ire of quite a few Chinatown community members who believed the block should have been first offered to Chinatown, “giving the neighborhood a ‘right of first refusal’” (Russ 1983). As James Guo, a Chinatown businessman and developer, pointed out, “Quite a few Chinese lived there (on the property) before, and they (the government) paid very cheap prices to push people out...Now they are selling it back to us at sky-high prices” (Russ 1983). Guo insisted, “The property has to belong to Chinatown” (Russ 1983).

The College of Podiatric Medicine thought differently and intended to use the land to build retail stores, parking, and student housing to expand its growing foot health center. Depicting this feud was a graffiti message that appeared on the wall of a rowhome across the street from the parcels of land under dispute (i.e., the western side of the block). Scrawled in ersatz “Chinese”- style font was a defiant declaration of the community’s ethnicized claim to urban space: “This is, was, will be Chinatown.” Undoubtedly, this message also indexed Chinatown’s longer history of besiegement under various urban renewal plans. Just below that message read, “Get off our back,” along with an image of large foot trampling on a person’s back (Figure 7). Clearly, the author of this message had a knack for visual communication: the disproportionately large foot symbolized the College of Podiatric Medicine, and the relatively small person being trampled underfoot represented the beleaguered Chinatown. This particular block held great symbolic value for Chinatown, for it was not the first time that it was the subject of debate and conflict. The very parcels of land under dispute were the site of Cecilia Yep’s “Chinatown Alamo” of the 1960s, which eventually, in the 1970s, made

way for the Commuter Rail Tunnel that connected Suburban Station and what we now know as Market East Station. Succinctly summing up the predicament of Chinatown, Yep stated, “We’re being hemmed in” (Russ 1983). Gaining these parcels of land for Chinatown was then seen as reclamation of the eastern boundaries of the community.⁷

During the same year, two proposals to build the Pennsylvania Convention Center were introduced. Both plans envisioned that the convention center would be a hulking behemoth of steel and concrete. An architect for one of the competing plans characterized it this way: “Did you ever have something caught in your throat, so you can’t quite swallow? That’s what this convention center is like. It feels a little too big. It’s very hard putting it into the city” (Hine 1983). Indeed, the convention center hall would take up two city blocks, or the equivalent of six football fields (Hine 1983). One news reporter referred to it as a “monster” but qualified that it was a “benevolent one” that would result in the creation of 9,000 permanent jobs (Hine 1983). He further noted, “Even a friendly monster makes a big impact, however, and wherever the convention center goes will never be the same” (Hine 1983).

This turned out to be a prescient statement. The construction of the convention center became the next major incursion that Chinatown had to contend with. In August of 1983, a decade had passed since the Save Chinatown movement was forged to prevent the destruction of Holy Redeemer for the sake of a ramp on the Vine Street Expressway. Though the fate of HR still hung in the balance, a two-hour long meeting took place there over proposed plans for the Pennsylvania Convention Center (Sutton 1983). The meeting

⁷ In 1985, PCDC eventually erected Gim San Plaza, a mixed commercial and residential structure that stretches along the east side of 9th Street, spanning Race and Cherry Streets (Wilson n.d.).

was attended by about 75 community residents and two plans were presented: (1) The Reading Plan would be located on Arch and span 11th to 13th Streets; and (2) the Franklin Town Project would extend from Vine to Callowhill Streets and from 15th to Franklin Town Boulevard (Sutton 1983). Debbie Wei, 19, sat quietly at the back of the room, listening intently to the two proposals (Sutton 1983). The Reading Plan would displace 23 families, including Wei, her four siblings, their parents, grandparents, and an uncle who lived in a five-bedroom apartment on 11th Street (Sutton 1983). The Franklin Town Project would spare Chinatown of the disruption that the convention center would wreak, including exacerbating traffic congestion, the rising cost of real estate, and years of dirt and demolition (Robb 1984).

Leaders and community members of Chinatown sounded off. “As residents, we’re going to hate it,” said Cecilia Yep, executive director of PCDC at the time (Robb 1984). While those who pushed for the Reading plan argued that it would increase home values in Chinatown, Yep responded with the following: “If we’re a community of moderate-income people, we have to receive protection against real estate values. I hope we won’t be priced out of our homes and businesses” (Robb 1984). Some, however, saw the convention center as a positive opportunity and believed the benefits would outweigh the costs. Steve Parks of the Reading Company claimed that because the convention hall would include retail stores at the street level, it would be a “commercial extension of Chinatown” (Hine 1983). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some Chinatown businesses were in favor of the Reading plan. Joseph Poon, a restaurateur, said that it would “help the whole community grow” (Robb 1984). Wherever community members stood on the issue most agreed that more room was needed for Chinatown.

Despite community opposition to the Reading Plan, it was unanimously approved by the city Planning Commission in late October of 1983, just two months after the community learned of the proposals (Caparella 1983). Recognizing the disruption this would cause, the Planning Commission urged developers and the city to “take special steps ‘over and above the law’ to preserve the 1,424 jobs, 145 businesses and 30 residences the mammoth project would displace” (Caparella 1983). The Reading Plan included \$47 million in provisions for the cost of relocating businesses and residents and redrawing the boundaries of Chinatown and Market East (Caparella 1983). Nevertheless, two members of PCDC castigated the Planning Commission for approving the plan without any community input from Chinatown (Caparella 1983).

The final decision came as no surprise though since it had always been favored out of the two because it integrated the convention center with the Reading Terminal Market, the Gallery Mall, and the city’s core retail area. Placing the convention center in the heart of Market East built upon 20 years of city planning efforts that began since the days of Edmund Bacon. Additionally, in the last eight years, more than \$600 million in public and private money was invested into further developing Market East (Hine 1983). The Reading Plan, estimated to cost \$401 million (Caparella 1983), would take advantage of the Commuter Rail Tunnel that was nearly complete and the Market East Station that was set to open in November 1984 (Kozel 1998). The combination of these factors tilted the scales toward the Reading Plan and sealed the fate of Chinatown. Guo, the Chinatown businessman who was intimately involved in the land dispute with the College of Podiatric Medicine, offered a sober suggestion: “We have no choice... The only way to go is north” (Robb 1984).

Going North

As a result of the Save Chinatown movement, activists pushed for and were granted a professional neighborhood plan on the city's dime. The 1975 Gluck and Chadbourne Comprehensive Plan proposed that Chinatown's boundaries extend south to Arch Street and north to Callowhill Street for the construction of new affordable housing and community centers (Yee 2012:29). Though the notion of "going north" germinated from this neighborhood plan, it was not until the late 1990s that pieces of the plan came to fruition. Between 1999 and 2003, PCDC built 61 mixed-income housing units in Chinatown North (Yee 2012:29), or what others have referred to as Callowhill—a neighborhood known for its large scale manufacturing and old factory buildings built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Just as Chinatown began to lay down roots on the north side of Vine Street, in 2000 the Street administration proposed to build the new Phillies baseball stadium at 12th and Vine (Burton and Benson 2000). This was one idea among several being floated. But it was the front-runner site as far as Center City locations were being considered. Mayor Street, attempting to follow in the footsteps of several other cities with downtown ballparks, rationalized that building a stadium in the downtown corridor would generate additional revenue for the city. It would take advantage of "impulse decisions" of office workers to attend games at the last minute and fans that would dine and shop in the area (Panaritis 2000).

Chinatown was in uproar. An umbrella group made of different organizations rallied together. Among these organizations, Asian Americans United (AAU), established in 1985 as a successor to Yellow Seeds, stood out for its leadership.

Organizers quickly mobilized over 1,500 people to protest these plans (Ung and Harris 2000). Donning T-shirts and holding signs that declared in red ink “NO STADIUM FOR CHINATOWN,” they took to the streets, shutting down major arteries in Center City (Ung and Harris 2000). Other catchy baseball related puns included signs that read: “PITCH IT SOMEWHERE ELSE,” and “DON’T FOUL UP OUR NEIGHBORHOOD” (Panaritis 2000).

Debbie Wei, a board member of AAU, echoed the claims of cultural genocide expressed decades earlier in the Save Chinatown movement. “Cultural genocide is wrong,” she said, “and using taxpayer money to commit cultural genocide is wrong” (Rhor 2000). She expounded on her thoughts in a documentary that Wei co-produced a few years later. Reflecting on the stadium protests, she said,

The thing that I think is really painful about all this development is that it was all government money used to displace Chinese residents and a community that was already small and inhibited from growth at a time when there’s so much pressure to find homes for families that needed them. So when the city announced plans to put a stadium in Chinatown, no one could believe it. I mean, people were just outraged.” [Wei, Dornfeld, and Kodish 2002]

Touching on a personal note, Lai Har Cheung, a youth organizer from AAU, noted the impact that a baseball stadium would have on her own family life:

I’m living in South Philadelphia. My grandmother lives in Chinatown. The reason why my family moved is because of housing issues. Otherwise, I think we would have stayed together. And now they want to have another thing that keeps families away, to spread out people, to break apart families.” [Wei, Dornfeld, and Kodish 2002]

Both Wei and Cheung spoke specifically about the negative consequences of the downtown ballpark, while also indexing a longer history of displacement that exacerbated the stadium situation.

On April 26, 2000, a public meeting was convened to discuss the different possibilities for the ballpark (Einhorn 2000). Several Center City businessmen commanded airtime to advocate for a downtown ballpark. First, it was Bruce Crawley, chairman of the Convention and Visitors Bureau and noted friend of the mayor (Einhorn 2000). Next up, Paul Levy from the Center City District urged for a downtown stadium citing the economic boon it would be to the city (Einhorn 2000). By the time Tom Muldoon, director of the Visitor's Bureau, took control of the microphone, community members who had waited in line for over an hour to speak simply had enough (Einhorn 2000). Someone from the upstairs gallery shouted, "You have got to be kidding!" (Einhorn 2000). Another added, "They already spoke." Chants of "No stadium in Chinatown!" quickly drowned out Muldoon's remarks. Residents from various communities in which the ballpark was being proposed also came out to register their discontent. None appeared more single-minded and resolute in its objection to the ballpark than the Chinatown community (Einhorn 2000). Cheung, AAU's youth organizer, defiantly challenged public officials, saying, "If you want to build something, build a public school...but don't you dare build a baseball stadium." In the end, Citizens Park, home of the Phillies, was built in the South Philadelphia Sports Complex largely because of the high costs associated with building downtown, and because of community opposition.

To be clear, despite the fact that Crawley and Muldoon championed a downtown ballpark, corporations like the Convention and Visitor's Bureau were not trying to decimate Chinatown, as it was not in its own best interest to do so. In fact, a division of the Visitor's Bureau, known currently as PHL Diversity (and formerly as the Philadelphia

Multicultural Affairs Congress) was founded in 1987 to promote diversity in Philadelphia (PHLDiversity website). And yet it was clear from the very beginning that its interest in promoting diversity was cemented in economics. According to its website, PHLDiversity was founded to “attract more multicultural visitors to the city,” and it “continues to work to increase Philadelphia’s share of the multicultural meetings and *tourism markets*” (PHLDiversity website, emphasis added).

More recently, Greg DeShields, Executive Director, spoke at PHLDiversity’s annual luncheon, which featured the theme, “Business of Diversity.” DeShields said, “Diversity is one of Philadelphia’s most valuable resources” (PHLDiversity 2014 Annual Luncheon - discoverPHL.com n.d.) He further noted, “The luncheon will highlight the rich multicultural presence that makes our city a world-class destination for diverse meeting and convention attendees” (PHLDiversity 2014 Annual Luncheon). The purpose of the luncheon was “positioning diversity as a driver in economic growth for our city and region” (PHLDiversity 2014 Annual Luncheon). At the luncheon, John Chin, current executive director of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, was honored with an award “for exhibiting personal dedication in both corporate and community service activities relating to the mission of PHLDiversity” (PHLDiversity 2014 Annual Luncheon). PHLDiversity touts that it “worked closely with the Asian American community to promote Chinatown, one of Philadelphia’s most historic neighborhoods to visitors” (About PHL Diversity - discoverPHL.com n.d.). There was, therefore, never any intention to destroy Chinatown lock, stock, and barrel. However, when it came down to building either a ballpark that would be a driver of economic growth, or a public school that Chinatown’s community members expressed a need for, but didn’t hold any

value in terms of promoting tourism or generating revenue, it was clear that the Visitor's Bureau would come down on the side of economics.⁸

Though the ballpark battle was won, Cheung's message—"if you want to build something, build a public school"—remained in the hearts and minds of community members. It was a message that reverberated through the decades since the days of the Save Chinatown movement. Even in the 1973 Statement of the Chinatown Community, PCDC noted the need for more community facilities, and that "[p]resently there is no public elementary school closer than the McCall School." The problem with McCall was that many Chinatown residents perceived it as primarily serving the needs of Society Hill's more middle- and professional-class families. It was not only geographically distant as far as neighborhood schools go (1.4 miles away), it also felt socially and culturally distant (Liu 2012). The school was severely lacking in services for Chinatown's students. Even when AAU successfully lobbied for bilingual support, and bus services for Chinatown's students, these victories were often short lived. Once there was a turnover of teachers and administrators, the changes that AAU worked so hard to obtain were quickly erased. In many people's minds, Chinatown desperately needed a

⁸ One board member provided a finer point on what I have argued throughout this chapter regarding the competing interests of Philadelphia's Chinatown. Because we live in an era of cultural commodification, Chinatowns undergo a process of, what she called, "Disneyfication" by groups like PHLDiversity. She asserted that the "big fight for defending Chinatowns" is with actors who "don't recognize Chinatown as [a] neighborhood...[and don't see them] as having the same needs as other neighborhood—for schools and public spaces and investment in public infrastructure."

While PHLDiversity honors groups like PCDC, which, according to what I've observed throughout the years, has done an enormous amount of work for Chinatown residents, it is safe to say that as a tourism organization, PHLDiversity's primary interests lie more on the aspects of material culture that attract tourists, like the Chinatown gate, and less on residents, especially poor ones. Images of poor Chinatown residents do not translate well on glossy postcards. PHLDiversity's notions of diversity are economically driven to promote a "happy face," while community-based organizations like Yellow Seeds, and now AAU, conceive of diversity in terms of building political solidarities.

public school to buffet against claims that it was no more than a commercial and tourism hub, and to provide Chinese immigrant students the educational services they needed. According to community activists, making Chinatown legible to outsiders as a bona fide community entailed establishing a public school. Additionally, it entailed expanding into Chinatown North and building a publicly funded school to claim that territory as Chinatown's.

The founding of FACTS was directly influenced by the threat of the baseball stadium being built at 12th and Vine. During a 2010 interview I had with Debbie Wei, one of the school's founders and its first principal, she relayed the story of FACTS' founding in a manner that pointed to her activist roots. Wei's oration of the events was rousing and oozed with moral urgency. Appealing to the right of the Chinatown community to state provisions she said, "We really needed a public school. This community is entitled to as much of the commonwealth as anyone else." Then she explained the strategic logic of founding a school in Chinatown to rebuff top-down urban development efforts.

As long as there aren't these big institutional anchors, it's easy for the community to be decimated. It's easy for people to come in and put these big projects here because they think people don't actually live here. There are certain things that mark a community, and a school is a big one. And as long as there isn't a public school in your community, it's just a lot easier to say, "You're not really a community."

Sitting in a cozy corner of a classroom at FACTS, Wei pointed out the symbolic significance of our locale. In an ironic turn of events, the school was located where the Phillies ballpark complex would have been built. Wei explained:

This particular area of Chinatown, where we're sitting, this building would have been demolished for the baseball stadium. This building is the parking lot outside the third base baseline. When the city said, "Well you're not going to do anything with that space anyway," it felt like all these things were churning in our minds as critical to claim the space. We want to build things for the community in these spaces.

The threat of the Phillies stadium thus prompted AAU members to "claim the space, and to build things for the community in these spaces."

Within Chinatown's struggle for self-determination the stakes of the game have always involved more than the individual right to determine one's own lifestyle within the city or the decision regarding what to erect and what to tear down. For activists affiliated with AAU, it was, and continues to be, about the rights of the marginalized to collectively determine the very quality and character of urban life and to remake their community accordingly (cf. Harvey 2003; Harvey 2008). Helen Gym, a board member of AAU and founder of FACTS, explained it this way:

Chinatown launched an unprecedented struggle 12 years ago to fight off the stadium and on this place we would build a beautiful school that would honor that struggle by working with many different artists to create young people who would sing and dance and drum their way to a different vision.

By "going north" and establishing FACTS in Chinatown North, AAU members were preemptively claiming the area just north of Vine Street as belonging to the Chinatown community. Though PCDC also favored northward expansion, and they held similar views on the need for affordable housing and concerns about gentrification, these two groups held notably different ideas of what was good for the community. PCDC's close collaboration with PHLDiversity reveals some of the historic and contemporary splits among those who call Chinatown home, particularly as it relates to defining a

vision for the community. PCDC sees itself as playing the role of official spokes-organization for Chinatown, describing its mission as “preserv[ing], protect[ing], and promot[ing] Chinatown as a viable ethnic, residential, and business community” (Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation n.d.). For its part, Yellow Seeds in the 1970s took a more radical stance defining their position as anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist. Contemporarily, Yellow Seeds is viewed as the progenitor of AAU, representing a progressive Asian American voice in Philadelphia, and using language such as “unit[ing] against oppression” to describe its work within communities. AAU’s “different vision” of Chinatown specifically rejected efforts by big box developers, city planners, and even those within the Chinatown community who were either indifferent to, or even promoted the idea of Chinatown as a site for play and pastiche.

“A Different Vision”

This “different vision” of Chinatown, and of American schooling, was highly influenced by FACTS’ two institutional partners. Asian Americans United (AAU) was founded with the mission to develop “leadership in Asian American communities to build our neighborhoods and unite against oppression.” The Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) began in 1987 as the planning arm of the American Folklore Society that was gearing up to celebrate its centennial anniversary. Organizing a month-long celebration that took place in Philadelphia was, in the beginning, PFP’s primary task. Two years later, in 1989, PFP became a 501(c)(3) organization with the “focus is to build critical folk cultural knowledge, *sustain* vital and diverse living cultural heritage in communities in our region, and *create* equitable processes and practices for nurturing local grassroots

arts and humanities” (Philly Folklore Project | Philaculture.org n.d.). FACTS was envisioned to be a school that embodied the combined values and expertise of PFP and AAU. The founding partners saw FACTS as a vehicle for advancing a vision of Chinatown characterized by face-to-face connections, intergenerational bonds, and the passing on of folk traditions. In terms of schooling, they forwarded a vision that valued the cultural backgrounds of racial and ethnic minority students, while also fostering convivial cross-racial friendships.

Though all the various campaigns and projects that AAU and PFP were involved in likely influenced the development of FACTS, a few specific examples most directly illustrate the genesis of this “different vision” of education, and of Chinatown. In 1995 AAU, supported by PFP, inaugurated Philadelphia’s first Mid-Autumn Festival held along 10th Street between Race and Arch Streets (Asian Americans United » History of the MAF n.d.). Mid-Autumn Festivals are celebrated among people in the Chinese diaspora during the harvest full moon that takes place between September and October. It is one of the major holidays celebrated in China and other places where large Chinese populations have migrated, and provides a time for family reunification. The festival was organized to help stem “deep feelings of homesickness” among immigrant youth in Philadelphia, and to raise the spirits of the elderly who lived in Chinatown (Asian Americans United » History of the MAF n.d.).

But more than simply raising spirits, this festival was “a chance to come together as a community to affirm our human right to culture...to renew our commitment to each other to celebrate and care for our community and its people” (Asian Americans United » History of the MAF n.d.). The festival was intended to be a time for people to “linger,

interact and engage with each other in meaningful ways” (Asian Americans United » History of the MAF n.d.). Echoing PFP’s commitment and attention to “the experiences and traditions of ‘ordinary’ people,” (Philly Folklore Project | Philaculture.org n.d.) AAU’s website states that “festivals are times when the powerless become powerful...when ‘ordinary people’ have the chance to be part of art making and tradition making” (Asian Americans United » Human Right to Culture n.d.). As instances in which traditional power dynamics are upended, festivals unearth longstanding contestations over urban space, and the articulation of local subjectivities (Regis 1999; Regis 2001). Philadelphia Chinatown’s Mid-Autumn Festival was an instantiation of the local community’s “fight for time and space to celebrate” (Asian Americans United » Human Right to Culture n.d.). This is particularly resonant given Chinatown’s history of struggle against large-scale projects.

The values embodied in Mid-Autumn Festival directly relate to how FACTS was imagined to be a vehicle for advancing a vision of Chinatown that was based on intimate connections, rootedness, and community engagement. This vision worked to directly challenge a dominant narrative—articulated by corporations like the Convention and Visitor’s Bureau—that positioned Chinatown as important primarily because it added to Philadelphia’s faces of diversity, where diversity was put in the service of business. More broadly, it challenged dominant values and modes of American society based on the primacy of the market, big business, consumerism, and social disconnection. This was clearly conveyed in a children’s book about Chinatown that was published by PFP in 2004. On a page straightforwardly titled, “Community,” the authors mentioned how immigrants who came to Chinatown opened small businesses and “families worked hard

to keep them going” (Cheung et al. 2004:5). Signaling a contrast, it then said, “Now, Chinatown is in the heart of the city, a place where rich people want to live and big businesses want to move” (Cheung et al. 2004:5). They went on to assert, “But Chinatown is a community” (Cheung et al. 2004:5). Defining community as more than “just a place” or the sum total of “streets, buildings, and sidewalks,” (Cheung et al. 2004:5) they defined it as “the people in that place, and the way they work, play, and live together. It includes peoples’ memories of the past and their dreams for the future” (Cheung et al. 2004:5). FACTS was then envisioned to be a vehicle for carrying forth this community-based vision of Chinatown.

Additionally, AAU and PFP imagined that FACTS would offer a different vision of schooling. In 1985, AAU provided guidance to a group of immigrant and refugee students who, represented by the Education Law Center, brought a suit against the School District of Philadelphia over inadequate services provided to English language learners (ELL) (Education Law Center 2013). In this class action suit, the plaintiffs maintained that the District violated their rights under the Fourteenth Amendment, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and state law “which generally require school districts to develop programs and services to meet the needs of limited English speakers, including those with special education needs” (Education Law Center 2013). At the time of the lawsuit, ELL students in the District only received one to three periods of English instruction, and spent the remainder of the time in regular classroom settings. As a result, ELL students fell significantly behind academically. Moreover, the lack of interpretation and translation services provided by the district kept families from participating in their children’s education. The lawsuit resulted in a series of “remedial orders and

stipulations” (Education Law Center 2013) to address “the provision of ESL services, bilingual tutoring, translation services, and other supports” (Education Law Center 2013).

However, in 2004, nearly two decades after the lawsuit was initiated, an independent evaluation of the district found that “some school level programs are clearly floundering and students are not succeeding because the local level of expertise, knowledge of the needs of [the students] and resources are not adequate to the task” (Snyder 2004). As proof of this claim, the report stated: “Teachers at eight sites could not produce ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages]...or bilingual curriculum guides” (Snyder 2004) and there was no consistent policy for determining how ELL students should be placed, monitored, or moved from one level to another (Snyder 2004).

This lawsuit was cited in FACTS’ charter application as evidence of the poor educational services afforded to immigrant students in the district and to argue for need of a school like FACTS. FACTS was intended to serve as a counterexample to the schools mentioned in the evaluation of the district. According to its charter application, FACTS “expressly fights against unilineal assimilation by valuing students’ home culture” (Charter Application:6). This went against the grain of American public schools that tended to devalue minority students’ “home cultures” in assimilating them into American society.

Moreover, this “different vision” of schooling not only valued students’ home culture, but also believed it was possible to create different, more congenial, forms of interracial sociality. In another part of the charter application, the founders wrote that although they bring “expertise about the needs of Asian American immigrants in particular, [FACTS] is committed to building a multi-racial school serving the

educational needs of other diverse immigrant and non-immigrant communities city-wide” (Charter Application:4). The means by which students would both learn to value their own cultural heritage, and others was through the folk arts. In the charter application, the founders explained that

[FACTS] chooses to focus on folk arts because they represent collective action and shared values, and because use of these arts embed the things which are most meaningful to the communities themselves into the life and culture of the school. For diverse populations such as the students we anticipate at [FACTS], folk arts serve as vehicles to bridge children to elders, *school to community*, and *school community members to each other*...Folk arts education will also teach students skills and concepts to explore cultural participation, *both in their own lives and in the lives of others* (emphasis added).

The school was intended to provide a different kind of educational experience for those who were traditionally marginalized and ill-served by the public schools. The founders envisioned that minority students would both develop a deep sense of cultural pride because “culturally healthy children are rooted in their own experiences,” (Charter Application:5) and that they would engage meaningfully in the lives of others who were different from them, for “self-esteem allows [students] to develop compassion and respect for others” (Charter Application:5). The deliberately multiethnic and multiracial aspects of the school were intended to engender interracial friendships that differed, in quality and substance, from what was happening in other parts of Philadelphia and from images depicted in the media.

This talk of teaching children to value their own and others’ culture was not the stuff of “Multicultural Day” that occurs once a year in schools. Because Debora Kodish—one of the school’s founder, who was also founder and longtime executive director of PFP—received a doctorate in folklore, and another founding member received

her doctorate in cultural anthropology, they were all too aware of the misuses and abuses of how “culture” gets deployed. This “different vision”—one that respected students’ cultural backgrounds—was not based on notions of culture and folklore as timeless and unchanging. In an article published in the *Journal of American Folklore*, entitled “Cultivating Folk Arts and Social Change,” Kodish (2013:436) described folklore as “improvising new ways forward by building on a body of tradition. It is bricolage.” In another article she posed the question of how artists, and perhaps we can also add students here, can “name their own particular places in, departures from, and challenges to any tradition” (Kodish 2011:35). Similarly, she maintained that issues of authenticity and how artistic work is to be evaluated “is especially a concern in a time when so many people appropriate the veneer of diverse cultures with little regard for what may count as insult or damage or for how it may diss or undermine community cultural efforts” (Kodish 2011:35). In short, the founding of FACTS was also a “different vision” how schools could mobilize culture in ways that were dynamic and non-essentializing.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a historical understanding of the school’s notion of the “good life.” FACTS was envisioned to be a place that maintained and created social memory related to Chinatown, born out of dreams of a different future. This future replaced unfettered individualism, property rights, and consumerism, with those of collective action and concern for the common good. Harvey identified the rise of individualism and consumerism as dominant values in American society, emerging out of the 1940s restructuring of American cities. These values were largely promoted by

people and institutions like Edmund Bacon, the Visitor's Bureau, the Reading Company, and physically evident in the construction of the Vine Street Expressway, the Gallery Mall, the Convention Center, and the proposed downtown ballpark. In this vision of a "modern Philadelphia," urban development projects often eclipsed the needs of the most vulnerable communities (often minority and often working class), dispossessing them of land and rights. As such, the school's understanding of social justice was inextricably tied to asserting full rights of citizenship for Asian Americans, and also for other marginalized populations. FACTS' twin goals of promoting Asian American recognition and multiracial coalitional building are apparent in this history and apparent in its practices. But because advancing these dual goals was not without its challenges, this dissertation focuses on the intended and surprising ways in which the tensions produced by these goals were allayed.

CHAPTER 3

THIS IS ~~MULTICULTURAL~~ FOLK ARTS EDUCATION

Multicultural education, and culturally relevant pedagogy by extension, is now so commonly accepted as “good” instructional practice that it is rarely critically examined. My friend captured this pervading sentiment when she said, tongue-in-cheek, “You just need culturally relevant pedagogy.” Progressive educators and scholars place so much faith in this instructional approach that they seldom notice the tension that inheres in putting multicultural education into practice. An exception to this is Sonia Nieto. She warned that “designing a school to be culturally compatible with just one group of students, even if it is the most numerous group, might jeopardize students of other backgrounds” (Nieto 2011: 160). Taking this line of reasoning to its extreme, affirming the cultural background of one group of students may even feel exclusionary to others.

This dissertation shows how FACTS reconciled this tension and largely avoided exclusionary practices. The school accomplished this through embodied rituals and acts of bearing witness to one’s own oppression that created a sense of intimacy amidst difference. Because these practices were founded on the principles of folk arts, this chapter zooms in on the founders’ emic understanding of this term. Folk arts were viewed as *not just* another way of reconciling its dual/duel goals but rather as central to all the rituals and practices in the school. As such, understanding what “folk arts” meant to the school’s founders is key to understanding FACTS itself.

The Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) is one of FACTS’ institutional partners, and a number of its staff members are founders, as well as past and current board

members. Because of this, the concepts of folklore and culture that I articulated in chapter 2 are highly relevant to understanding FACTS' definition of folk arts. This chapter begins by discussing school members' characterization of this tension. It then delves into how FACTS' definition and mobilization of folk arts differs from popular understandings of "folklore" and "folk life," and how it differs, still, from the more widely legible term, *multicultural education*. By doing so, I seek to problematize and de-familiarize a pedagogical approach that, by now, seems so familiar that is considered commonplace and even trite. De-naturalizing these terms and ideas allows scholars and educators to talk more precisely about what we mean when we talk about "multicultural education."

The "Twin Pillars" of FACTS

A palpable point of contention that repeatedly emerged during my time at FACTS centered on the question, *What kind of child is FACTS designed to serve?* This contention, and confusion, was the product of two competing values that the founders wanted the school to embody. This became crystal clear to me during a conversation I had with one of the school's founders. Ellen, the executive director of AAU, who was one of the central figures in organizing Chinatown against the downtown ballpark and Foxwoods casino, began explaining the school's founding values to me in a slow and purposeful manner. She said, "We didn't deliberately make it difficult for ourselves, but there were two important things we wanted the school to be." As I came to learn during the course of the year, many of the school's practices are the result of a great amount of thought and deliberation and often have a backstory.

She explained, “At first we thought, ‘Well maybe we’ll make it a Chinese bilingual school’” to serve the Chinese community and the people in Chinatown. Here, Ellen was indexing the founders’ special commitment to protect Chinatown, and the local history of disenfranchisement against Chinatown and Asians that made her organization, and the school, necessary. “But then,” she continued, “because we also care about social justice,”⁹ and wanted to teach children to appreciate other cultures, being a multiracial¹⁰ school was important. “We called it the twin pillars,” Ellen said.

Of the “twin pillars,” the special focus on Chinatown and Asian American immigrant families was the more controversial of the two because it could be interpreted as conferring special privileges to one racial group. As a result, the Chinatown/Chinese/Asian American pillar was ambiguously communicated in practice, leaving newer staff members (and even those well acquainted with the school) scratching their heads in wonder. One teacher described the ambiguity by tilting imaginary scales with the use of her hands, and said, “People are always wondering, ‘is it, or isn’t it [an Asian school]?’” Indeed, when I recapitulated this version of the twin pillars concept to some school leaders, they said they never heard it expressed in that way. One person said she thought the twin pillars referred to social justice and the folk arts.

⁹ In written feedback, Ellen clarified that “addressing the specific experience of Asian Americans and Chinese Americans in particular is also a social justice issue. It is more that to build a just society, we need to develop people’s capacity to work with one another, to operate in a multiracial/multicultural world.”

¹⁰ In conversations I had with people at FACTS, particularly the school’s founders, they deliberately used the term *multiracial*, as opposed to the more commonly used phrase *multicultural*, because of their recognition that the school could have been racially homogenous but still considered multicultural. Instead, their social justice concerns extended beyond Asian Americans, and they wanted to cultivate solidarity among students of different races, and hence the preferred usage of the term *multiracial*.

Because of this, the board engaged in a long and arduous process of making its founding values clearer to members of the school by rewriting the school’s vision statement. In the 2004 document titled, “Founding Vision for the School,” some key foci included providing an education that was “truly community-based,” having a “dual emphasis on academic learning and traditional knowledge,” building bridges within “immigrant families” (i.e., between the generations), and “between and among immigrant and non-immigrant families.” In addition, the school would promote “language and culture,” teach children to be “compassionate and kind,” and “develop a vision of justice.” One might be able to deduce what “community,” “immigrant families,” and “non-immigrant families” refer to, yet nowhere in the 2004 document was there an express mention of Chinatown or Asian American families. The more generalized terms—*immigrant* and *community*—appealed to a broader audience, communicated greater inclusivity and were less likely to alienate. However, these terms were also less clear, and created misunderstanding, as indicated by the teacher’s use of imaginary scales and the question she posed: “Is it or isn’t it [an Asian school]?”

To clarify things, the board spent considerable time revising the *Who We Are* statement, which was finally approved in November 2011, after a year of deliberations and discussions concerning each paragraph. In the new vision statement, the Chinatown/Chinese/Asian American pillar was noted front and center. The very first bulleted point in the document stated the school’s history of struggle “for equity and justice for Asian American students and immigrant and refugee students of all races in the public schools.” Notably, even as it mentioned Asian Americans, it also sought to include non-Asian students by referencing “immigrant and refugee students *of all races*

in the public schools” (emphasis added). The *Who We Are* statement made known the school’s “special commitment and responsibility to Chinatown” because it serves as a “social and spiritual hub for many Chinese immigrants and Asian Americans of all ethnicities.” But perhaps most demonstrative of the potentially uneasy relation between these twin pillars was the following paragraph that attempted to qualify its “special commitment”:

Although FACTS is designed to address the needs of Asian American and Asian immigrant students, FACTS’ founders sought to create a deliberately multi-racial/multi-ethnic school. Such a school best embodies a model of anti-racist education that not only values diversity but also addresses inequalities and promotes justice. FACTS is committed to helping children work cooperatively in a diverse, multicultural society. □

Based on this excerpt, which tacks back and forth between mention of Asian Americans and being multiracial/anti-racist, it is clear that because the school valued both these things, it was a tension they would have to let stand. It was par for the course, in terms of creating a school with such a unique vision.

In fact, as Ellen’s earlier comment makes clear, this was not a tension that emerged unexpectedly. Rather, it was built into the school’s founding. Uplifting Asian Americans, on the one hand, and promoting multiracial conviviality, on the other, were “two important things we wanted the school to be.” In subsequent meetings I had with Ellen, we discussed ways in which she felt the school was misrepresented in the first draft of this dissertation and her concern over the repercussions of this. Even in these discussions she readily admitted that there was a tension built into the school. It was the way in which I characterized how the school did (or did not) address this inherent tension that she took issue with. I had not given sufficient weight to the centrality of the folk arts

and thus had missed out on a key way that the founders, from the very beginning, sought to mitigate this tension. My revision, especially the addition of this chapter that focuses on the folk arts, seeks to remedy these initial oversights.

What's in a Name?

During one of the meetings in which I discussed the first draft of my dissertation with Ellen and two other board members, they took issue with my use of the term *multicultural education* to describe the practices of the school. I was caught off guard by their contestation of the term, since some of their founders had been speakers at *multicultural education* conferences. But because multicultural education has come to be applied in such a wide variety of ways, quite superficially in many cases, they believed I was equating their practices with the “heroes and holidays” version of multicultural education. In no uncertain terms, this was *not* what they strove for at FACTS.

I explained that my own understanding of multicultural education was linked to the progressive multicultural movement of the 1960s that was explicitly social justice oriented. Undoubtedly, I did so less eloquently than I am able to now. However, I tried to convey that I understood multicultural education as “primarily a movement for change” (Turner 1990: 412), which was also what I understood of FACTS’ mission. Multicultural education, to me, is an attempt to challenge “the cultural hegemony of the dominant ethnic group...in the United States...by calling for equal *recognition* of the cultural expressions of nonhegemonic groups within the educational system ” (Turner 1990: 412, emphasis added). *Recognition* was also not a term “we use to describe ourselves.”

They peppered me with questions, including why I didn't use emic terms that school members used to describe their practices (i.e., *folk arts education*, and *anti-racist pedagogy*). I rationalized that *multicultural education* was a more widely legible term. While few would know what a *folk arts education*, or *anti-racist pedagogy* entailed, most would be familiar with multicultural education. It was a way of orienting readers. Moreover, I was unsure at that point whether I had permission to use the school's real name. Rendering folk arts more visible in my dissertation would certainly make the school's identity crystal clear.

These explanations did not suffice. I was told that I had missed out on an opportunity to make the unique affordances of folk arts education more widely known. They explained that they had toiled and debated over the name of the school. Calling it the *Folk Arts and Cultural Treasures Charter School* was incredibly deliberate. Likewise, choosing to center the school's practices on folk arts and anti-racist pedagogy (i.e., *not* multicultural education) was also deliberate. One board member even suspected that, after all the time I spent at the school, I still didn't know what folk arts were. She administered a verbal pop quiz. With as much confidence as I could muster, I said that folk arts are "arts that come out of people's everyday lived experiences," that they are "shared," and come out of "local communities." I received a nod of approval.

Nevertheless, I came away from the meeting feeling like I had committed grave epistemological violence—something I had never intended to do. I was flabbergasted. In the months since, I have sought to seriously understand both the substance of their arguments, as well as the emotionally laden way in which it was conveyed to me. Through these experiences, and through excavating the school's founding charter (that

already began to accumulate virtual dust), I learned something of ethnographic value: that the *folk arts* itself was one of the primary ways in which the founders envisioned mitigating the tension between uplifting Asian American experience, and promoting multiracial solidarity.

As I mentioned earlier, there was never a denial (not by Ellen at least) that there was a tension built into the school's mission. In fact, in another meeting I had with them along with members of my dissertation committee, she reaffirmed that this tension "obviously exists" in the school. Ellen and her colleagues' objections were based on what they perceived as my fundamental misunderstanding of what the school was trying to accomplish. "Exhibit A" was my (mis)use of the term *multicultural education* to describe their practices. "If she got *that* wrong, what else did she get wrong?" they likely asked themselves. This was, in part, the reason for the pop quiz, the flow of questions, and the suspicion that I didn't understand the school. While the substance of a folk arts education and anti-racist pedagogy was still evident in earlier drafts of this dissertation, through adding this chapter, I seek to make those practices and meanings more explicit. This is made easier now that I have gained permission to use the real name of the school. By parsing out the differences between multicultural education, on the one hand, and a folk arts education and anti-racist pedagogy, on the other, I also seek to show how their preferred emic terms were not simply a matter of semantics but that these were seen as substantively different. In short, in their minds, multicultural education exacerbated the tension by taking a quid pro quo approach toward recognition of different cultures, while folk arts education and anti-racist pedagogy remedied these failures.

From the outset, FACTS' founders were well aware of the potential problems of promoting culture in a diverse school setting. Focusing on the folk arts was their answer to resolving some of these issues. They reasoned: *Everyone* comes from communities in which the folk arts are practiced. This then allowed them to create a school environment in which *all* students felt affirmed and accepted, no matter their cultural background. As the school's name—the *Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School*—implies, folk arts were central to the school's founding, its mission, and its design. It brought disparate groups together under the common umbrella of folk arts, while simultaneously appreciating the unique cultural traditions that existed within each of these communities.

FACTS' founders thought carefully about how to avoid the pitfalls that popularized versions of multiculturalism often fell into, including a propensity to essentialize culture, to sanitize it, and to commodify it. Because of this propensity toward essentialism, in their minds, multiculturalism was more prone to creating divisions and conflicts between groups. That is, whenever culture is depicted as bound and distinct, barb wired walls get erected. Avoiding these reified mobilizations of culture was a special concern for founders given its connection and commitment to Chinatown. As discussed more fully in chapter 2, Chinatown has served as an ideological battleground between urban developers who view the neighborhood as a means to promoting the city's happy, cosmopolitan, multicultural face, and community activists who see it as a living and dynamic community. They refused to have Chinatown's cultural traditions essentialized and commodified for capitalistic gains. The founders' preferred use of the term *folk arts* is then related to this ideological orientation and community history. It is also related to their hope of promoting cultural pride and

identification with a particular group, while also making those group boundaries permeable and fluid.

But interestingly, in contemporary educational, anthropological, and educational anthropological scholarship, the pitfalls of essentialism and cultural commodification have more often been assigned to approaches labeled under the “folk” category. In education scholarship, Jerome Bruner (1996), noted cognitive psychologist, referred to unexamined assumptions about education as “folk pedagogy” (Bruner 1996: 44). Folk theories about teaching and learning were contrasted with professional ideas about education. Thus, the work of educational reformers was seen as replacing these quaint folk theories with professional-based ones.

Robert Redfield, an influential urban anthropologist of the early- to mid-twentieth century, built upon the Chicago School’s folk-urban dichotomy. His ethnographic study of the village of Tepotzlán (1930) and the Yucatán (1941) offered a portrait of folk life that depicted these communities as harmonious and timeless, whereas cities were viewed as sites of modernity in which culture contact and social transformation took place (Redfield and Singer 1954). These early anthropological renderings of folk life help to explain contemporary anthropology’s allergic reaction to things typified as “folk.”

More recently, in educational anthropological scholarship, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti’s well known work on funds of knowledge, they argued, “anthropological literature [has] moved away from an integrated, harmonious, univocal version of culture” (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Riverra, Rendon, Gonzales, and Amanti 2005: 99), and yet, “prevailing notions of culture in the schools center around observable and tangible surface markers: dances, food, *folklore*, and the like” (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Riverra,

Rendon, Gonzales, and and Amanti 2005: 99, emphasis added). Here, *folklore* is associated with understandings of culture as “integrated [and] harmonious” (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Riverra, Rendon, Gonzales, and and Amanti 2005: 99)—(i.e., essentialized culture).

Despite the obvious overlap between anthropology and folklore (i.e., their mutual focus on cultural processes), anthropology has been quick to police the boundaries of the discipline and to maintain an arm’s-length relationship with folklore. In anthropology circles, folklore has often been derisively dismissed as being antiquated and even *pre-postmodern*. Because of its focus on preserving cultural *traditions*, anthropologists have often created a caricature of folklore. While caricatures are useful for rhetorical and political purposes, it scarcely begins to tell what self-identifying folklorists, who are well versed in postcolonial/postmodern critiques of “Culture” (with a capital “C”), seek to do through deliberately naming their practices *folklore* and *folk arts*. In other words, according to FACTS’ founders, what does folklore do, that multiculturalism doesn’t do?

While it is certainly true that in practice, folklore is often deployed as simply “tangible surface markers” (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Riverra, Rendon, Gonzales, and Amanti 2005: 99), it was not imagined as such by the school’s founders. They asserted folklore and the folk arts as *living tradition* that promoted *collective action*, and *anti-racist pedagogy*. These very (re)definitions of folklore and the folk arts were central to how the school straddled between building cultural pride in one’s own heritage, while also bridging differences among groups.

Folk Arts as Living Tradition

The concept that folk arts are a living tradition was a key part of the school's ability to mitigate the tension inherent in its mission and vision. The school's charter application states that the folk arts "represent time-honored vernacular educational systems, ways of *teaching and passing on* valued knowledge that are known by and known within the communities of our students" (emphasis added) and that "these arts are connected to community values and *have meaning* to people." This understanding of folk arts, with its emphasis on "teaching and passing on valued knowledge" and arts that "have meaning to people" is clearly at odds with the superficial notion of a "Multicultural Day." Folk arts, as such, are opposed to the idea that tradition is something that gets taken off the shelf for the sake of parading it around for a day out of the year and making a spectacle of it. In this sense, to be a *living* tradition means to be a tradition that is *practiced*—and taught and passed on; it has meaning and not simply paraded.

For FACTS, articulating folk arts as a living or *practiced* tradition was not an activity in parsing words. While focusing on *tradition* allowed them to connect students to particular groups and communities, focusing on *practice* made these group boundaries permeable. In other words, students who didn't identify with a particular cultural heritage could still participate in it, and claim it, through *practice*. This term has a double meaning. It first refers to the common understanding of practice as the repetitive actions that people perform in order to improve upon something. This, for example, occurs during lunchtime ensembles in which students repeat certain actions involved in learning how to step dance or perform Beijing opera. But it also refers to the Foucauldian notion of self-making that occurs in the space between structure and agency. The practice (i.e.,

repetitive actions) of traditions is inextricably linked to the practice (i.e., self-making) of students' identities. This is an especially important point as it concerns the question of how FACTS manages to emphasize the specificity of particular ethnic traditions, without excluding students who do not identify with that heritage. The answer is, *through practice*. It is through practice that a black student can legitimately perform the steps in the lion dance (a Chinese tradition) without it being kitsch or cultural appropriation.

This was expressed to me by the lion dance teacher, a Korean American woman, who herself came to the tradition not through heritage but through practice. As we chatted, she beamed with pride about one of her most committed students—Paula, an African American girl. Teacher Elena told me that Paula was one of the few students who remained in the ensemble for so long. It was extremely rewarding for her to see Paula progress through the different kung fu forms (a series of moves that are part of the lion dance).

Through practicing the lion dance, this tradition became so much a part of Paula that it was evident in the way she fluidly performed it on stage during the Lunar New Year celebration when I observed her many months later. As I watched the performance, my eyes were initially drawn to Paula because Teacher Elena had talked about her and also because she was one of a few black students performing a Chinese tradition among a majority of Asian faces. But as I continued watching, what kept my eyes fixed on her was not her racial background, or my memory of Teacher Elena talking about her. It was how seamlessly, expertly, and even naturally she embodied the tradition. This speaks precisely to the point that I am trying to make concerning how re-articulating the folk arts as living and practiced tradition creates more permeable group boundaries. Claiming and

embodying the Chinese tradition of lion dance is not something that inherently exists in those who identify as Chinese. Rather, it is embodied and claimed through practice and repetition. In this regard, a black student can legitimately perform the lion dance, and integrate aspects of Chinese cultural traditions into her identity.

At this point, someone learning about FACTS' emphasis on tradition may suggest: if the goal was to emphasize the permeability and fluidity of culture, wouldn't it be more straightforward to focus on popular cultural forms rather than "tradition"? As the logic goes, popular culture is rife with examples of boundary crossing and the construction of hybrid identities. It sends the message that students' identities are not necessarily anchored to their particular cultural heritage. This then seems to lend itself more directly to the goal of inclusivity. Why tradition? Why not pop culture?

There was, in fact, a very particular reason why the school was committed to emphasizing tradition. But its idea of "tradition" was much more expansive than one might imagine. For example, step dance, arguably a contemporary and popular cultural practice, is featured as one of the school's lunchtime ensembles. Despite some slippage of what counts as being "traditional," the school resolutely asserted that "tradition" must undergird any understanding of the folk arts. In the charter application, the founders quoted Dr. James Griffith, a noted folklorist, explaining, "To be traditional does not mean to remain unchanged; rather it means that folk art has a kind of depth of time" (p. 16). This depth of time is what founders believed to be most powerful about tradition. It develops in students a sense of history, connectedness, and pride. One need only observe the profound popularity of sites like Ancestry.com, or watch an episode of *Finding Your Roots*, hosted by acclaimed scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., to know this to be true. Upon

learning about one's ancestral roots, guests are often moved to tears, expressing a deep sense of pride and purpose from their newfound understanding of their history.

This same dynamic explains why FACTS emphasizes tradition over popular culture. As the founders stated, "Culturally healthy children are rooted in their own experiences" (Charter Application:4-5). Having a sense of one's own history, tradition, and "depth of time" cultivates the kind of self-love that is not only healthy but also a strategy of survival for cultural, ethnic, and racial minorities. As Audre Lorde, poet and writer who drew from her experiences as a black lesbian woman, poignantly argues, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

For FACTS' founders, developing culturally healthy students had a dual purpose. It not only developed one's self-esteem, but this "self-esteem allows them to develop compassion and respect for others" (Charter Application:4-5). In other words, being rooted in tradition affects one's ability to cross boundaries. Just as emphasizing *practice* creates more permeable boundaries, so too does emphasizing *tradition*.

Tradition, at FACTS, was not expressed in generic and general terms, but as coming out of a *particular* history and lineage. Going back to the example with Paula and lion dance, this tradition was not introduced as an *Asian* tradition but more specifically as a *Chinese* tradition. Likewise, when I spoke with teachers from several ensembles (African drums and dance, the Indonesian dance, and step dance), they conveyed a similar sentiment. One of the teachers from the African drums and dance ensemble told me how they often stress that particular dances didn't just originate from

“somewhere in Africa,” but to share about its West African origins, and to talk even more specifically about the region and its cultural producers.

One might at this point wonder whether this focus on specificity compromises the school’s goal of building affinities across group boundaries, and if so, why the school continues to take this approach. In short, cultural specificity was important to avoid the trap that superficial multicultural education often fell into—that is, creating a savage slot for Others to occupy. While it is true that the school frequently attempted to use more inclusive categories (e.g., teachers discussed how Lunar New Year is celebrated by many groups in East and Southeast Asia, rather than deferring to the more widely used term, *Chinese New Year*), it is equally true that they tried to specify the origins of cultural traditions to avoid exoticization. While generalities are fine for tourists who are consuming ethnic traditions for entertainment purposes (in fact, it’s preferable since getting into the nitty-gritty details of these traditions detract from the entertainment value), it scarcely develops the kind of deep pride and connection that FACTS wanted its students to experience.

FACTS members were constantly negotiating how to emphasize cultural specificity *and* inclusivity; pride in one’s own tradition *and* that of others; the fluidity of tradition *and* the rootedness of it. It is precisely in these everyday negotiations, in redefining tradition as *practice*, that the school was able to walk this delicate tightrope. It enabled the school to both uplift specific group identities, and encourage more expansive notions of identity and belonging.

Folk Arts as Collective Action

While developing healthy individual student identities was one of the purposes of mobilizing folk arts, it was part of a larger equation to promote students' political and social consciousness. Therefore, folk arts cultivated more than individual self-esteem and improved interpersonal relations. It cultivated collective action across different groups. The school's charter states: "FACTS chooses to focus on folk arts because they represent *collective action* and shared values" (Charter Application: 16–17, emphasis added). It goes on to explain that this collective action is imagined across different boundaries. "For diverse populations such as the students we anticipate at FACTS, folk arts serve as vehicles to bridge children to elders, school to community, and school community members to each other" (Charter Application: 16–17). This articulation once again draws attention to central aspects of the school's multipronged vision, and the way in which folk arts ameliorate the tension that emerges in this vision.

First, it mentions "bridg[ing] children to elders." This speaks to the school's concern with developing students who are connected to their own heritage, and as mentioned earlier, who experience a sense of rootedness, "depth of time," and history. As noted elsewhere, the school "expressly fights unilineal assimilation by valuing students' home culture" (Charter, p. 6). While unilineal assimilation is often applied to the context of immigrants, it is perhaps just as applicable to non-immigrant populations who undoubtedly also experience loss of connection among the different generations. Connecting children to their elders serves to fight unilineal assimilation and the sense of disconnection for both immigrant and non-immigrant students.

Second, folk arts bridge the “school to [the] community.” As discussed in more detail in the history chapter, FACTS’ location in Chinatown was not accidental. In fact, the founders deliberately located the school in Chinatown for symbolic and practical reasons. Symbolically, the school’s location in Chinatown was one way of asserting the rights of Asian Americans to self-determination and valuable urban space. It was their stake in the ground. Practically, being in Chinatown also prevented developers from taking space that would have otherwise been rationalized as “unused space” that was up for grabs. The intention of connecting the school to the community stemmed from the founders’ long history of activism in Chinatown and within the Asian American community. It emphasizes the school’s commitment to uplifting a community that was first founded upon segregation and anti-Chinese discrimination and that later became ground control for Asian American activism in Philadelphia. Bridging the school to Chinatown highlights accomplishments of Asian Americans in the face of overwhelming struggles.

Third, through folk arts, FACTS bridges “school community members to each other.” To recap, the first bridge (i.e., children to elders) emphasizes the development of culturally healthy children through knowing their *own* heritage and traditions. The second bridge—i.e., school to community—specifically emphasizes Chinatown and the Asian American struggle. On their own, each of these goals may be read by outsiders and the unindoctrinated as promoting ethnocentrism or even ethnic/racial superiority, had it not been for the third dimension of the school’s vision (i.e., connecting community members to each other). This is precisely why emphasizing cross-group relations was

necessary and important to founders. It guarded against the development of intragroup isolation and ethnic/racial supremacy.

When founders chose “to focus on folk arts because they represent *collective action*” (Charter Application:16–17, emphasis added), they had broad-based notions of what this meant, and they created a number of opportunities for students to learn about and practice other traditions. These opportunities were not ad hoc but built into the school’s programming. They offered a diverse array of lunchtime ensembles (various performing arts including dance and music that students learned during the lunch period), and residencies (artists that came to the school and shared about their work for several consecutive weeks). The following lists provide a sense of the range of cultural productions that students were exposed to:

Lunchtime Ensembles:

1. Kung fu lion dance
2. Beijing Opera
3. Indonesian Dance
4. Vietnamese Zither
5. African Drum and Dance
6. Step Dance

Residencies:

1. African Drum and Dance
2. Liberian Fables
3. Chinese Shadow Puppets
4. Spoken Word
5. Tibetan Sand Mandala
6. Cambodian Beadwork and Masks¹¹

Through residencies, entire classes were exposed to different traditions. The concentrated time that artists-in-residence spent with students built a more sustaining relationship than the “visitors-for-a-day” approach. While FACTS did invite visitors for the day, and often to very powerful effects like the Holocaust survivor who shared her experiences on the Kindertransport, or when Lois Fernandez, the Philadelphia activist

¹¹ This was replaced by the Mexican Day of the Dead.

came to visit, they clearly also went beyond this. By implementing annual residencies in which artists often returned the following year, the school built long-term, institutional, and interpersonal connections with diverse artists.

While students voluntarily participated in lunchtime ensembles and chose their ensembles through a ranking system, these were still remarkably racially and ethnically diverse. None of the ensembles were homogenous, and some, like Step Dance, attracted students from all different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The times that I observed, there were Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, black, and white students who participated.

The diverse array of residencies and ensembles provide a glimpse of FACTS' broad-based notions of "collective." For FACTS, the "collective" did not only refer to one's own group. And it did not only refer to the Chinatown community and its allies. "Collective action" also referred to crosscutting various racial and ethnic groups within the school to form social and political solidarities. This collective action was intended to engage diverse groups in fighting for a more just and liberating future, not for one group, but for many.

Folk Arts as Anti-racist Pedagogy

This notion of collective action was rooted in anti-racist pedagogy. This was a particularly salient way in which school leaders differentiated their work from popular and superficial forms of multicultural education. A quick gloss of these differences are: the view of racism as an individual problem vs. a societal, institutional, and interpersonal problem; learning trinket aspects different cultures for enjoyment sake vs. understanding the multiply and complicated dimensions of others' backgrounds to develop a critical

orientation toward discrimination and to work toward collective change; the view that anti-racist pedagogy is only necessary for students of color who experience racism and need to be uplifted vs. the view that anti-racist pedagogy is for everyone because we all live and participate in a racist society; and an around-the-world approach toward learning about cultures or cultural celebrations as add-ons vs. a holistic integration of anti-racist pedagogy into all aspects of the curriculum (cf. Appendix A).

It was these differences that board members tried to convey to me during that same meeting in which my understanding of the school was called into question. At that meeting, the new principal¹² also expressed her concerns and reservations. Many of the issues she raised were extremely insightful, helpful and productive, and I addressed them through making revisions to the text—that is, without providing an additional narrative layer. But because her comments bring into relief the differences between what school leaders see FACTS as doing (i.e., transformational teaching), and more widespread forms of multicultural education (i.e., tolerance teaching), it is worth describing this meeting and the subsequent feedback she provided me. In other words, her comments get at the heart of how folk arts, as a form of anti-racist pedagogy, avoids ethnocentrism.

We met in the summer when school was already out. Because she had her daughter with her, and had to leave shortly, she was given the floor to speak first. As she tried to rock an awakened toddler back to sleep, she conveyed that she had a positive

¹² During the years I did fieldwork and wrote this dissertation there were significant transitions in leadership. The person who had been the principal and executive director during my time of fieldwork (2012–2013) took a leave of absence the following year (2013–2014). There was an interim principal and an interim executive director to fill these roles. During the 2014–2015 school year, the board hired the interim principal as principal, and Ellen Somekawa became the school’s executive director. While the principal was “new” in the sense that she had just completed her first official year as principal, she had actually been one of the school’s founding teachers, and knew the school very well.

response to one of my chapters but that another made her feel “uncomfortable.” In a subsequent letter to me, she wrote, “This chapter painted FACTS with a very watered-down version of our efforts.” Along with this letter, she attached a handout titled, “How Should Multi-Cultural¹³, Anti-Racist Education Look at FACTS? Moving from ‘Tolerance’ to ‘Transformation.’”

The crux of her discomfort could be found in her impression that I wrongly depicted the school as Chinese-centric, and thus elided the richness of their anti-racist efforts. She was referring to a chapter in which I discussed how some black families expressed their acceptance of the fact that they were racial minorities in a school that was majority Asian and that incorporated many Asian cultural practices. Not only did they not mind this, I argued, they appreciated the broad exposure to other traditions because it taught their children the value of diversity, and it prepared them for a changing future global economy in which China played a growing role. To set up this argument, I showed how the school included many Chinese practices. To be fair to myself, it was not uncommon for students, parents, and even teachers to express that Chinese practices weighed more heavily in the school. To leave these opinions out would have silenced a good number of voices. But to also be fair to the principal’s point, this narrow focus de-contextualizes the school’s wide range of practices and obscures how these other practices helped to avoid ethnocentrism.

¹³ Interestingly, though I was critiqued for using this term, it appears in the documents that the school uses to describe their own practices. This simply highlights the slippage and challenges of trying to engage in broader discourses while also seeking to tell their own story.

In her letter, the principal provided a list of school-wide events that are celebrated as part of FACTS' ritual calendar (*italics*, added):

1. *Mid-Autumn Festival*
2. Many Points of View Day
3. Celebration of Peace
4. *Lunar New Year*
5. Black Heritage Day
6. Founders Day Celebration
7. Honor our Elders Day
8. Folk Arts Showcase
9. Play Day
10. Move Up Day
11. Promotion Day

She pointed out that “Mid-Autumn Festival and LNY [Lunar New Year] Celebration are the two events that may be considered Chinese.” Moreover, she said, “[W]e don't celebrate it because it is ‘Chinese’ but because they are important holidays for the majority of our students and families.” Likewise, she commented, “We teach a world language, because it is important. We teach Mandarin because we are in Chinatown, and because of the connection it has to many of our students.”

The principal wasn't bickering over trivial matters like what events I had left out of the ritual calendar. Rather, her point was that by leaving out other aspects of what the school does, I unwittingly portrayed FACTS as being a “tolerance”-type school, rather than a “transformational” one. For example, by not sufficiently explaining that Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival are celebrated because “they are important holidays for the majority of our students and families,” readers of my dissertation may have derived the wrong impression that the school takes a superficial “around-the-world approach” (Principal letter) in which students “visit other cultures and return to an

existing Euro-American-based curriculum” (Appendix A). Similarly, she pointed out that while Mandarin is recognized as a world language, it is also a language in which many of the school’s students have a connection to.¹⁴ In other words, learning Mandarin was FACTS’ attempt to “incorporate students’ life experiences and interest and tailor curriculum to meet their cultural, developmental, and individual needs”—a characteristic of transformational, anti-racist pedagogy, *not* tolerance-based pedagogy. As a school that strove for anti-racist pedagogy, my depiction of FACTS as a school that focused on Chinese-ness and Asianness at the exclusion of other groups was highly worrisome.

“The Black American Celebrations are [NOT] an Add-on”

Building on this point, the principal also felt I had inaccurately described how Black Heritage Day came to be included in the ritual calendar during the 2012–2013 school year. In the version she read, I leaned on the perspective of two teachers and a couple of students, who talked about how they felt the school focused more on Chinese practices. Consequently, they told me, celebrations like Black Heritage Day seemed like an add-on. This was characteristic of tolerance-based pedagogy, which was expressly not what the school intended to do. An excerpt from that version reads:

A few teachers explained to me that the inclusion of Black Heritage Day into the ritual calendar was prompted by a group of black students, since graduated, who were disgruntled by the lack of black cultural recognition. Teacher Maya...was one of the teachers who talked about this with me...“I’ve had students in the upper grades in particular complain overtly to me that they don’t feel like the school lives up to its mission in terms of reflecting their culture.” “African American students,” she qualified. This particular group of students, she said,

¹⁴ While a number of the school’s Chinese families spoke various dialects at home, Fukinese being one of the more widely spoken dialects, Mandarin serves as the national language of China. As such it is highly valued for symbolic and for practical reasons and is learned as a second or even third language by parents and students.

“were miserable much of the year and angry.” Although there were other factors that contributed to their discontent, she believed that a part of it was related to the lack of black cultural recognition. In her usual flare for storytelling, she vividly reenacted the gist of students’ grievances: “This school says it’s multicultural. But I don’t see that. It’s not enough African American.” Returning to her own persona for a moment, she said, “So I’ve felt that tension, I’ve heard that tension.” In staff meetings where this issue arose, Teacher Maya said that some teachers responded with puzzlement, and perhaps even defensiveness. “Look,” she said, now reenacting the dialogue from the staff meeting, “there’s examples where African American culture is reflected, is addressed, is supported. Why do [students] still have that perception?” Weighing in on this, she expressed the ability to relate to both the teachers, and the disgruntled students. “We do African dance and drumming, we have, you know, African American history month.” But she conceded, “I don’t think we’ve had it as much though. African American culture, we have a day, a day [devoted to that.]”

To note, Teacher Maya describes the source of tension as not having “as much” black cultural celebrations. There is only “a day [devoted to that],” she says. If the problem were framed in terms of quantity, the solution would point towards including more days that directly celebrated black history and culture.

While this was what some teachers and students advocated, founders and school leaders explicitly refused this approach. The following response from the principal reveals why. In offering her own perspective on Black Heritage Day, the principal discussed how the event was beneficial not only to those who could directly claim that heritage (that is, those who identified as black), but to *all* students, period.

From my understanding as an administrator, Black Heritage Day was included not because of disgruntled students, but because (I think) it is important to learn the history of the United States, and, to understand the history, we need to learn about black history, Diaspora, Jim Crow, etc. This is important at any school who is teaching with a social justice lens. The rationale for having BHD, that you present, is inaccurate.

The principal maintained that “any school who is teaching with a social justice lens” should teach black history because it is crucial to learning about the history of oppression in the United States. In this way, she highlights how the school turns a potential point of division (Black Heritage Day is for black students) into a point of collective action (all those concerned with social justice need to learn about black history). This touches upon a point in the document on anti-racist and transformational pedagogy. Instead of viewing black students as being the target audience for Black Heritage Day because we need to “build their low self-esteem” (this is the paternalistic tone ascribed to the tolerance model; see Appendix A), anti-racist pedagogy insists that “everyone needs multi-cultural, anti-bias education” (see Appendix A). Viewing events such as Black Heritage Day as being for *everyone* avoids pitting ethnic and racial groups against each other in an endless quid pro quo struggle for recognition.

The principal also addressed how she felt uncomfortable with the way I characterized Black Heritage Day as an add-on. In the version that she read, I discussed Teacher Sarah’s perspective on Black Heritage Day in the following way:

She began, “I always felt a little uncomfortable because...” She hesitated and then explained that she understood the school was borne out of “the lack of service, and all the put downs of the Asian population.” Although she understood that “they worked so hard to get this school up and running,” she still often felt like “the multicultural part is an add-on. Like, in particular the Black American celebrations are an add-on.” Instead of complaining overtly, she said, “the black students make comments under their breath.” It was complicated, because, as she put it, “they appreciate the safety of the school, the caring of the teachers, but also felt like they were an “after-thought.” She admitted, “And I kind of feel that way too.” She explained, “I just don’t feel like the push of the institution sometimes is behind our Black Heritage Day. I don’t think anyone works against it, but it’s just not the same force, and it makes me feel uncomfortable.”

In the letter from the principal, she goes into further detail explaining exactly why the characterization of Black Heritage Day as an “add-on” felt particularly off-base. She cites how the school tries to avoid the “‘around-the-world’ approach” by integrating culture and history more holistically into the curriculum and daily practices:

We attempt to value and include all voices through stories and through folk arts pedagogy. With such a diverse group of students and families, it will be impossible to fit in every culture in thoughtful ways. The “around-the-world” approach, like cultural nights, is something we’ve avoided, which is the reason I felt so uncomfortable reading your rationale for us having BHD. Instead we can find all cultures in the writings of our students, student poems, in the books we read, in the games we play, songs we sing, etc.

In this paragraph, the principal makes clear that one of the practical challenges of doing this sort of work is the push and pull between wanting to be as inclusive as possible, while not diluting the school’s program by taking a reductive “‘around-the-world’ approach.”

Unlike Teacher Sarah, Teacher Maya, and other students that I spoke with, the principal did *not* see the solution as adding on more cultural celebrations because this ran contrary to the school’s anti-racist, transformational approach. Adding on cultural celebrations would mimic a tolerance-based approach, described in the following way: “Multicultural activities tend to be add-ons to the curriculum—a special holiday activity, a multi-cultural bulletin board, a week-long unit, a multi-cultural education course in a teacher training program” (Appendix A). Instead, the principal articulated that FACTS strove for the following: “Parents regularly share their daily life experiences at home and work, as well as special holiday events...All aspects of the curriculum integrate multi-cultural, critical thinking and justice concepts and practice” (Appendix A).

In sum, the principal's position seemed to be that black cultural celebrations were not an add-on because it did not view Black Heritage Day as simply *for* black students, and because it regularly integrated student' daily life experiences into many facets of the curriculum. To be an add-on meant that the school adhered to a tolerance-based approach. The board members and the principal understood their work as taking on a transformational approach. Therefore, according to these school leaders, those who felt that adding more cultural celebrations to achieve balance had a fundamental misunderstanding of the rationale for these events, and how it fit into the overall ideological pedagogy of the school.

Conclusion

It should be clear by now that FACTS stood head and shoulders above the vast majority of schools in terms of its sophistication in thinking about these matters. By mobilizing the folk arts, and defining them as practiced tradition, collective action, and anti-racist pedagogy, FACTS largely created a school in which children from diverse backgrounds felt connected to their history and heritage, *and* constructed identities and solidarities beyond their own heritage. In other words, it largely mitigated the “twin pillars” tension—of uplifting the Asian American experience, while advancing broad-based notions of social justice—that inhered in its founding. I honestly know of no other school that has thought through, so comprehensively, about issues that often get typified as “multicultural education.”

And yet, the very aspects of the school's philosophy that made it so rich and nuanced also made the message so difficult to communicate to parents, students, and

teachers. Different interpretations of what the school sought to do abounded. Despite the principal and board members' sophisticated understanding of the school's intended approach, other school members held different views. A new teacher that I talked with said that she thought she signed up to teach at a "multicultural school." To her, this meant giving many different groups (including those who are not represented in the school) equal curricular time—a parity view of multicultural education.

Fewer longtime school members shared this parity-based notion of the school, while a number of teachers, students, and parents believed that the school's mission was to reflect students' backgrounds. That is exactly why people like Teacher Sarah and Teacher Maya felt that there should be more events that celebrated black heritage. When the students that Teacher Maya talked about wanted a Black Heritage Day, they were making the claim based on their understanding that the school valued students' home cultures and that it wanted to reflect this in its programming.

This is where it gets hairy. This *is* what the school tries to do, and it's *not*. Based on how board members and the principal responded negatively to my earlier draft, it is clear that this is, at best, only a partial rendering of what the school tries to accomplish. While board members and the principal might agree that the school seeks to reflect its students' cultural backgrounds, it tries to do so in ways that make it applicable to *all* students. It also tries to do so in deep and meaningful ways, as opposed to seeing the task as a superficial checklist to get through: Yup, we have a Black Heritage Day; Latino Heritage Day? Check. Asian Heritage Day? Done. What I have tried to convey here through the rhetorical twists and turns in my own writing is that it is no small feat to

convey the rich and sophisticated understandings of the folk arts and anti-racist education held by board members and the principal.

CHAPTER 4

RITUALS OF MULTIRACIAL KINSHIP

The previous chapters analyzed the tensions that emerged between simultaneously mobilizing a politics of recognition, and of diversity to advance equality in a racially diverse charter school. To understand how this tension was mitigated, I discussed how black students and parents rationalized that the school's focus on Asian heritage furthered their class aspirations. I continue in this chapter to explore how FACTS' rituals of care, vulnerability, and intimacy engendered a sense of kinship among members of the school that also alleviated potential conflict between these two goals. While the previous chapter focused on the surprising and unintended ways in which this tension was mitigated, this chapter focuses on the intentional ways in which the school worked to make these two goals commensurate, knowing and even deliberately creating this tension because the school's founders had a more complicated and sophisticated understanding of social equality in mind.

FACTS' work of building interracial solidarities was a central dimension of their ethical pursuit of social justice and racial equality. The school's founding emerged out of the work of activists hoping to create new forms of sociality, particularly between black and Asian Philadelphians. According to Dave (2010:371):

People are drawn to activism because they have an ethical orientation to the world. They act because they nurture ethical ideals of what the world ought to look like... They act in part because they desire the practice of new freedoms that they can only yet imagine, but still strive to enable.

This chapter builds upon the theoretical framework of *ordinary ethics* as a way of understanding how activism provides a window into people's ethical orientation—an orientation aimed at building new forms of sociality across racialized differences, specifically through disciplining students' habits of interaction. The founders, who were also local activists, brought these ideals to life by creating an institutional model of what race relations in a school *could* look like. The school, and the convivial relations among its members, was a prefigurative form of race relations in which school members embodied and practiced interracial solidarity. It was in the mundane, ordinary, and everyday interactions among different raced students, parents, and teachers that this alternative vision of society and urban life would come into being.

These interactions were assiduously governed (by self and others) through the school's daily and annual rituals. Foucault (1990) referred to these techniques of discipline as *ethics*, whereas *morals* were defined as norms and values. *Ethics* are then seen as the practices, demeanors, attitudes, and work performed on oneself to be transformed into a moral being. This chapter focuses on the morals and ethics of building interracial intimacy by taking note of the values that are uplifted, and the practices meant to orient students to those values. I especially attend to those moments in which values were explicitly communicated as when attempts were made to (re)educate older and newer members (not to mention the probing anthropologist), and when moral codes were transgressed (cf. Lambek 2010:2). These instances of education and violation made explicit the values, norms, codes, and practices that were otherwise implicitly stated.

Black-Asian Relations

In my earlier days of fieldwork I met Teacher Mel, an African American woman who I became quite fond of because of her unique mix of sincerity and care and no-nonsense attitude. She unflinchingly and persistently broached the topic of race, often without me even asking. She enjoyed posing big questions to me that I could never answer but thought long and hard about, questions that I remember such as: “What sacrifices are you willing to make to achieve racial equality?” And she always encouraged me to “say what you hafta say.” Our running joke was to blame the other person for making a short casual conversation turn into a long extended reflection on race. “Oh, no,” she would loudly say, upon seeing me. Then turning to whoever was around at the moment, she jokingly warned them, “Don’t talk to this one.” The jury is still out on who ropes who into these conversations.

Early on in our friendship Teacher Mel struck up a conversation with me just as we were crossing paths in the nurse’s room. She complimented me on *Growing Up is Activism*, a film based on FACTS that I co-produced and had recently screened at the weekly faculty meeting. Parts of the film included images of students of various races participating in step dance, and lion dance. “I love that film,” she said, “but how do we get kids to understand that?” I assumed she meant, how do we get kids to appreciate and respect diversity, but I wasn’t sure, so I stumbled to articulate a clarifying question. “Do...you...mean...?” As I struggled for the right words, she interrupted and added, how can we “teach kids about living in a diverse world,” and “about making friends with all people.”

She contrasted FACTS with her own experiences growing up in South Philly—a neighborhood that underwent significant demographic changes over the course of the last hundred years. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants settled in the neighborhood, and black migrants from the southern states arrived in large numbers during the Great Migration. In the latter part of the twentieth century, Asian (primarily Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Chinese), and Latin American (mostly Mexican and Central American) immigration further diversified South Philly. Teacher Mel recalled how residents “did not welcome the change” as East Asian and Southeast Asian immigrants began to move into South Philly in the 1980s. She also recounted how she was pejoratively referred to as the “UN girl” in her neighborhood—her high-minded ideals and hope for racial harmony perceived as a chimera at best and undesirable at worst.

A few other teachers, African American and Asian American, who were also longtime residents of South Philly, echoed similar sentiments. Teacher Madeline, an African American teacher who grew up in South Philly and continues to live there today, typified black-Asian relations in South Philly as disrespectful and lacking trust.

I’m brought up in inner city South Philadelphia, and I’ve seen so much tension between the Asian population and the black population within the urban setting, if you wanna say that. And I feel like, for some, you know, African Americans are so disrespectful because of the difference within the Asian population. And then also because of the way African Americans treat the Asian population, there’s just not a trust between those two groups in society.

Hesitation is evident in Teacher Madeline’s comments most likely because of my racial identity and her not knowing my racial politics. But clearly, she conveys the idea that a lack of trust runs both ways between blacks and Asians in society, especially in the

neighborhood of South Philly where she grew up. Teacher Mel and Teacher Madeline's comments crystallized something for me. It was one of the earliest moments in which I realized that FACTS, in many people's minds, modeled an alternative to the damaged black-Asian relations in America broadly, and South Philly specifically.

These tensions, which had been simmering under the surface, erupted on December 3, 2009, when thirty students of Asian descent were attacked at South Philadelphia High School by a group of mostly black students (Hoye 2010). This came on the heels of an assault on a disabled black student by two Asian students (Associated Press 2010). In the aftermath, Asians American United (AAU) organized students to take a stand but were careful to avoid a racial blame game. They focused their message on criticizing the authorities that allowed the violence to occur, making signs that read, "IT'S NOT A QUESTION OF WHO BEAT WHOM, BUT WHO LET IT HAPPEN." South Philly High was a case of containment, and repair work. Its school leaders had never adequately addressed racial tensions, which resulted in years of interracial distrust. Dwindling resources and inadequate educational conditions were the tinderbox that set off the attacks.

In 2010 a parent of a first-grade student at FACTS talked to the Philadelphia Public School Notebook about why he chose the charter school. The article stated, "While he appreciates the diversity at South Philly, it hasn't worked well there" (Denvir 2010). In contrast, the parent said, "[FACTS] is truly community-based—a lot of new immigrants. It's full of race diversity, so that all people can connect" (Denvir 2010). FACTS was a foil to South Philly High, standing in stark contrast to what had happened there. It is worth noting that the founding principal of FACTS was a longtime teacher at South Philly High, leaving years before the incident occurred. Instead of being reactive,

FACTS' founding in 2005 was a proactive way of developing intimacy (i.e., thick, trusting, and even familial bonds) from the time students were in kindergarten. The school modeled an alternative to South Philly High. It created conditions of possibility.

The school's focus on improving black-Asian relations was also evident in a blurb that Teacher Ben wrote that appeared in the daily e-mail to all staff and faculty. Teacher Ben, for good reason, is well respected by his colleagues and is often viewed as the keeper of the school's institutional memory. He is one of the school's founding teachers—the only white male in the cohort. In professional development meetings I sat in on, I was always impressed by the way Teacher Ben succinctly crystallized the original intentions of a particular ritual celebration, or explained why things were done a certain way at FACTS. In doing so, he indoctrinated newer staff members to the seemingly peculiar traditions of the school, and stanching the sense of mission drift that some teachers had expressed concern over. In the e-mail he sent, he memorialized the 2014 death of Yuri Kochiyama in this way:

Monday marked the passing of a remarkable Asian American activist, Yuri Kochiyama, at the age of 93. A fighter, a mother, an inspiration for countless across the U.S. dedicated to human freedom. She must be counted among one of FACTS' spiritual Founders (June 5, 2014).

Attached to the e-mail was a brief outline of Kochiyama's life and links to interviews and articles for further reading. The articles described her self-avowed apolitical beginnings as a Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) growing up in California who believed her childhood to be idyllic and "all American" (Goodman 2008; Nakao 2005). But the treatment of Japanese-Americans during the McCarthy era, when thousands were rounded up and interned after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, changed everything for

Kochiyama. The racial discrimination and violence she experienced from her and her family's incarceration led to her political awakening, and her life's commitment to seeking reparations for Japanese Americans.

According to an essay written by Kochiyama's granddaughter, in 1960 she moved to a housing project in Harlem to accommodate her and her husband's growing family, and "slowly immersed herself in the [Civil Rights] movement as she increased awareness of the struggles of people surrounding her" (Kochiyama 2011). She was subsequently involved in the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the 1960s. Her commitment to justice that crossed the lines of race was often pointed out through referencing this iconic 1965 *Life* photo (cf. Gordon 1965) in which Kochiyama is seen cradling Malcolm X's head as he lay dead on the stage of the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem.

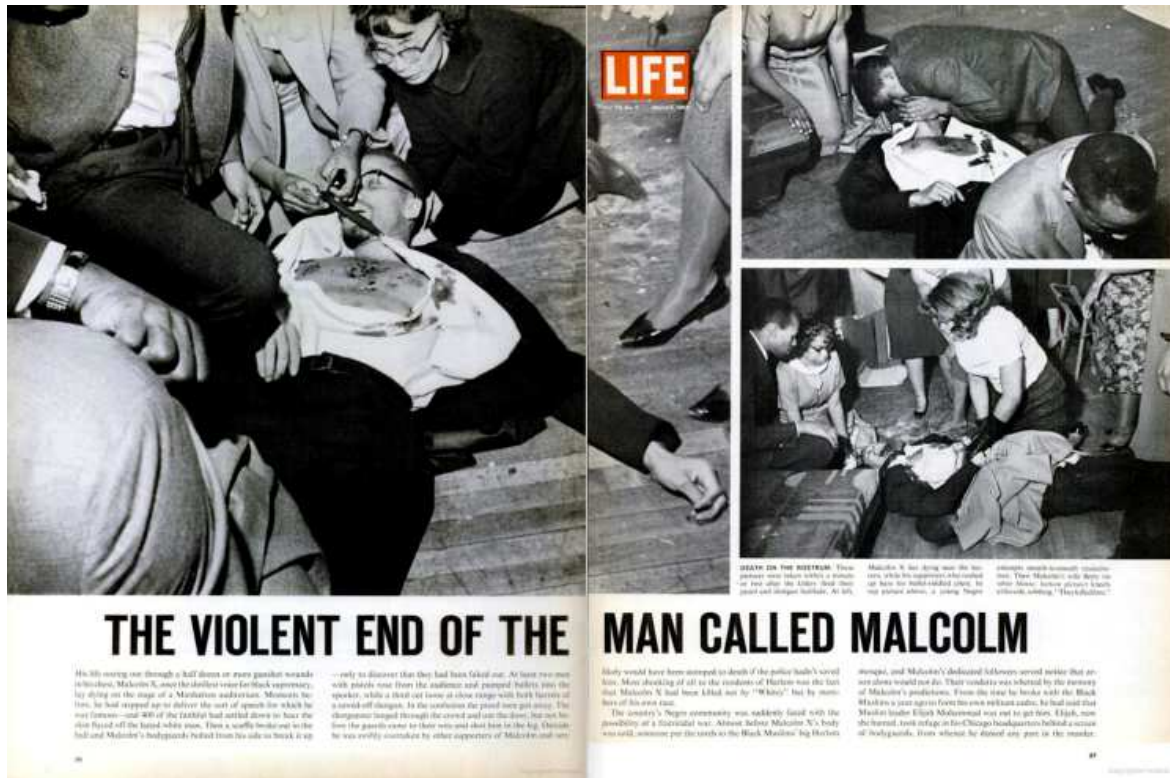


Figure 8. Photo of Yuri Kochiyama cradling Malcolm X's head as he lay dead in the Audubon Ballroom, March 1965. Permission and Source: *Life*.

About her grandmother, the younger Kochiyama (2011) wrote, “Yuri emphasizes the importance of interethnic alliances and cross-cultural ties in the struggle for social justice and movement toward a better world.” Others also made note of her commitment to building interracial solidarity by commenting that she was “one of the few Asian Americans who, early on, forged deep bonds with blacks in some of their most important struggles for equality” (Nakao 2005).

An important reason why Teacher Ben referred to Kochiyama as one of FACTS’ “spiritual founders” was because of how her activism was based on an understanding of racial justice that moved beyond an exclusive focus on the Asian American struggle and

compelled her to also engage in the struggle for black self-determination. It is not a coincidence that Kochiyama's multiracial spirit of justice found expression specifically through her participation in the African American struggle for rights and full citizenship. Studying the ethical work that FACTS was engaged in was essentially a study of "the depth of radical imaginary possibility...of people who act within and against socially prescribed and enforced limits" (Dave 2010:371). Kochiyama's activism was emblematic of new social imaginaries, interracial possibilities, and political futures. She was, in other words, regarded as FACTS' spiritual founder because she represented the hope for improved relations between blacks and Asians, particularly in light of the history of strained race relations in South Philly and of what those renewed relations might portend for the future of American social and political life.

Out of Many (Races), One (FACTS Family)

"One locked in conflict with another at one level might find that there are other thresholds of life in which one becomes, despite all expectations, attracted to that other" (Das 2010:399).

FACTS' strategy for improving race relations between blacks and Asians in Philadelphia was put into practice through creating congenial and intimate relationships within its student body. This was so much so the case that many referred to the school as a "family." This "family" was a prefigurative form of race relations that was intended to model an alternative to South Philly. It should be noted that the institution of schooling, particularly a charter school, created a set of conditions that facilitated the construction of a multiracial FACTS family. First, FACTS was an influential vehicle for socializing children and youth because it was a formal school with legal requirements for attendance.

Students spent the bulk of their waking hours in school, which made FACTS' role in shaping students' life worlds highly influential. Second, the founders chose to carry out their multiracial vision of justice through establishing a school because the younger generation was assumed to be more malleable and open to new possibilities for interracial sociality. Third, because enrollment in charter schools is a closed system, with students admitted only in kindergarten or when a slot becomes open through attrition, this created a highly stable student body. This stability meant that many FACTS friendships had been cultivated since kindergarten, which created a sense of closeness and intimacy among students of various races. As one parent, who was recapitulating the sentiments of another parent stated, "Her daughter is the only African-American [in her class] but it doesn't bother her because they've been here since kindergarten. It's more important for them to be with their friends than another African-American."

During a weekly teacher faculty meeting, I screened *Growing Up is Activism* (cf. Lui and Liu 2012). Several scenes showed two charmingly precocious fifth grade students, a black boy and an Indonesian girl, talking about the origins of step dance, and the folk arts more generally. The dynamics between them were unmistakable. They exuded a high level of comfort, familiarity, and mutual respect and support. In the film, Jahzaire began to talk about how step dance originated in South Africa and was a method of communication between black people. But when he forgot why they weren't able to simply talk to each other, he side-eyed Brenda and queried, "Brenda, do you know the reason why?" She immediately picked up on his thought and talked about South Africa's legacy of apartheid and how "they used, like, these boots with the jingles, and they called it the gumboot. Like, miners used to use it far down below because...they couldn't talk

to each other.” After listening to her talk for a few moments, he added, “certain beats would give...a certain(t) meaning...like a mad beat, or a soft beat, or a sad beat. It depends on how you stomp, how you clap, and how you make rhythm.” The give-and-take was seamless and required no off-camera direction.

After the screening, I invited comments from the teachers and staff. One teacher was interested in how students were chosen to be part of the film because, for her, Jahzaire and Brenda epitomized the school’s values. She said, “You couldn’t have chosen two better students.” While the maturity of these students was clearly one reason why they were viewed as the best representatives for FACTS, the subtext was also obvious: they modeled the kind of friendly relations that FACTS imagined was possible between blacks and Asians. This was stated more directly when Teacher Cecilia posed the rhetorical question, “Where else will you see an Asian and an African American boy, sitting side-by-side, having the conversation that they had?” She said it was a testament to the kind of school FACTS was, and its unique mission. A few months later, during a separate conversation about the eighth-grade students, she said, “Even if they just leave with that idea—these people who look different from me are my family—wouldn’t Philadelphia be better?” And then humorously expressed her hope that the positive interracial interactions at FACTS would spark some Asian-black “love connections” later on in life. Teacher Cecilia’s comments signified her hope that the school’s work in building greater racial harmony between Asian and black students would result in one of the closest bonds possible—that of “love connections.” While she was certainly aware that not every (and not even most) FACTS relationships would result in a love connection, the larger goal was that of intimacy among students of different races. This

intimacy can be defined as emotional connection, generosity and openness toward one another, and knowledge of one another's life stories, as the following examples show.

Students were keenly aware of this and frequently referred to the school and to other students quite fondly and emotionally. This sense of family was evident in sentiments expressed by Dwight, an African American student whose guarded contemplativeness, and the fact that he stood about a head over most boys his age, made him seem much older than 13. As he talked graduation, Dwight exposed a tenderhearted side of himself that I had not known up until that point. He said, "I think it's gonna be sad and some people say they don't care, but I think they will. We've been with each other since first or second grade, so how you not gonna feel something? They're lying. I don't believe them." Then with a great deal of vulnerability and honesty, he admitted, "I be the first one to cry." He said, on the first day of summer vacation after sixth grade, "I literally put my clothes on, and I was like, 'Oh there's no school.' And I shed a tear." Referring back to the upcoming eighth grade graduation, he insisted, "People are gonna cry. Trust me." It is clear from this exchange with Dwight that intimacy at FACTS created deep emotional ties, such that he "shed a tear" on the first day of summer vacation, presumably because he missed his friends and teachers. He moreover admitted, "I be the first one to cry" during graduation, and was certain that "people are gonna cry."

As a group of Indonesian American girls informed me, intimacy was not only predicated on connecting to those you felt drawn to, but it also meant showing support and generosity toward those you didn't feel an immediate connection to. Sharon, who is known for her incredible set of singing pipes, described the kind of family FACTS was by saying, "We might not all like each other, but we support each other." Her friend

Sophia, a fast-talking bubbly girl, broke the analogy down further, explaining, “Think of it as, ooh [laughter] think of it as a really really big family and there’s cousins and cousins and uncles and great aunts...Some are closer, and some are not. That’s how we are.” Sharon posed a hypothetical that described the expectations of being a family. “Pretend that I wasn’t really that close to [Sophia], like I didn’t like her or something. But then we would still try to talk to each other, and see what’s going on to try to be friends.” Though FACTS students would inevitably be closer to some more than others, the school still expected a fundamental level of friendliness, care, and acceptance toward those students that one might not be as close to, or, flat out, didn’t like. Students could not foreclose on the possibility of friendship, and were expected to remain open to it—“to see what’s going on to try to be friends.” The girls described FACTS as a place where they could “get accepted,” and people “feel comfortable about who they are.” Although they were not specifically speaking in terms of cross-race friendships, their description of the school’s general ethic toward building relationships was, nevertheless, integrally tied to improving race relations. By shaping how this multiracial mix of students related to one another in daily and ordinary encounters, they were modeling positive interactions between people of different races in the ultimate hope of bringing about broader changes.

This intimate multiracial FACTS family was also built upon knowledge of each other’s life histories. For the entire year I was at FACTS, Teacher Mel rebuffed my requests for a formal interview because, as she told me, she liked to “stay out of the spotlight.” I found this strange considering her penchant for talking and her outspokenness. Nonetheless, at the end of the school year she finally relented but only with the promise of keeping the recorder off. After the interview, she took out her smart

phone and swiped through her camera roll until she found the picture she was looking for. With a deep sense of pride and tears welling up in her eyes, she showed me a picture of three eighth-grade boys—looking quite dapper in their starched shirts and ties—taken during the graduation party. As she pointed to each one she said, “Latino, Asian, and African [American]. How many places can you find that? This one. We don’t just know them as students. We know their life stories.” The sense of being part of a multiracial FACTS family was predicated on knowing students’ “life stories” and not just their academic portfolios. Embedded in this was the expectation that one would share vulnerably in order to learn about one another’s life stories in order to build an intimate community.

FACTS’ implicit charge was to re-educate students and introduce them to another set of normative expectations for how black and Asian students should interact with one another. This set of expectations was not the low-hanging fruit of tolerance. Rather, it was a loftier set of expectations that included engaged respect, celebration, and intimate solidarity. As Melissa, an Indonesian alumna who was a senior in high school at the time, told me:

I think...part of the influence from FACTS, I feel like just because you’re Asian, you don’t have to know just about the Asian history. I mean you also have to be aware of other culture’s struggle or other culture’s successes.... I feel like I care more about what’s going on around me, because we were taught to like care about all the things that are going on around us.

This meant that students were expected to seriously engage in understanding the struggles of other races. Being FACTS kinfolk transcended the fact that they were not skinfolk. Invoking *family* created an allegiance to FACTS’ pursuit of racial equality for all. By

invoking the trope of a FACTS family the school was providing a prefigurative example of the kind of intimacy and conviviality possible in multiracial coalitional efforts and everyday relations among people of different races.

Rituals of Kinship: Care and Intimacy

As I walked by Teacher Cecilia's door, I noticed that she posted a new sign that read, "WE ARE WHAT WE REPEATEDLY DO. EXCELLENCE, THEN, IS NOT AN ACT, BUT A HABIT. —ARISTOTLE". This mantra was assiduously followed in FACTS, with "excellence," in this case, being the advancement of social justice through creating interracial intimacy, and "habit" being the ritualized embodied practices at FACTS that cultivated meaningful cross-race relationships. In this section I discuss how daily rituals were important processes for ethical self-formation—forms of ethical striving and self-making that were predicated on a vector of caring that crossed color lines, and moved students to engage in the lives and struggles of other ethnic/raced FACTS kin. In particular, I discuss how rituals promoted the ethics of listening, and sincerity among students.

According to Lambek (2010:15), care is central to the domain of kinship, and constitutes an important realm of ethical activity:

Care signifies, in the first instance, looking after or looking out for, the well being of others, and as such it both is central to what anthropologists have constructed as the domain of kinship and serves to remind us that kinship is fundamentally a realm of ethical activity.

Care was constantly conveyed as a foundational value at FACTS and undergirded the school's rituals, as well as its construction of the trope of a "FACTS family." This was

so much so, in fact, that it was the first line in the school pledge: “We care for each other....” This sense of care radiated throughout the school. One of my friends, who spent a good deal of time at FACTS co-producing the film *Growing Up is Activism*, described it as having “a really feminine vibe.” Care, as an ethic, was an important way in which FACTS distinguished itself and stood against hegemonic forms of imagining social change predicated on notions of revolution. Instead of conceiving of social transformation in broad, sweeping, and totalizing terms, as the masculinist idea of revolution alludes to (cf. Thomas 2011), this caring approach was more banal and ordinary but no less powerful, and it certainly counted as no less of an ethical project, for “moral striving shows up in everyday labors of caring for the other” (Das 2010:399). Through the small things of teaching children how to treat one another (particularly, cross-racially) with care, the school sought to imagine and construct forms of interracial sociality that had yet to take full shape or to have been fully realized. In other words, it was, and continues to be, a “work-in-progress.” The ethic of care practiced by the school was relational and obliged a person to care, even when it didn’t come naturally, because they were members of the same family.

My analysis of FACTS’ rituals of care is informed by Hirschkind (2006) and Mahmood’s (2011 [2005]), discussion of how Islamic pedagogical materials (e.g., cassette-taped sermons and pamphlets) are practices of ethical self-cultivation. Challenging the popular dichotomy between a “privatized interiority” and a “public exteriority,” Mahmood (2012:227), drawing on Foucault, argues, “Not only are the two inseparable in their conception but, more importantly, belief does not precede (or is the cause of) these outward devotional practices but is the product of their apt performance.”

Rituals, then, are not merely an expression of belief in a set of moral codes but are the means of ethically cultivating a sense of self that is “good” and “right.” In the FACTS context, this was not an ethics based on religious moral striving but one based on striving to live in a way that was “good” and “right” in a racially diverse, culturally plural, liberal society.

When I sat down to interview Teacher Sarah, one of the middle-school teachers, she clearly communicated the analogy between moral strivings based on religious beliefs, and those based on liberal principles. Though they had different end goals, both employed rituals and routines as methods of indoctrination.

I’ve been to religious schools and they do prayers in the morning, and we don’t do that, but something we aspire to as good human beings, which is contained in our pledge, it’s our statement of intentionality and I think it does help. In the middle of a lesson I’ll say, “We care for each other, there’s no limit to what we can do.” It’s like a joke, the typical kid, “There’s Teacher Sarah being corny.” As much as they roll their eyes and joke, it’s like your mom reminding you, “Mind your manners.”

The school pledge, like a prayer or liturgy, was embedded with FACTS’ values and beliefs and served as a compass that pointed to what a meaningful life looked like, according to the school’s founders. Similar to religion, developing ardent practitioners of these beliefs relied on repetition and application, as Teacher Sarah’s example of bringing up the school pledge in the middle of a lesson indicates. Disciplining students’ minds and bodies to practice ethical interracial caring was accomplished through daily and annual rituals that habitualized caring practices.

One of these habitualized caring practices was that of being a “really good listener,” as Teacher Sarah put it. She explained:

The hardest thing for me, but I've found to be most valuable, is to be a really good listener, and to set up situations where listening is active. Empathetic listening is almost forced, and like the basic level of behavior.

While having seemingly little to do with ethical cultivation, morning meetings were central sites for advancing an ethical project at FACTS. Morning meetings are a common feature in many American classrooms. When I taught kindergarten and first grade, I used morning meetings to review the calendar, the weather, to talk about the day's upcoming events, and to give students an opportunity to divulge about their lives. Primarily, it was a means of building a classroom community. FACTS uses a *responsive classroom* approach, which in the middle grades is referred to as the *Circle of Power and Respect*. Through structured greetings that involve making eye contact and shaking hands, morning meetings encourage students "to greet each other with respect; communicate with power and authority without putting each other down; [and] listen to each other's stories, hopes, and fears" (Circle of Power and Respect | Responsive Classroom n.d.).

During morning meetings, intimacy was created among students of different races and ethnicities. Though seen as valuable, in and of itself, fostering interracial intimacy was not, however, the ultimate end goal. Developing trusting and caring relationships among students of different races was put in service of a new way of imagining race relations in Philadelphia and American society more broadly. Morning meetings furthered interracial trust and care through teaching students to self-manage the comportment of their bodies, their speech, and their affect. By disciplining these external elements, morning meetings were a safe space where students felt "heard" and also felt

free to share their lives (including cultural practices that were marginal to mainstream America) without fear of being mocked. The focus on governing external dispositions—for example, replacing students’ impulses to laugh at inappropriate times, with the desired affect of care, attention, and affirmation—was an ethical practice that transformed the internal elements of the heart.

A typical morning meeting consisted of students gathering around the rug area in unassigned spots. Protocols for facilitating morning meeting varied; some days relied on a prompt for generating discussion, drawn from a list of suggested games, and other days were more open ended and free forming (e.g., What did you do this weekend?). When I talked to Teacher Sarah, she emphasized that morning meetings cultivated a safe and caring environment in which students could feel free to be vulnerable, to express themselves, and to be heard. She did this by contrasting FACTS middle schoolers with the archetypically awkward middle schooler who is “so uncomfortable in [his] own skin.”

To me the morning meeting unit, and the idea that we have worked so hard to teach the children to be respectful of each other and this is a safe place, that things get shared in morning meeting by 7th and 8th graders, by middle schoolers. Every other experience I’ve been in, either my experience, or my kids, its sort of a brutal time when kids are so uncomfortable in their own skin, they snap at each other, get ridiculed. [It’s] the last place where you’d want to put yourself out. In this school it’s been so different to me...the things that are shared in circle.

She continued by providing an example of how FACTS students have felt safe enough to be vulnerable and open in their sharing.

One time one day, we did a quick share at the end of the day, and it was, “If you could do anything in the world, what would it be?” And one boy said, this is again 8th grade boys and girls with each other, “I would have a girlfriend for a weekend.” I said “Why?” And he said, “I’ve never had a girlfriend and I want to know how it feels.” And I was so sure, gritted my teeth, that people were going to

laugh cause he was so vulnerable, but it was as if he said he wanted to go to the mall. People heard it, they respected it and moved onto the next comment.

In this quote, Teacher Sarah pointed out that this boy shared his desire to have a “girlfriend for a weekend” in a mixed gender environment to call attention to the high level of trust that students place in each other’s hands. But perhaps, given the negative Asian-black interactions students experienced before coming to FACTS (e.g., Asian students often shared about their previous experiences in predominantly black schools in which they were teased through the use of mock Chinese), and even within FACTS (e.g., Asian parents not wanting their children to play with black kids), the high level of openness and trust that exists in this racially mixed classroom setting is also worth mentioning.

This caring environment opened up opportunities for students to share, in a diverse setting, about cultural and religious practices that might be considered “exotic” or “weird,” without fear of being ridiculed. Teacher Sarah shared another example of this happening during morning meeting.

We were talking around New Year, a number of my students had grandparents who died, and in circle when we share weekends, those things come up, and they share rituals around death, and everyone else shares rituals around deaths. Certain boys shaved their heads, and the monks come to the house and they shave their heads to show respect to the person who passed away and the respect that they listen to each other. I was in awe of their attitude towards each other.

While the reason for shaving one’s head, and having monks come to the house, would most likely not get shared in a typical American classroom, especially among middle schoolers who are quite conscious of fitting in, this story was not only shared but was received respectfully by listeners. The highly structured form of morning meetings—a

space in which the teacher acted as facilitator and enforcer of interactional expectations—served as a training ground for students to respond felicitously (i.e., sincerely) to their fellow classmate-kin’s vulnerable sharing.

Practicing Sincerity

Since students’ “attitude towards each other” made possible the interracial intimacy that existed within FACTS, this was the pivot point for students’ ethical formation. This “attitude” was the product of consistent and repeated governance of their bodies, gestures, and speech, as the following quote from Teacher Sarah begins to explain. Referring back to the boy who wanted a “girlfriend for the weekend” she said:

I’ll never forget it cause I get shivers up my arms. It’s such a precious moment. Cause this was a shy Asian boy and some kids who are more out there, fun, loud, not a single one, there wasn’t a snicker, or any curl of the mouth. It was just, “Oh, that’s what he wants to say today.” I think it’s really just consistently, the morning meetings, the consistent sharings, the consistent focus on this as a safe place.

In this quote, Teacher Sarah notes how some students, despite being “more out there, fun, [and] loud,” were able to display a respectful and caring attitude by controlling their demeanor, namely, by avoiding “a snicker, or any curl of the mouth.” A student’s attitude, then, is a window into his interiority that bespeaks of how rigorously he works on disciplining his external behavior, for “manners, once mastered, become natural expressions of the kind of person one has become” (Yeung 2010:241–242). When Teacher Sarah said she was “in awe of their attitude toward each other,” she was essentially praising them for nurturing the work they did on themselves to become

FACTS' paradigm of a moral human being. And this, as the interview quote suggests, is not a one-and-done deal, but rather occurs through consistent, and repeated practice.

In observing morning meetings and other instances in which students were praised for being caring, respectful, or supportive, a good deal of onus was placed on the listener's ability to control his/her affective response. Though Teacher Sarah spoke of how respectful FACTS students were (which was true in most cases), I also observed examples of the opposite. These counter-examples serve as looking glasses into the processes by which students become caring and respectful. For example, there were times when students received the teacher's "evil eye" or a verbal reprimand for not being able to successfully repress a laugh, for making surreptitious glances at a friend, for disguising a comment in a cough, or for making gratuitous gestures or movements. In addition, I observed times when students (most often the infamous classroom clowns but also students who had a reputation for being well behaved, who were also most often boys) physically stifled their laughter by covering their mouth, or burying their heads in their lap. These were attempts to discipline their bodies to be in alignment with the school's values.

And yet suppressing one's emotions, or displaying a deadpan expression, was not what teachers necessarily praised, for I also observed instances in which students displayed a great deal of emotion that was not admonished by teachers. For example, during a fourth-grade discussion about Chinatown, one student mentioned reading about a Chinese American boy named Aaron, who was a celebrity of sorts in the school because he played the role of the well-known Chinese mythical character Monkey King in local performances, and because he was the son of the school's founding principal. The

student recapitulated Aaron's feeling of offense when a bus full of tourists gawked at him as he performed kung fu in Chinatown. The student said, "Aaron felt bad when the trolley passed by, like he was there to entertain [the tourists]." A black student immediately yelled out with indignation in his voice, and a scowl on his face, "He ain't no music box!" Teacher Kim, instead of reproaching him, validated his comment and response by saying, "You're right David James. That's a good way of describing it. When he practices...what is it...I forgot...martial arts and opera, it makes him feel like he's part of the community. But people just see that as a form of entertainment."

Praise for students' behavior was not about creating taxidermic students who were lifeless and emotionless. Rather, the goal was teaching them how to display certain emotions that were appropriate to the situation—that is, conveyed empathy and care. In this instance, the conversation was about the boy feeling exoticized under the watchful gaze of tourists and more generally about Asian Americans being cast as the perpetual foreigner. So David James's angry response to this injustice was commended by the teacher as being "right." Being able to emotionally relate, to mirror someone's affect, or to walk a mile in someone else's emotional shoes—especially cross-racially as the case of David James and Aaron shows—was a way in which students could successfully manage their disposition, affect, and speech. This was essentially how students could cultivate an ethic of care and respect that strengthened intimate connections across racial lines.

While much of the burden was placed on the listener to respond appropriately, speakers were also expected to share in ways that were sincere. For example, during circle times, Jamir and Caleb, two eighth-grade boys, were regularly reprimanded for

sharing in ways that were deemed insincere. These two boys were constantly talked about by their peers for their classroom antics, which many perceived as being funny, yet also going too far. They were the tightest of friends, evinced by their construction of a new racialized hybrid identity. One referred to himself as “Blackanese,” and the other as “Blasian” as a way of melding together their black and Lao heritages.

During circle times, Caleb might begin sharing, then Jamir would make a loud but incoherent noise, Caleb would randomly insert a phrase like, “Never die!” (which had a meaning understood only between the two of them), and both would start laughing uncontrollably. These antics were judged by the teacher as being “too silly,” and they were frequently told, “We’re not gonna do this if you’re not gonna take it seriously.” Interestingly, governing ethical behavior was not only the role of the teachers, or the subject herself in the case of self-disciplining, but other students also engaged in this activity. Some adjudicated on Jamir and Caleb’s actions by telling them, “You’re taking it too far,” “You’re messin’ around too much,” or quite simply, “Stop.” These performances were deemed as being insincere because their primary goal was to make themselves and other students in the class laugh, as opposed to being true intentions that came from the heart. Sincerity was the premium students had to pay (or perform), to enjoy the fruits of being part of the FACTS family.

Being sincere also entailed performing care and respect spontaneously, like when students were not under the watchful eye of authority figures. Students’ unmonitored interactions were a test of how well they cultivated sincerity toward one another. While morning meeting served as a main forum for providing guidance in the embodied practices of care and respect, performing care outside of this domain was the true marker

of sincerity (i.e., that students had worked so hard on the process of subject making that it now came naturally). Stated differently, “Habitual practice [brought] about, paradoxically, one’s own virtue and sincerity through disciplined effort” (Yeung 2010:243).

In one of the more striking instances of a sincere performance of care and affirmation, I was hanging out with Jamir and Caleb in the conference room. They were psyched about showing me Jamir’s new rap music video that had been recently uploaded to YouTube. As the page loaded on my laptop screen, I quite suddenly felt flushed for the content that appeared on my *watch history*—videos of Chinese opera and Katy Perry singing on Sesame Street. Becoming quite self-conscious that my *watch history* fell far short of teen notions of coolness, I tried to explain nonchalantly, “My mom and kids like to watch that stuff.” “Wow, I am so uncool,” I quickly conceded. Because of their reputations as class clowns, I fully expected to become the butt of their jokes. But instead Jamir said very seriously, “Why is it embarrassing? It’s not embarrassing,” with Caleb nodding his head in agreement. Instead of teasing me for having videos that featured traditional Chinese opera and Katy Perry, I was affirmed and told not to be embarrassed. Because of FACTS’ focus on valuing different cultural traditions, and because Beijing opera is one of the folk arts ensembles, even these students who are known for their incessant joking and teasing, were conditioned to not mock cultural difference, but to affirm it. Why they let me off the hook for the Katy Perry videos, I still don’t know. All this occurred not under teachers’ surveillance or dictates of appropriate behavior but spontaneously and sincerely.

Constructing Shared Histories and Shared Futures

I have so far argued that daily rituals, such as morning meetings, trained students to share vulnerably and intimately about their lives, as well as to practice sincerity toward one another, and that these were ways of producing an interracial FACTS family. I now turn to an examination of a social studies curriculum unit that investigated a historically black community in Philadelphia (South Central Philadelphia¹⁵), and a historically Asian community in Philadelphia (Chinatown), and view this as an annual ritual that served to further consolidate notions of interracial kinship. I argue that the way in which the histories of these neighborhoods were woven together, provide an example of how the politics of remembering the past is used to further contemporary political purposes (cf. Olwig Fog) and constitute an ethical act. Referring to the way in which contemporary Vietnamese memorialize and provide death rites to both revolutionary war heroes, as well as to soldiers who fell on the other side of the war (whether Vietnamese or American), Kwon (2010:406) argues that “the act of repairing brotherly relations between these two fallen soldiers is at once a moral and a political practice” (Kwon 2010:410). Constructing a collective memory that knits together the histories of Chinatown and South Central Philly, then, is an ethical act that seeks to repair the

¹⁵ *South Central Philadelphia* was the designation used by community leaders of the historically black neighborhood of South Philly, specifically around where the Odunde festival takes place (at 23rd and South Street). The *Seventh Ward* in DuBois’s *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) defines the north-south boundaries as Spruce to Naudain Streets, and the east-west boundaries as 7th to 23rd Streets. A subsection of this area was referred to as *South Street West* and was designated as anything located on South Street that was west of Broad Street. This nomenclature was determined by that area’s business association with the namesake *South Street West Business Association*. Although teachers referred to the neighborhood as *South Street West*, I have chosen to refer to it as *South Central Philadelphia* because the social studies unit did not focus narrowly on the businesses along the South Street West corridor (though this was where the field trip took place), but rather, included the cultural and social happenings in the broader black community around that area.

damages of the past, and forge toward a different future by building solidary relations between black and Asian Philadelphians today.

When I inquired about the genesis and intention of the unit, teachers told me that Chinatown and South Central Philadelphia were specifically chosen because they reflected the racial demographics of FACTS' student body. When I inquired why these *particular* neighborhoods were chosen as proxies, (as opposed to places in the Northeast, North Philly, or West Philly where significant numbers of FACTS students reside), I was informed that the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) had already created or collected educational resources about Chinatown and South Central Philly. While these neighborhoods did not have the highest populations of Asian Americans and African Americans in Philadelphia (because of gentrification and the use of eminent domain that razed homes to create large-scale development projects), Chinatown and South Central Philly nevertheless held a great deal of symbolic value for Asian American and African American communities within Philadelphia. PFP had long-standing collaborations and personal connections with groups like AAU and Odunde that worked to preserve these ethnic communities.

From the outset, investigating these neighborhoods was not about a dry or distanced study of Chinatown and South Central Philly but were opportunities for teachers and students to personally integrate into an existing network and a history of interracial collaborations. The curriculum, presented as a study of neighborhoods that experienced parallel challenges due to urban development, deliberately entwined these neighborhood histories and deepened a sense of connection between them. The unstated theory of action was that constructing parallel neighborhood histories would encourage

students who identified more with Chinatown (most of whom were presumably Asian) and students who identified more with South Central Philly (most of whom were presumably African American), to engage in *each other's* histories because they were part of the same shared struggle of racial minorities in the United States. This was implicitly conveyed through the way in which the entangled struggles of Chinatown and South Central Philly were told.

The social studies unit leveraged voices from members of each community who shared similarly themed stories—stories about the encroachments and threats to the community by state and private development. Over the course of the unit, the fourth-grade teachers showed two community-produced videos, one entitled *Look Forward and Carry on the Past* (Wei, Dornfeld, and Kodish 2002) that was about Chinatown, and the other entitled *The Taking of South Central...Philadelphia* (Morton and Maskovsky 2005) that was about South Central Philly. In *Look Forward*, a youth community organizer was interviewed and talked about the immanent devastation that the proposal to build the Phillies baseball stadium at 12th and Vine (adjacent to the boundaries of Chinatown North) would wreak on families. Referring to previous development projects (the Pennsylvania Convention Center, the Vine Street Expressway), she said that she lived in South Philly and her grandmother lived in Chinatown because of “housing issues” (Wei, Dornfeld, and Kodish 2002). “And now they want to have another thing that keeps families away to spread out people, to break apart families” (Wei, Dornfeld, and Kodish 2002). Similarly, in *The Taking*, one of the opening shots showed archival footage of two people holding up signs that indicated they were protesting the crosstown expressway. “We won that fight,” the speaker tells the viewers (Morton and Maskovsky

2005). In the next frame, Lois Fernandez (founder of the Odunde festival) is seen walking around Madison Square near 22nd Street, alongside a longtime resident who un/apologetically said, “I’m sorry to say…” and then launched into a critique of the un-neighborly attitudes of newer folks, and also the exorbitant asking price of Toll Brothers’ new housing (\$600,000) that pushed decades-long residents (many of whom were black) out of the neighborhood (Morton and Maskovsky 2005).

At that point in the film, Teacher Rena paused the video and asked students, “Where did the crosstown expressway that these people fought against ended up being built?” A boy apprehensively offered the response, “Philadelphia?” Other students offered equally puzzled guesses, “A highway?” After a few misfired responses, one student answered that it was built in Chinatown. Teacher Rena then explained how “back then there was no way of getting across the city without driving through all the streets so they wanted to build a crosstown expressway.” She then emphasized how both communities fought against this, but “their successful fight against the crosstown expressway ended up in Chinatown’s backyard,” and that these neighborhoods had “struggles and things to overcome.” Teacher Rena drew on the theme of struggle that was apparent in the films and the incursion of space as a result of public and private development projects. She also specifically referenced the battle that both neighborhoods waged against the crosstown expressway—a piece of connective tissue that constructed them as communities with a shared history. The destruction of homes and other aspects of material culture were not only physically devastating but also included “the force to destroy the social foundations of remembrance” (Kwon 2010:406). Excavating and documenting these stories on film, recirculating them through lessons, and creating a

common point between them were not only ways of preserving the social foundations of remembrance but also bolstered the connection between the two communities.

The analogues between these communities were also communicated through discussions about the festivals they founded and celebrated each year. Festivals can be thought of as place-making strategies that are mobilized to further local political purposes (Breunlin and Regis 2006; Mines 2005; O'Reilly and Crutcher 2006; Regis 1999; Regis 2001; Regis and Walton 2008), particularly in urban landscapes with limited space. In the case of Chinatown and South Central Philadelphia, the Mid-Autumn Festival (MAF) and Odunde, respectively, were used to make racialized and ethnicized claims to Philadelphia space, precisely because they faced the persistent specter of contestation and incursion. In *Looking Forward*, Debbie Wei, a community activist, talked about how the establishment of the Mid-Autumn Festival (MAF) was “a real political statement, about claiming our right to be *Chinese in Philadelphia*” (Wei, Dornfeld, and Kodish 2002, emphasis added). On the festival’s website, MAF is described as an affirmation of “our human right to culture” (Asian Americans United » Human Right to Culture n.d.). Striking a similar but subtler tone, in Tina Morton’s documentary work-in-progress (a trailer I found on *vimeo* that was subsequently used in a lesson), speakers talked about how Odunde was a “manifestation of the community, [bringing] together Africa and African Americans...not to mention just the community generally coming together...and having a taste of our culture” (Morton 2012). Another speaker asserted, “*Odunde is part of Philadelphia*, and it’s part of the culture of Philadelphia and the black community” (Morton 2012, emphasis added). Resonant in these quotes is the sentiment that racialized minorities not only have the right to freedom of cultural expression but that it should not

compromise their sense of belonging as Philadelphians, or as Americans for that matter. Rather, these cultural expressions reworked notions of what constituted “Philadelphia.”

Interestingly, the racialized and ethnicized celebratory nature of these festivals created questions among students as to whether or not they were welcome to attend—an issue that is homologous to the broader tensions inherent in recognition-based strategies. Although MAF and Odunde conveyed loose and flexible understandings of the cultural traditions it intended to celebrate, students saw race as the gatekeeper of who was (and was not) allowed to participate. For example, in seeking to be more inclusive, in promotional materials, MAF was mainly billed as a festival that celebrated the traditions of people of Chinese ancestry and people connected to Chinatown (this opened the festival up to non-Chinese Asians who viewed Chinatown as “home,” as one Hmong teacher told me). Odunde was advertised as drawing on Yoruba practices, West African traditions more broadly, African heritage, still more broadly, and the traditions of people from within the African diaspora (e.g., it included performances of capoeira—an African descended, Brazilian form of martial arts). While definitions of who and what these festivals were designed to celebrate captured an ethnically diverse swath of people, race was the more prohibitive, less permeable category that led Asian students at FACTS to ask whether they were allowed to attend a festival that seemed designated for a specific race.

During a social studies lesson, one of the school’s African American teachers, Teacher Madeline, was invited to share with the class about her experiences at Odunde. “There were flags flying, food smelling *so good*,” she said, as she animated a cartoon-like odor trail of food. “It’s a festival that’s all about African culture. There’s people

with natural hairstyles and afros.” An Asian American boy, sitting at a table I had just worked with, asked, “Do you have to be African American or black to go?” Teacher Madeline responded, “Not at all. It’s just like the Mid-Autumn Festival where you don’t have to be Asian to go. The festival is a celebration of African American culture, but you can go no matter who you are.” Indeed, the problem of seeking to celebrate particular cultures while being inclusive of all communities was preemptively dealt with by the festivals organizers who, on its website, expressly made the disclaimer that, “Odunde is for everyone.” In the case of MAF, organizers stated that while the festival “primarily highlights Chinese culture...we try to make connections with other communities.” To honor and make good on this statement, it reserved a segment of its festival to non-Chinese, even non-Asian performances. It is important to note how a potential point of disconnect (“Do you have to be African American or black to go?”) was reframed by Teacher Madeline to serve as a point of connection (“Not at all. It’s *just like* the Mid-Autumn Festival where you don’t have to be Asian to go” [emphasis added]). By articulating that both festivals fought against similar struggles (e.g., the right to cultural expression, and claims over urban space), and by explaining that the festivals were similar in that they were “for everyone,” MAF and Odunde were configured in ways that interwove the histories and futures of Chinatown and South Central Philadelphia, and by extension, the histories and futures of FACTS’ Asian- and African-American students.

Another ritual aspect of the social studies unit that provoked feelings of interracial kinship was its culminating event. Odunde’s founder, Lois Fernandez (who also spoke to the previous year’s fourth grade classes), and her daughter, Oshunbumi Fernandez, who currently leads the organization, were invited to speak to the fourth-grade classes. They

also invited Ellen Somekawa from Asian Americans United (AAU), and a few other people to participate in the panel discussion. The atmosphere of the event, like many events at FACTS, created a “feel-good” experience that contributed to a sense of cross-racial camaraderie. Many hugs were exchanged. Many pictures were taken. There was a great deal of warmth and excitement directed toward the guests, with one girl gasping at the first sight of Lois Fernandez, as if she had just laid her preteen eyes on Justin Bieber. Pedagogically significant, both sets of people (i.e., those who represented South Central Philadelphia/Odunde, and those who represented Chinatown/MAF) were sitting side-by-side at the same table, conveying a visual message about black-Asian solidarity. This had the similar effect that Jahzaire and Brenda sitting side-by-side in the film had on its viewers.

The sense of black-Asian solidarity was further reiterated to me at the very end of the event when the official program had ended and the adults were milling around and chatting. Just as I was about to introduce Lois and Ellen to each other, Ellen knelt down to where Lois was sitting in her wheelchair and embraced her affectionately like an old friend. After some time passed, Ellen’s husband, Teacher Ben, came in to greet Lois and also leaned down to hug her. Only later did I learn that they both supported Odunde, making an effort to attend the festival each year. I was surprised to see this warm and knowing exchange, and further understood at that point the depth of history that was behind the school’s effort at building multiracial solidarity. Through emphasizing the communities’ shared struggle of fighting against the Vine Street Expressway, constructing MAF and Odunde as analogues of one another, and creating a palpable sense of conviviality between community leaders of South Central Philadelphia (who

were black), and Chinatown (who were Asian), the social studies unit generated a sense of interracial connection, goodwill, and kinship among black and Asian students. With the best hope, the sense of shared history would in turn produce in students the desire to construct more socially just, interracially harmonious futures.

Conclusion

While schools are not commonly understood in terms of activism or ethics, FACTS' founding and workings were oriented toward promoting social change by envisioning an alternative to the strained Asian-black relations in South Philly (symbolized through the figure of Yuri Kochiyama as the school's "spiritual founder"). The interracial relations between students at FACTS—relationships that were typified as intimate and caring—then served as a pre-figurative form of race relations that heralded black-Asian solidarity more broadly. Jahzaire and Brenda's on- and off-camera chemistry was emblematic of these convivial relations. FACTS worked assiduously to establish rituals of interracial kinship predicated on care and intimacy. These were captured in morning meeting scenes in which students shared vulnerably in mixed race settings, and in the consistent governing of students' corporeality to ensure that their bodies properly communicated care, respect, and sincerity. The final section discussed how entwining the histories of Chinatown and South Central Philadelphia, as observed in social studies lessons, buttressed a sense of common history and common future. This chapter sought to paint a vivid portrait of how interracial intimacy, care, and kinship were constructed at FACTS to further cross-racial solidarity. As it relates to the overall argument of the dissertation, the trope of a FACTS family also worked to mitigate any

potential tensions produced by the school's dual goals of promoting Asian-American recognition, as well as a diversity.

CHAPTER 5

BEARING WITNESS TO DIFFERENCE

The previous chapter explored how FACTS rituals of behavior, gestures, speech, and action shaped the construction of an intimate multiracial family. This chapter discusses how the practice of bearing witness to subjective experiences of racism, injustice, and suffering also contributed to the cultivation of ethical beings and promoted a pre-figurative example of interracial solidarity. Whereas the previous chapter dealt mostly with protocols for *listening* that built interracial intimacy, this one deals more centrally with how ritualized *speaking*, particularly speaking about experiences of pain, loss, and oppression, were mobilized to further plumb the depths of difference, and to encourage a deep understanding of one another's inner struggles, plaguing thoughts, and embodied experiences of racism. This mode of building interracial solidarity was not predicated on dismantling the dividing wall between "us" and "them" through recourse to an impossibly broad and frustratingly abstract notion of our common humanity. Rather, it was based upon an attempt to understand our irreducible differences, and to acknowledge that while differences remained, school members were nevertheless committed to envisioning a more convivial future together.

Like many of the values and practices that FACTS hoped to instill in its members, the creation of ritual was key to accomplishing this. Bearing witness was ritualized in the form of teacher professional development days in which "courageous conversations" took place, as well as in the form of student poetry slams. This chapter analyzes the topics that emerged during teachers' and students' telling of their own stories, discusses how

publicly sharing the intimate thoughts and details of one's story were lessons for how to interact in a diverse setting, and also were a means of remediating hard feelings, misunderstandings, and the messiness that inevitably arise in attempts to build interracial intimacy.

Pedagogical Witnessing

In attempting to harness the power of pedagogy to transform social relations, Michalinos Zembylas (2006) has theorized how the process of telling one's own story of oppression opens up pedagogical spaces of possibility that engage people in understanding otherness. Teaching in a Cypriot context dominated by several centuries of ethnic conflict and division between Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots, Zembylas sought to create a classroom community in which bearing witness and the telling of personal narratives formed relational bonds that had affective implications among students. Referring to this as *pedagogical witnessing*, he argues that bearing witness in classroom spaces is a process of ethical and political transformation that moves beyond superficial demands for recognition (Zembylas 2006:308).

The concept of pedagogical witnessing draws heavily from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theory of affect. In *Notes on Translation*, Brian Massumi (1987:xvi) points out that Deleuze and Guattari's notion of affect does not refer to "personal feeling" or sentiment, which is likened to "emotion." Though these are imbricated concepts, affect is more closely related to the French word for power, *puissance*, which denotes a "range of potential," a "capacity for existence," a "capacity to affect or be affected," or a "capacity to multiply connections" (Massumi 1987:xvii). Affect, in this sense, is not the

power to dominate but the power to transform through connections made in the process of pedagogical witnessing. “What characterizes affect is not that they reside in individuals, but that they move us in surprising and unexpected ways, connecting us with Others” (Zembylas 2006:317), thus making affect resolutely relational. Massumi further notes that affect is more akin to the mathematical understanding of power—like a number being raised to the n th degree (1987:xvii)—magnified in intensity and energy. This intensity and energy is creative, generative, and indeterminate, as captured in the idea of “becoming.” Though using terms like “energy” may easily imply abstraction, affect is corporeal in the sense that it is “a process in which one body acts upon another” (Zembylas 2006:309) within relations of difference. Difference, in this way, is conceived as fodder for affect to do its work. This understanding of difference contrasts with empty notions of multiculturalism, often based on simplistic approaches to recognition, that takes difference as something to be domesticated.

Critiquing recognition-based approaches, Kelly Oliver argues, “If recognition is conceived as being conferred on others by the dominant group, then it merely repeats the dynamics of hierarchies, privilege, and domination” (2001:9). Recognition, in Oliver’s argument, simply reifies the subject-object divide because it presupposes a recognizer (i.e., subject with agency) who has the capacity to confer recognition to the recognizee (i.e., object void of agency). These power differentials are evident in superficial forms of multicultural education that, for example, grant all marginalized groups a day for celebrating their heritages and histories. Evident in this dynamic is the fact that subaltern groups are at the mercy of the privileged and powerful to be recognized in whatever form, and to whatever extent they see fit.

This also draws attention to how recognition-based strategies produce an objectifying gaze, which ossifies difference, therefore setting Otherness in stone. Speaking to the limitations of recognition, particularly in instances of genocide and slavery, Oliver (2001:8) contends:

[T]estimonies from the aftermath of the Holocaust and slavery do not merely articulate a demand to be recognized or to be seen. Further, they bear witness to a pathos beyond recognition and to something other than the horror of their objectification. They are also testifying to the process of witnessing that both reconstructs damaged subjectivity and constitutes the heart of all subjectivity.

To further apply Oliver's argument to the case of multicultural education, one can easily see how recognizing national minorities through a "Multicultural Day" produces an objectifying gaze. This day lends itself to creating a spectacle of marginalized traditions, foods, and other artifacts such that it exoticizes students and exacerbates a sense of otherness.

Despite the tendency to mobilize recognition in simplistic, even superficial ways, there were also forms of recognition practiced at FACTS that were more embedded in the school's daily activities. These were not formal attempts at **R**ecognition, with a capital "R," but were everyday ways in which students and teachers *recognized*, with a lowercase "r," each other's differences, *and* their humanity, simultaneously. Instead of equating *difference* with *object*, here, *difference* did not undermine one's *subjectivity*. This kind of recognition was felicitous and salubrious. According to nearly all the students I spoke to, the deeply embedded, everyday forms of recognition practiced at the school led students to feel uplifted, valued, and cared for. This form of recognition seems to be a close cousin to bearing witness because, inherent in processes of witnessing,

recognition of the other as subject often occurs. The process of witnessing in the context of FACTS repaired damaged subjectivity—the result of being victims of interpersonal and institutional racism—and was mutually transformative, both for the one bearing witness, and the co-witnesses (i.e., the hearers). The act of bearing witness contained the potential to create affective relations among culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse students.

Despite the fact that lowercase recognition was the school’s intent, this was not always the effect. At FACTS, some students and parents understood the ensembles in terms of uppercase **R**ecognition. They desired to achieve parity in the number of ensembles dedicated to different cultural heritages and in the number of celebrations dedicated to different racial groups. The quest for **R**ecognition produces a sense of competition among non-dominant groups, and so always contains the potential to damage these relations through pitting minorities against one another. Being acutely aware of these pitfalls, teachers and school leaders incorporated a number of opportunities for students and faculty to bear witness in ways that sidestepped the more problematic aspects of uppercase **R**ecognition. Bearing witness steered people away from attempts to quantify, and instead bade them to listen and draw near to one another’s stories. This was an important way in which the school’s intentional practices mitigated the tension between its “special commitment” to Asian Americans and its desire to build multiracial coalitions.

Because those bearing witness were often not strangers or invited guests that simply swept in to tell a compelling story but were members of the “FACTS family” (i.e., people that students and teachers already had enduring relationships with) the act of

witnessing provided a means of deepening and transforming relations by minimizing the difference-gawking that can often occur with recognition. Pedagogical witnessing, in particular, is based on a set of social relationships that occur within a relatively stable classroom and school community, and so it mitigates the tendency to objectify difference and to make it into Otherness. Or as Zembylas states, pedagogical witnessing “reconceives the Other as a subject, and [provides] a more radical opening up than mere (mis)recognition allows” (2006:313). This radical opening up, in the case of FACTS, can also be described as the affective potential of pedagogical witnessing to create a new ethics for interracial relations. Bearing witness created affective bonds that fortified relations within a multiracial FACTS family and also addressed differences based on gender, sexuality, and class.

Being “Honest” and Combatting “Ignorance”

FACTS, since its early years, institutionalized a form of bearing witness across racial difference that faculty referred to as “courageous conversations.” These were attempts to foster cross-racial understanding as a way to formulate new ways of living together. These conversations were sometimes organized events (e.g., whole-school professional development meeting), and sometimes ad hoc to address insults that arose in everyday speech or action. Courageous conversations were forms of bearing witness to the racism and hurt that teachers had experienced—opportunities for “listening to the speaking wound” (Dutro and Bien 2014; cf. Caruth 1996). Several teachers spoke of the value of these conversations, and Teacher Mel, my best informant-friend, was among those who explained its importance in fostering intimate connections at FACTS. Teacher

Mel, you may recall, was an older African American woman I had mentioned in an earlier chapter when I discussed our copy room conversation about Kenny Gamble.

It was the end of the school year, and all the student work that colorfully adorned the walls had been taken down. Though I had many informal conversations with Teacher Mel she only ever granted me one formal sit-down interview because she preferred to let others occupy the limelight. We sat down in a nondescript room on the second floor near a bank of computers. I offered her the Vietnamese spring rolls that I had just purchased from “Choo Choo,”¹⁶ knowing it was one of her favorites dishes. During the interview, she emphasized how telling stories—ones that were often characterized as being intensely personal and honest—served as a foundation for FACTS’ attempts to build cross-racial and cross-cultural intimacy.

Teacher Mel recalled the kinds of professional development (PD) the school used to engage teachers in. She said:

One of my first real open conversations, we did all kinds of exercises for PD, and I remember Teacher Maya [a white teacher] saying, ‘I like being part of the privilege.’ And that was the most honest thing I’d ever heard. And that was the kind of conversation we would have in PD. People were just honest. And I think that helped the school.

This “honesty” was in contrast to hiding behind the veneer of political correctness or a safe celebration of diversity and multiculturalism. As Teacher Mel’s retelling of Teacher Maya’s comment points out, conversations centered on an examination of racial inequalities and uneven power dynamics. In this particular case, it entailed admitting to one’s own white privilege, which, for Teacher Mel, “was the most honest thing [she’d]

¹⁶ The nickname often used to refer to a Vietnamese restaurant in Chinatown.

ever heard,” for it revealed Teacher Maya’s radical understanding of how seeking racial equality was predicated on upsetting the status quo and the loss of white dominance and power.

The school’s courageous conversations were also intended to provide teachers with a context of the challenges that students faced in their daily lives—challenges that were initially unfamiliar to some teachers. Regarding the kinds of conversations that went on during professional development, she said, “It made us more conscious of our students” and then explained the different things she learned from these stories. She gave an example of how “there might be 10 [store] owners who are Asian, but there are 80,000 who aren’t, cause they’re trying to survive.” This knowledge rebuffed stereotypes and challenged the widely circulating social figure of the Asian shopkeeper. By retelling this bit of information that was told to her, Teacher Mel is making the point that these stories made teachers more aware of the economically disadvantaged backgrounds of many of its Asian students, despite the widespread idea that most Asians were business owners.

She also learned about *satellite parenting*—a term that was introduced to teachers during professional development to describe transnational processes of child sharing. In the case of FACTS, the professional development organizers wanted to raise awareness of how some of their students were born and raised in China with relatives (most often grandparents), and only met their parents for the first time when they immigrated to the states as school-aged children. According to Teacher Mel, “it makes you understand,” because these children are “learning who their parents are for the first time. They’re just here and missing their grandparents, they’re in a place where they don’t know the language and expected to learn.” Teacher Mel expressed how these kinds of stories

helped her to sympathize because, “The more you learn and know, the more you sympathize. The more human it becomes to you. It touches your heart. It’s not just something that you read from a page. It’s giving love, and getting love unconditionally.” The sharing of these stories was so vital that Teacher Mel equated it with a form of “giving love, and getting love unconditionally.” This love was nourished through stories that made the Other “more human,” instead of simply being “something that you read from a page.” Moreover, it worked to combat ignorance, because, as Teacher Mel explained, “I think prejudice comes from ignorance.” The theme of using story-telling to combat ignorance was reinforced by Teacher Amelia, another African American teacher at the school.

Teacher Amelia commented that even just the act of listening to someone during courageous conversations was powerful because it combatted ignorance, which she described as not necessarily willful hurt, but simply not knowing:

People always say this word of ignorance and it being like this horrible, horrible word, but a lot of it, it is ignorance. I just did not know. I did not know. I’m so sorry, okay. You’re taking offense to it, but I did not know. So a lot of that happens at that time. Sometimes, people are just quiet and they just listen. But just that happening and listening going on, I feel like it’s powerful.

Courageous conversations were built into professional development with the understanding that in ethnically and racially mixed settings, there would simply be subjective experiences not known or experienced by others. The first step to changing race relations was through addressing this “ignorance” by directly sharing about and listening to these stories. For example, Teacher Amelia, admitted that she used to assume that all Asian students were Chinese, and was not familiar with the term *refugee* until she got involved in AAU.

By scheduling courageous conversations into things like professional development, there was an explicit expectation that race and other uncomfortable subjects would be discussed and addressed. Courageous conversations not only combatted ignorance but also “racial paranoia” (Jackson 2008)—a term that describes the “new reality of race in America” (Jackson 2010). In this reality, honest conversations about race are prevented because of the insistence of political correctness in a post–civil rights era. While one’s true racial views are struck from public performances, they are still “hiding in your heart,” as my daughter Emily likes to say, or expressed in the sanctity of one’s most intimate, often racially homogenous, social circles. Racial paranoia sabotages the advancement of racial equality precisely because these views remain hidden and hence not subject to scrutiny or change.

In contrast to racial paranoia, courage conversations worked toward transforming social relations as well as people’s views about race. It accomplished this through allowing school members to speak about race, to say things that weren’t “PC,” to unearth hidden biases—all in an intimate, but racially *heterogeneous*, FACTS social setting. Teacher Amelia explained, “It took a lot of learning.” With a grimace that turned into a chuckle she reenacted what part of a conversation might sound like: “I don’t like what you’re saying. That was very racist what you just said.” But however uncomfortable this was, she said, “I felt like I could have that conversation.”

Teacher Amelia said that these courageous conversations were “very personal, but I feel like they are necessary. Some people don’t like it, because it just opens you up and...puts you out there.” Although these conversations were “very personal” and “they can be very heated,” conflict was not only an expected part of being in intimate

community, it was what constituted a deeper, more refined and enduring sense of community. She described the school as a place in which “there are so many teachers who feel comfortable sharing their concern or their worry.” The seemingly contradictory way of talking about courageous conversations as, on the one hand, “very personal” and “heated,” and on the other hand, a setting in which teachers “feel comfortable sharing their concern,” speaks to the response-ability (Zembylas 2006:316) that staff and faculty feel they have to imagine a more just and livable future that is achieved through enduring the pain of remembering, or working through the conflict with those who were different. Teachers “feel comfortable” not because the process is a comfortable one. Quite the opposite. During courageous conversations, there is often a focused, pained, and grimacing look on teachers’ faces. “Feel[ing] comfortable,” then, has to do with knowing that their stories and concerns are heard—that empathetic listening is happening. Ultimately, bearing witness was a way of dealing with the conflicts that inevitably emerged in contexts of difference, and helped school members advance a more just means of living together. Bearing witness then commits teachers to the tasks of enduring together in a diverse community and teaching students to do likewise. This was predicated on telling the intimate and often painful details of one’s story, as the following professional development day illustrates.

“Go Back to Your Own Country”

During staff development day in the spring, the day’s events were dedicated to better understanding the school’s anti-bias curriculum. Everyone was gathered around circular tables that were spread across the cafeteria, which also served as the school’s

gymnasium. Despite its utilitarian function, the room was filled with an attractive glow from the sunlight that streamed through the wall of windows overlooking an urban industrial scene—the obsolete Reading Terminal Tracks, factory buildings, and tracks of land overgrown by dandelions and weeds. Teacher Lisa was leading the day’s activities. She went over an outline of the day and told us that momentarily a few teachers would share “counter-narratives”—that is, prepared speeches that interwove their personal backgrounds with why they taught at FACTS and the social challenges they have had to overcome in the process. She then made it a point to link FACTS’ anti-bias curriculum with the school’s mission, stating that the curriculum “compliments the school’s mission in terms of *folk arts* integration including *counter-narratives* and *social justice*” (italics added).

There are a few phrases in this sentence that I would like to tease out in order to better understand the significance of her statement. First, Teacher Lisa mentioned the school’s focus on “folk arts,” which teachers in the school often used as shorthand to refer to their value of the ordinary and everyday practices of students’ lives. “Art” was understood expansively, and in many cases it was used interchangeably with the term “folklore,” so that oral traditions and the passing on of stories from one generation to the next were considered part of the school’s focus on “folk art.” This countered high-culture notions of art that limited the use of the term to the visual and performing arts. As Teacher Lisa continued to say, this understanding of the term “folk arts” included the telling of “counter-narratives”—a version of truth telling from one’s subject position—that was an important aspect of the school’s anti-bias curriculum. But the term “folk arts,” insofar as the school used it, was also oriented toward advancing “social justice”

(cf. Kodish 2013) for in the telling of counter-narratives, marginal groups in society testified to their experiences of injustice and worked toward social change. By discursively linking “folk arts,” “counter-narratives,” and “social justice,” Teacher Lisa was making the assertion that the school’s mission to advance social justice included bearing witness to the *everyday* injustices of racism and other forms of oppression. While the literature on bearing witness often refers to catastrophic atrocities like genocide, its use at FACTS focused on *ordinary* and *everyday* injustices. The telling of these counter-narratives, not to mention their emotive deliveries (cf. Chubbuck and Zembylas 2008), was a central strategy to building interracial intimacy and advancing issues of social justice at FACTS.

After Teacher Lisa made a few more introductory remarks, Teacher Pheng stood up at her table, and, clutching onto a few sheets of paper, she took in a deep breath. Though we had no idea what she was about to say, there was a palpable sense of expectancy. Having previously heard her speak, I knew that she commanded gravitas and respect. Power was packed inside her petite frame. Similar to Teacher Amelia, Teacher Pheng, in the prelude she gave to her story, described the process of bearing witness as both comfortable and uncomfortable. It was comfortable in the sense that she was among a group of people that she trusted, but the content of her story—that is, her experiences with racism—and having to relive that trauma was decidedly uncomfortable. The question that often arises then is: what is the purpose of bearing witness if it potentially causes the speaker to relive the pain in such a visceral way? Teacher Pheng’s explanation here is helpful because she provides an interpretation of how crying, caused

by remembering one's own pain, is a "sign of resiliency, hope, pride, [and] comfort."

The discomfort of bearing witness, as she puts it, is "really necessary for us to move on."

So when I first started working at [FACTS] we had PD for two weeks straight and a lot of the PD was discussing these very issues...and I told someone this morning that before working at [FACTS], I did not cry. After working at [FACTS] I feel like I cry almost every moment we have these sorts of PDs [laughter]. But what I have learned is that crying is not a weakness. And I learned that from the teachers who were working here the first year, and [the school's first principal], it's a sign of resiliency, hope, pride, comfort, or I wouldn't be sharing all these things. Cause I am feeling comfortable, and also pain. And some of the things I'm going to share with you may make some of us uncomfortable and I'm a feeling a little uncomfortable too, but I think this discomfort is really necessary for us to move on.

She ended her preface by saying, "And if I start crying, it's okay." Some teachers chuckled, providing brief respite from the feeling of waiting with baited breath.

As Michel de Certeau argues, "If the art of speaking is itself an art of operating and an art of thinking, practice and theory can be present in it" (1984:123). In *speaking* about her subjective experiences of racism, Teacher Pheng captured the way in which FACTS both theorized and practiced how to "move on" and how to build more enduring and amicable forms of interracial sociality. In stories about trauma and everyday racism, victims often described a sense of helplessness and a loss of agency. Having speakers gain control over their own stories was transformative work because it allowed them to reclaim agency and to counter dominant messages in society that marked otherness as sub-human. Moreover, by telling these stories in racially diverse settings, it transformed race relations. Bearing witness modeled the kind of interracial intimacy that was possible. It provided a safe forum for members to say the wrong thing, to be ignorant, and to admit to privilege, in some cases, and importantly, to commit to working it out

together and supporting one another, personally and politically. This process, in and of itself, was a prefigurative example of multiracial solidarity. Teacher Pheng's preface touches upon how "*listening to the speaking wound*" (Dutro and Bien 2014) was a way of creating a shared alternative vision for what tomorrow would look like. Through the discomfort of not only *speaking* the pain but also intently *listening* to another's pain, intimacy and empathy—conceived of as the cornerstone for building solidarity at FACTS—were forged and practiced.

As Teacher Pheng's story illustrates, in bearing witness, providing the details of one's story are essential. I have decided to quote her at length here, mainly because the personal nature of her story makes it is beyond the pale of my ability to edit for the elements that are most "worthy" of retelling.

When I was eight years old, I came home to dead silence. This was definitely not typical of my large extended family. Finally my older cousin spoke. He murmured in defiance. "I am tired of people picking on me because I'm Chinese. I'm tired of being called [???nese]" My uncle shook his head and said, "No matter what, you cannot lash out like that. Are you crazy?" I may have only been eight but I felt his pain. At about 11 years old, my father sang a different tune than "just walk away." He said, "No matter what, never allow anyone to look down on you because of who you are, because you are Asian, he said with anger, pride and conviction. I knew he had grown tired of hearing racial slurs, tired of being the China man. I used to shield a lot from my parents. I didn't want them to worry but I knew his pain. It was almost a daily occurrence for me. It was more than the outright, "Go back to your own country," but it was the subtle things like, "Ew, what's that?" One night returning home from a friend's house, I again arrived home to eerie silence. But this time my mother was crying silently on the floor. My brother was locked up...

There was a long and uncomfortable pause, as Teacher Pheng tried to fight back the tears. She cleared her throat and continued.

Because he and his friends got into a violent brawl on SEPTA. Again, this was racially motivated. My father was pissed. But I could also tell he was proud that

his son stood up for himself. [Pause.] This was my norm growing up. I'd seen the skull of a person cracked open, and spit on by a stranger. Sorry. Too often I cleaned the wounds of, and bandaged people, washed blood off stained clothes and used yuw [Chinese balm].

She parenthetically explained, “Yuw is the thing that Teacher Betty uses for the bruises of students. And it kind of has a strong scent—that's yuw. To relieve pain and bruising.” She then continued reading what she had prepared.

Although I sat in school very quiet, blending into the walls, all this was happening in my life but none of my teachers ever knew. My family was only able to purchase two class photos...sorry...[clearing throat] One in first, and one in... [pause] Sorry. [clearing throat] Field trips were also a luxury. There was a time in my life when both parents worked two jobs but I knew their work at the take-outs best. They returned home at about 3 in the morning. I would pray that...[pause] my parents would get home safely.

At this point, Teacher Pheng struggled to finish reading, and so another teacher stepped in to read on her behalf. Later on, Teacher Pheng completed reading herself.

Drive-bys and drug dealers were happening on the stoop of my parents' takeout. My teachers didn't know how late or how hard my parents worked or the lingering fear I had every night. They were quick to criticize and wonder why they never showed up at events. I was the non [inaudible] Remedial reading, and tutored all throughout my life as a kid, barely made it in high school, and never felt smart enough, Chinese-enough, or American-enough. I was a mess of a child. Lost. At times I would observe or think about students at [FACTS]. I was [inaudible] back then, but what they had, this I know is a place where their identities are valued.

Teacher Pheng's example of bearing witness to racism provides a stark contrast to types of recognition-based multiculturalism that limit itself to celebrating things like different foods and holidays. This vision for enduring together was not an attempt to simply transcend the differences that existed, or a superficial appeal to our common humanity. Instead, this vision of interracial solidarity was predicated on the ruptures in our common humanity, and “inhabit[ing] that very space of devastation once again” (Das

2012:145). This is what women in Das's study who were subject to the horrific violence of the 1947 Partition of India referred to as "drinking the pain" (2010:145). Interracial solidarity, here, was built upon interpersonal understandings of the pains of anti-Asian racism: her father being ridiculed as the "China man," she being told to "go back to your own country," people being disgusted with her food, her cousin and brother being physically assaulted, the pervasive fear of being assaulted, and of her teachers making moral judgments of her parents for their supposed lack of engagement.

Her story also speaks to the social and economic challenges of coming to this country as refugees. Though Teacher Pheng only mentioned her ethnic Chinese identity, her family was among those who escaped Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge genocide with little to build a new life on. The multiple jobs and long hours that her parents had to work in the takeout business was reflective of the limited opportunities that were available to Asian immigrants but especially to refugees. Teacher Pheng's mention of her family having only enough money to purchase two sets of class pictures throughout her schooling, of living with extended family to cut down living costs, of her parents working in a neighborhood with high rates of violent crime, of observing the "skull of a person's head cracked open," of "drive-bys and drug dealers," are indicative of the economic hardships that she experienced growing up under the "refugee" label. Since many students at FACTS come from low-income families, Teacher Pheng's bearing witness also provides a window into differences based on class. The "other," which witnessing seeks to re-conceive as a subject, is not only a racialized other but also a classed other.

Teacher Pheng's story also illustrates the valence of gender and race. For example, she spoke of how her brother and male cousin were involved in violent, racially motivated fights but also how she suffered more silently from the embarrassment of being in "remedial reading," never feeling "smart enough," taking on the role of cleaning and bandaging wounds, washing blood stains off of clothes, and of simply sitting in school "very quiet" and "blending into the walls." This last part about her being a wallflower is flagged as important for teachers at FACTS to take note of, because although "all of this was happening in [her] life...none of [her] teachers ever knew." Her testimony called for teachers to be attentive to the gendered ways in which students experienced and dealt with racism and other traumas in their lives but especially girls, who may be socialized to manage stress in less noticeable ways.

Teacher Pheng's testimony not only influenced how teachers responded to and interacted with students but also gave teachers a direct view of her personal story and her inner pain. These intimate details built a sense of connectedness to her and an understanding of her subjective experiences as an Asian American woman growing up in Philadelphia. Drawing on Teacher Amelia's point that I quoted earlier, Teacher Pheng's story combatted ignorance. Because FACTS' teachers consisted of people who were differently positioned in society—economically, racially, and in terms of gender and sexuality—many teachers were simply unaware of the various forms of discrimination faced by people coming to the United States as refugees and what growing up as a Chinese-Cambodian American was like in Philadelphia. Bearing witness to her story, on a basic level, made people more knowledgeable of these subjective experiences.

Additionally, bearing witness was a way of “giving love, and getting love” in a way that built an intimate community. Teacher Pheng’s story, told in all its raw and vulnerable honesty, was a way of “giving love” because it exhibited a high level of trust in her listeners. It entrusted them with pieces of herself that were formative to her identity. It was a way of “getting love” because her story was recognized (with a lowercase “r”) and affirmed by others. This is similar to how people often colloquially describe the process of “being heard,” as healing, and of being loved. But constructing an intimate community was not only intended to transform relations on the school level.

Bearing witness was a building block for creating an intimate community among those who were different at FACTS. This intimate community served as a prefigurative politics, described more fully in the previous chapter, which modeled how to relate with others and had the affective capacity to transform social relations. Building an intimate community among “others” in FACTS created a collective responsibility to imagine a different kind of world and advance more palatable forms of sociality. In Teacher Pheng’s testimony, listeners were presented with the opportunity to take ethical “response-ability to become a transformative agent of awareness and reception of Others’ trauma” (Zembylas 2006:315). This process was dramatically different from what we see of how “others” often interact with one another in broader society—interactions that can be characterized as attempts to find the lowest common denominator that unite us as humans, and politically correct stances that fail to dig beneath the epidermal layer of difference. FACTS’ model of relating to others was based on telling one’s own irreducibly subjective story, and intently listening to others. This “giving love and getting love” was a harbinger of how differences could be dealt with in broader society.

“Young, Gifted, Black, Gay, and I Happen to Be Short”

Teacher Zach was also asked to share about the “social challenges” he faced in life and how that affected his teaching. Though it was not explicitly stated, these teachers were most likely approached to share because they represented different sets of backgrounds (backgrounds that matched the school’s student population), and experiences of marginality. While Teacher Pheng spoke about her experiences of anti-Asian racism and urban poverty from the perspective of an ethnically Chinese woman who migrated as a refugee from Cambodia, Teacher Zach talked about his experiences of anti-black racism growing up as an African American in Michigan (whose grandfather migrated there during the Great Migration), and the fear of homophobia that loaded down on him as the school’s only openly gay black male teacher. While a solemn and confiding tone was already set by Teacher Pheng’s sharing, I took particular notice of the seriousness and weight in which Teacher Zach spoke, mainly because it was such a stark contrast to my usual interactions with him that were so lighthearted. This presented another dimension of Teacher Zach that was different from the teacher that always greeted me with a beaming and slightly mischievous smile. Before he read what he prepared, he framed his sharing by explaining the following:

So I was asked about the social challenges faced... When I was asked this question I was thinking about my music and there’s this song, “to be young, gifted and black”...[sings song lyrics] I was always the only black kid involved in sports, involved in teams, baseball team—I was always that one dark little spot sitting in the bench. My dad always told me that you may not start this time, but you’ll have to work twice as hard as those other guys because that’s the only way you can make it in this world. I had that tattooed on my mind all my life and it became a part of who I am, my life and what I want to do in my life. And I thought that lesson would help me make change in the world and so I chose to teach. But with that came baggage, but a lot of social challenges that I had to

think about myself. And so I wrote this down, and I hope it makes sense. I think it will, but it's a letter to myself, and a response.

In a lyrical, spoken word sort of way, Teacher Zach proceeded to share some of his deepest insecurities and struggles.

Dear [Zachariah],

Remember when you only thought teaching would create social change? That was in the beginning. Are you torn? Don't you have your own social burdens to attend to? Have you conquered your social demons? Tell me, how many times do you think about your age? Do you still feel invalid among your peers? Cause you were immature and decided to become a teacher after you barely passed undergrad. Is [incoherent] valuable as attending the nation's top education school. You may have a lower center of gravity, but more than anyone, you know the statistics of success of those taller guys don't work in your favor. Gay? Gay, it doesn't mean you're happy. How many times do you have to think, "Are your clothes too tight? I better watch my hands when I get too excited." Do you still wonder what it would be like to put the picture of your partner on your desk like everyone else who shows off their family next to their pile of papers. Do you fear what your students will say? Will they hate you? Will they refuse to learn in your class? Will a simple hug initiated by a student who needs one because there are no hugs at home turn into a case of you on the sex offenders list? Will they call you...

"Sorry," Teacher Zach choked back. After taking a moment to recompose, he continued.

Will they call you a pervert or a pedophile and eventually cause you to lose your job? Are you afraid to say, "I'm black and I'm proud." Are you still worried about being called lazy when you're just laid back? How do you be passionate without people thinking you are an angry black man? Are you tired of being the only black male voice? How does it feel to represent your culture every time you speak? [Clears throat] Sorry. Will you ever have the chance or the opportunity to find a graduate mentor who looks like you? Are you as sick of this assimilation struggle?

Yours truly,

[Zach]

[Zach],

No, I'm not tired, I'm not sick, I don't mind being the only one. The internal conflict allows me to live. It is a part of me like the blood in my veins. Without it

there is no growth, no change. I would be defeated, not motivated. A core learner, even though I may be bruised, I have to ask myself every morning when I wake up and look in the mirror and get ready for the next fight. I am more prepared with a deeper understanding of the world around me. Young, gifted, black, gay, and I happen to be short.

[Zachariah]

When Teacher Zach finished, I was so enamored by the strength and courage of FACTS' teachers. As I took a quick peek around the room, I could tell from the expressions on everyone's faces, that they, like me, were struck with awe. There was a feeling that this school was something different, something special. This was clearly not a "usual" professional development, and this was not a "usual" Philly school. This was a place that defied both the metaphor of American society as a "melting pot" in which differences melded together and ceased to exist, and the more recent metaphor of a "salad bowl" in which differences existed side by side, but people remained ostensibly unchanged. Distinct from both these metaphors, difference was not conceived as simply innocuous but also as the basis for the systemic oppression and marginalization of groups in society. In other words, courageous conversations presupposed the existence of racism and other social maladies. The very fact that courageous conversations existed meant that racism existed. Because of this view, courageous conversations plumbed the depths of difference (based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and even stature, in the case of Teacher Zach) in terms of people's experiences of alterity, in order to combat "ignorance," as Teacher Amelia put it, and to cultivate greater understanding across various forms of difference. Within a diverse setting, these testimonials opened teachers

up to the ways in which difference pervaded and mediated people's daily thoughts, encounters, and actions.

Teacher Zach's sharing is illustrative of this point. Up until the moment he shared, I never considered how being gay might mediate everyday decisions such as whether or to not wear clothes that were "too tight," to "watch [his] hands when [he] gets too excited," to not display a picture of his partner on his desk¹⁷, to fear that students would refuse to learn from him and to worry that innocent displays of affection toward a child might be interpreted as the actions of a pedophile. His sharing provided a vantage of how his sexuality structured his life in constant, mundane ways. Teacher Zach, like Teacher Pheng, did not bear witness to atrocities that would make national headlines, but rather to the micro, minute ways in which he suffered from heteronormative standards of society. This part of his sharing focused on how his sexuality curtailed his exercise of everyday freedoms, while other portions focused on how he struggled against stereotypes of black men.

Teacher Zach worried that his "laid back" demeanor would instead be mistaken as laziness, and his passion would be misunderstood as the actions of an "angry black man." He spoke of the challenge of being the sole "black male voice" at FACTS, and being charged with "representing [his] culture every time [he] speak[s]." These comments spoke to how Teacher Zach's identity and freedom of expression were restricted by racialized and gendered tropes that led him to ironically shun being a representative for

¹⁷ In a previous conversation I had with Teacher Zach, we were chatting about a local media-making organization at which I had taken workshops. He informed me that his partner worked there, and when I asked for more of a description, he said with a devilish smile, "You'd know him since he's the only Asian there." This provided some context for understanding his motivations for working at FACTS.

his race, yet also to take on the burden by defying negative stereotypes. His vulnerability provided teachers with a sense of the internal struggles of being a gay black man, and the profound sense of otherness that caused him to be “sick of this assimilation struggle,” and sick of the societal push to conform to the unmarked category of whiteness.

In a rhetorically effective move, Teacher Zach’s sharing was in the form of a letter to himself, and a rejoinder from himself, to communicate the sense of internal conflict that he struggled with in society broadly, but also specifically at FACTS. It touched upon how conflicts exist in cross-racial coalitional building, and that solidarities, where they exist, cannot be simply assumed. In the second letter, the one addressed to “Zach,” he asserted, “I don’t mind being the only one”—a reference to him questioning whether he was “tired of being the only black male voice” at FACTS. This statement presumes that Teacher Zach did, in fact, mind being “the only one,” or else there would not have been an “internal conflict” to speak of. In this sense, Teacher Zach’s sharing does not attempt to sugarcoat the travails of building interracial solidarity, as so many attempts at multiculturalism often do. Rather, he conveys the fraught nature of interracial coalitional building, and yet also attests that without conflict “there is no growth, no change.”

Though it is murky whether Teacher Zach’s reference to “internal conflict” is indexing the conflict of being “the only one” at FACTS, or more generally to him being a gay black man in America, either way, he maintains that though the experience of difference may leave him “bruised,” it also makes him “more prepared with a deeper understanding of the world around [him].” This, in many ways, explains the school’s approach toward understanding and dealing with difference through the mode of bearing

witness. Any sort of interracial solidarity forged at FACTS was not, primarily, based on an uncritical celebration of the superficial differences that existed, for example, through the study of other people's foods and historical figures.¹⁸ Rather, as this anti-bias professional development day highlights, solidarity was built upon an attempt to intimately convey the subjective, embodied, and "bruised" pain of being a gay black man, in the case of Teacher Zach, and a Chinese-Cambodian American refugee woman, in the case of Teacher Pheng.

FACTS members believed that enduring and sharing about the pain of difference, ultimately prepared them "with a deeper understanding of the world around." And, recollecting Teacher Pheng's prelude to her testimony, the act of remembering and retelling these stories was uncomfortable, but the "discomfort is really necessary for us to move on." Embedded in this quote is the idea that sharing detailed stories of racism, struggle, and injustice would engage teachers in understanding the "other," and form a shared commitment to enduring together in ways that brought forth racial reconciliation. And yet, ironically, the deep engagement in people's experiences of difference created its own challenge to building multiracial solidarity. Because the process of bearing witness creates a profound respect for the speaker and the story, this may obscure the ways in which speakers are structurally positioned differently within society. It is possible to acknowledge that racism takes on different forms, while still assuming that all experiences of oppression are equal. To put it bluntly, because anti-black racism and

¹⁸ FACTS had events that celebrated cultural difference through learning about different foods and historical figures. But as these courageous conversations, and the previous chapter's discussion of rituals of creating interracial kinship illustrate, food and figures were not the only (or even primary) means of teaching about difference at the school.

anti-Asian racism come out of different histories, they also occupy different positions within the American racial hierarchy. Robust multiracial solidarity requires acknowledgement of these structural differences—issues that I will explore further in the next chapter.

Unsurprisingly, seeking to understand difference through the exploration and expression of one's identity was designed to have a trickle-down effect. Teachers modeled vulnerability and trusting behavior, and students were intended to do likewise. As Teacher Mel explained, "Once you start telling those stories, there's a different kind of trust. You say things here that you would have never said somewhere else, and it filters to the students." According to her, "There's a different kind of trust" that's developed when these stories are told—a putatively deeper and familial kind of trust. The fact that "you say things here that you would have never said somewhere else," speaks to the milieu of the school that created an environment where people felt comfortable sharing intimately and also to what school members were *tasked* to do in order to build community—that is, to "say things...that you would have never said somewhere else." This was evident in my observations of the eighth grade poetry slams.

"Is It Because I Am Asian?"

I eagerly anticipated attending the eighth-grade poetry slam. By the time it was held at the end of the school year, the students were no longer a mass of unfamiliar faces. I felt an attachment to this group of students, and I was sad that my time, and their time, at the school were drawing to an end. While I formed individual relationships with students, it seemed that in large part my attachment also had to do with my participation

in FACTS' rituals—one of which was the poetry slam—that built a sense of intimacy, even among people I did not know very well. The poetry slams that Teacher Sarah organized each year marked an important occasion in which students seized the opportunity to publicly bear witness to emergent identities, internal struggles, and triumphs.

When I walked into the classroom, the atmosphere was already filled with exultation. I was surprised to see how well attended the event was. In addition to Teacher Sarah, there were six other adults in the school who came to lend their support to students. Greg Corban, who played a central role in the poetry unit, was of course in attendance. A young African American man, Corban is the founder and executive director of the nonprofit *Philly Youth Poetry Movement*. He served as poet-in-residence that year, working with eighth graders for several weeks on their poems. He quickly won the students over with his positive energy, sincerity of speech, and humor. He lavished praises on them when they shared drafts of their poems, and in turn, they were motivated and took to his advice.

Students took turns going to the front of their room to deliver their poems. They walked up to Teacher Sarah, and handed her a copy of their poem so she could feed them their lines in case they forgot. Like the courageous conversations that took place during professional development, I was left utterly speechless. At one point of the event, Teacher Sarah called up one of the more socially awkward youths in the class. I braced myself, expecting a cringe-worthy performance. I was proved wrong. With confidence and poise, the student delivered the poem flawlessly. Even the students who gave off a disaffected vibe delivered their poems with unwavering commitment. Likewise, it

surprised me to see some of the reputed class clowns exhibit nervousness brought on by the occasion. From the shyest student, to the most outspoken, from the serious, to the jocular, from those who struggled academically, to those who excelled: they all delved into a facet of themselves and produced something that felt really honest.

While many students struggled to remember their lines, the audience was generous and laughed supportively. In one of the more comical instances, a Chinese American boy, Damian, forgot his line and paused for a moment. Instead of freezing up, he gyrated his body to musical notes playing in his head and gestured his hand to his ear in a Hulk Hogan style to get Teacher Sarah to feed him the next line. Rapturous laughter erupted in the room. Corban, who was sitting in the back of the room, was literally slapping his knee and enjoying every moment of it. Teacher Sarah commented that it was one of most creative ways of asking for help. Another teacher later commented that he had a lot “swagger” in him.

Caleb, an African American boy who I talked to the day after the poetry slam, described the difference between the laughter that took place at his old school versus at FACTS. He said, “If they gave the wrong answer [at my old school] they would get laughed at. When I do something wrong in this school, or get a wrong answer, its not a bad laugh, it’s a good laugh.” “Kind of a supportive laugh...like what happened during the poetry slam?” I asked. “I would say that,” he confirmed. This just once again underlines the supportive atmosphere in which people shared their stories and lives at FACTS.

The eighth grade students worked on a number of poems during the poetry unit, one of which explicitly asked them to explore their identities. Students mainly

understood this assignment in terms of race and ethnicity, though one student explored her role as a girl in the family. They were allowed to decide which poem they wanted to perform, and though a few chose poems that revolved around the topic of relationships (parent-child, sibling, and friendship), many chose to recite their identity poems. A few interwoven themes included the internal tug-of-war between their ethnic and national identity, challenging widely held stereotypes about one's race and personal experiences of racism and the feelings these evoked. These thematic thrusts, particularly those that state the author's ethnic/racial affiliation and then attempt to challenge predominant stereotypes of that group, were not coincidental since they were explicitly taught in mini-lessons. These poems often had similar patterns with lines that read something like this: *Just because I am (race or ethnicity)/Doesn't mean I'm (stereotype)/I'm (assertion of one's own identity)*. Similar to the courageous conversations that occurred during professional development, performing these poems gave students an opportunity to air frustrations and debunk racial/ethnic stereotypes, and also provided others a window into their lives and struggles.

Recollecting Teacher Mel's comment for a moment, poetry slams were an example of how students "say things here that [they] would have never said somewhere else." Not only did these poetry slams break the unspoken social rule of talking about race in racially mixed company, the event was remarkably aligned with the school's approach to *deliberately* talking about racism, in mixed settings, as a way of understanding difference. I have chosen to quote two poems here, because they represent the ways in which students chose to write about issues of race, ethnicity, and identity (that is, to address common racial stereotypes), and also because some of the themes

mentioned in these poems were often talked about in settings outside of this event. The frequency in which these themes were taken up by students signals how they are encouraged, by the school, to think about self, and relation to others. The first poem, written by John, a Vietnamese American boy, explored common Asian stereotypes:

Is it because I am Asian
You have the authority to call me
“Ching Chong Wu”
In fact people who call me that
Are just big racist fools
Is it because I am Asian
You assume I love rice
Yes I like rice
But I love Cheese Burgers
Like a little kid addicted to sugar
Is it because I am Asian
You assume I love Math
Yeah you right
I love Math
But that doesn’t mean all Asians love math
You got a problem with that?
Is it because I am Asian
You assume I am Chinese
There is more to Asia than just China
I wish I would be able smash the barricades
Of the corrupted racism
With my righteous rage
Until I release the fair and purified judgments from their prison
We, us, you, and I
Have been pieces of our world since the beginning of time
We are the same
But yet different
I am the same to you
As green is to blue
And different
As blue is to green
My ethnicity is Vietnamese
Don’t let ethnicity be in the way who you want to be
Be a who not a what
Be you

While there are many interesting themes worth exploring in this poem, I want to

draw particular attention to John's attempts at deconstructing stereotypical understandings of Asianness through examining some structural elements of the poem. Like many other identity poems, John first brings up a few assumptions associated with Asians: "you assume I love rice," "you assume I love math," and "you assume I am Chinese." Some students chose to address these stereotypes through outright denial. For example, one Latino student wrote: "You say I barely know English/Please.../I can talk you 'till ya ears bleed..." But John mainly chose to argue that he and other Asians are more than what these stereotypes depict. While admitting, "Yes I like rice," he bids listeners to see other dimensions of him, such as the fact that "I love Cheese Burgers/Like a little kid addicted to sugar." This was not hyperbole since John, in fact, *always* talked about cheeseburgers. While writing about food preferences may seem trivial, this was one way in which he asserted a sense of personhood beyond common Asian stereotypes, because they are, at best, only partial renderings of people.

Also, although he acknowledged, "Yeah you right/I love Math," he maintained, "that doesn't mean all Asians love math." And in a confrontational tone that belies the image of the nerdy, reticent Asian student, he rhetorically asks, "You got a problem with that?" This attempts to broaden narrow views of Asianness by exhorting listeners to see the heterogeneity that exists within this racial category. Similarly, the lines that state, "Is it because I am Asian/You assume I am Chinese/There is more to Asia than just China," are meant achieve the similar effect of deconstructing common views which position *Chinese*—the numerically dominant Asian ethnic group in the school, the city, and the United States—as a surrogate for *Asian*. By revealing, later on, "my ethnicity is Vietnamese," John uses himself as an example of the "other Asian" (Reyes 2007)—a

term that refers to lesser known, more marginalized groups within the Asian racial classification. In many ways, John's message to those who were listening (that is, don't assume all Asians are Chinese, don't assume that they all like rice, and doing math) was simply a reinforcement of what non-Asian students in the school were already quite sensitive to.

Teacher Ben, who I introduced in an earlier chapter because he sent around an email referring to Yuri Kochiyama as one of FACTS' "spiritual founders," explained to me how the school's demographics aided in deconstructing the *Asian* racial category.

Within a school where you get large enough numbers, the children themselves are able to differentiate with an awareness of an imposed racial category of Asian...[they] begin to have a more refined sense of self in relations to others, instead of an imposed category. *Asian* is a U.S. construct.

This critical position that viewed *Asian* as an "imposed racial category" and a "U.S. construct" was evident at FACTS through Asian students' "refined sense of self in relation to others." And students in general, that is, not only those who were Asian, testified of having a more refined understanding of the *Asian* category because of attending FACTS. On a number of occasions and in a number of different settings, I heard students talk about how being at FACTS made them more aware of, and careful not to reproduce Asian stereotypes. For example, Tamara, an African American girl, said she used to think all Asians were Chinese but that she became a lot more knowledgeable about the diversity that exists within this racial group and no longer typified all Asians as Chinese. As proof of her learning, she rattled off several Asian ethnic groups (e.g., Cambodian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Chinese). Interestingly, Elizabeth, a Cambodian American girl who was also in the conversation, said she was able to relate to

Tamara. Despite being a non-Chinese Asian herself, who was subject to the experience of ethnic misidentification, she admitted that before she transferred to FACTS, “I called everyone Chinese, too. ‘Oh, she’s Chinese, he’s Chinese.’” This stereotype was so pervasive that even though her own experience contradicted this notion she continued to perpetuate it. At FACTS, however, students and teachers were so highly sensitized to challenging Asian stereotypes and anti-Asian sentiment that even if they came in with those views, they were quickly disabused of them and transformed to think differently.

Indeed, this level of sensitivity and refined understanding also applied to Chinese-ness. One evening, with my husband and children waiting for me in FACTS’ playground/parking lot, I quickly dashed into the school to retrieve something. The annual lottery for admissions was being held. I bumped into Teacher Mel, and though I was in a rush, I found myself engaged in conversation with her. We were interrupted by a woman who asked for help with interpretation. Teacher Mel asked what language she needed, and she responded, “Chinese.” She followed up by asking the woman if she needed “Cantonese, Mandarin, or Fujianese.” The woman responded and Teacher Mel directed her to someone. Then with great pride, Teacher Mel turned to me and said, “I bet she didn’t know I knew that,” referring to her understanding that there were multiple dialects spoken in China.

According to a student, this sensitivity and open stance was directly attributed to the ethos created in FACTS. Sophia, a girl who primarily identified as Indonesian (in part because of her migration history and because of her ethnic makeup), but also referred to her Chinese heritage, talked about how FACTS taught her not to simply presume someone’s ethnicity.

In this school they teach you, it's not necessarily that they say out loud, like right out, 'You can't just assume that.' Over time...like the things that they do that are like multicultural, it kind of gets in your head, 'Oh, you can't just judge people like that'... We can't just say, 'Oh you're Chinese.' We don't just say that. In our school...people are just like, "Are you Cambodian?"... We ask the question.

This certainly rang true with my experience at FACTS. I was often approached by students of various races and ethnicities who first queried what kind of Asian I was and then what kind of Chinese I was. In the chat I had with Elizabeth (a Khmer American girl) and Tamara (an African American girl), Elizabeth asked if I was Chinese and then proceeded to ask if I spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, or Fujianese. I told her that my family mainly spoke Cantonese, though I understood and could speak rudimentary Mandarin. She told me that she never knew there were so many Chinese languages. At the time I was a little taken aback by the direct line of questioning. But when I take into consideration Asian students' experiences of having an identity laminated onto them, I could see how the approach of asking about one's identity, instead of just presuming it, and how their knowledge of various Asian ethnicities and Chinese languages, in contrast, revealed a more sophisticated understanding of Asianness and Chineseness than one might find in other Philadelphia schools. Returning to John's poem, toward the middle, he expressed rage against the "corrupted racism" of stereotypes. His rhetorical performance of being irate about these stereotypes then worked to support a consistent message that was already being conveyed in the school—namely, that one should not engage in the erasure of other Asian ethnicities by simply assuming that Asian was equated with Chinese. As he put it, "there's more to Asia than China."

John ends the poem with entreating listeners to not "let ethnicity be in the way who you want to be/Be a who not a what/Be you." These last few lines capture John's

refusal to claim ethnic affiliation as a primary way of defining his identity. Here ethnicity is seen as more of a straitjacket—something that can stand “in the way [of] who you want to be.” This view falls in line with what I know of John. When I talked to him and his friend, Damian, on a separate occasion, I asked them to self-identify. John initially and only half-jokingly responded by saying, “I identify personally, is that, cheeseburger.” After further prompting, he said, “I would identify myself also as staying positive in life because to me, personally, I would say that it’s not that long to spend it, like...when you should be looking on the bright side of things.” Unlike the vast majority of his friends who responded by stating their ethnic or racial identity (which sometimes included editorializing, such as, “I’m proud to be...”), or giving a brief history of their family’s migration, John equivocated his answer even after Damian just screamed out, “I’m Chinese!” Sensing his apprehension, I later on asked, “Would saying Vietnamese be an important thing to you or not so much?” He answered, “Um, to be honest, I’m not really sure.” Instead of wearing his ethnic identity on his sleeve, as many of his friends do, he chose to identify according to personality traits and his outlook on life (“staying positive in life”).

The overwhelming majority of students at FACTS, however, did choose to identify according to race and ethnicity. In the same interview I had with Teacher Ben where he talked about *Asian* being an “imposed racial category,” he gave an example of how having a core group of Cambodian students in the school—an experience they may not have in the majority of other Philadelphia schools—enabled them to “seek each other out” and develop an awareness of the imposed racial category of *Asian*. He then mentioned his own children, who were adopted from Vietnam and attended FACTS, to

make the fine point that by having a more sophisticated understanding of themselves, by understanding difference, they were also better able to relate to others.

So I think my kids being able to operate on that terrain are able to identify it without it being negatively framed, where they stand in relation to the Asian category. Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, and then choose to position themselves in relation to others. But at the same time not forcing kids to get to that disposition.

Teacher Ben also discussed how, in addition to crafting an ethnic and racial identity, it was important for his children to have a sense of self that moved beyond, and cut across race and ethnicity.

Hopefully they also get a sense of being a Philadelphian along with everyone else, or part of the [FACTS] family along with everyone else. So there's various roles and positions that they can try on and find by having a base knowledge of the centrality of language, language identity... That sensitivity can transfer into ethnic sensitivity, national sensitivity, racial sensitivity.

It is important to note here that Teacher Ben's examples of finding commonality with others were based on a local scale. He did not refer broadly or abstractly to global features of humanity, but rather specifically to being a "*Philadelphian* along with everyone else," and "part of the [FACTS] family along with everyone else" (italics, added). He then continued to say, "having a base knowledge" of one's difference—in terms of language, and I think he would also include ethnicity, and heritage traditions—allows students to "transfer [that] into ethnic sensitivity, national sensitivity, [and] racial sensitivity."

These quotes show how FACTS' strategy of building interracial collectivity was predicated on the *specificities* of difference, and the *specificities* of commonality. It accomplished this through creating rituals in which teachers and students were

encouraged to bear witness to particular experiences of difference, and by giving them the particular common experience of FACTS rituals, like courageous conversations and poetry slams, that were infused with vulnerability, openness, and intimacy. Through speaking about, and listening to experiences of difference, school members gained access to perspectives that they might not otherwise be aware of. These experiences also more broadly built a concern for social justice in regards to unknown others, as Teacher Ben alluded to when he referred more abstractly to students developing “ethnic sensitivity, national sensitivity, [and] racial sensitivity.”

“Just Because I’m Black”

Deidre and Rochelle are two African-American, middle-school girls who teachers and classmates spoke highly of. Both girls are high achieving, thoughtful, and poised beyond their years. Because of their high academic achievement, Deidre’s lighter complexion, their preppy fashion style, and other ways in which they challenged stereotypical notions of black girls, their classmates often didn’t know quite how to place them. An Indonesian-American girl said, “[Deidre’s] light-skinned, but black, but sometimes she acts Asian,” by which she meant that she was high-achieving and got good grades. A white student said, “I put her in the confused category.” In regards to Rochelle, a Cambodian-American girl likened her to “Michelle Obama” because of her preppy fashion style.

These two girls talked about the frustrations of people assuming that they perform popular stereotypes about black girls. Similar to John’s poem, she expressed indignation at these stereotypes. But in contrast, the message of her poem, which took on the tone of

a cautionary tale that forewarned the dangers of stereotyping about blackness, was not as widely reinforced among students. There was, in short, less expressed sensitivity and knowledge about understandings of blackness, despite the existence of social studies units and ensembles that provided examples of the heterogeneity and contributions of the African diaspora. This was, I suspect, because most black students in the school self-identified as African American. Because many of the school's Chinese students ran the gamut in the diaspora and talked about their experiences as twice migrants from Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and then America, there was greater understanding of the heterogeneity that existed within this ethnic group. In contrast, while there were a few students of Afro-Caribbean heritage, and an African immigrant student was mentioned to me once, by and large the school's black students identified as African American.

Students of various races and ethnicities often engaged in cross-racial forms of joking as a performance of their tight-knit friendships. Since race-based joking often occurs in intragroup settings—that is, among people of a particular race or ethnicity—students' cross-racial joking asserted a different definition of *intragroup*. *Intragroup*, here, was defined as students who were part of the FACTS family. While students told these jokes indiscriminately across race and gender, it was strictly done among students because these forms of joking often drew on popular stereotypes that associated blackness with criminality (in the case of boys), or loud, in-your-face rudeness (in the case of girls), that they knew would have been sanctioned by the school's adults. For example, Darrell, an African American boy, frequently liked to tell the joke, "What's the difference between Batman and a black man?" Punch line: "A black man can't go a day without robbin." Telling this joke to nonblack students assumed that these Asian, White,

and Latino friends understood what the black students understood: that it was, according to students, “just a joke,” meaning there was no legitimacy to it, and that it wouldn’t be used against black people.

In another case, Jillian (a Chinese American girl), often referred to non-black girls as “acting black” when they became loud, confrontational, and aggressive. This was frequently accompanied by an exaggerated, mock performance of presumably what a black girl acted like. This was complete with finger wagging, head rolling, and loud black vernacular speech. In contrast to Darrell, Jillian only told these jokes to other Asian students. This is most likely related to the fact that she did not think her joke telling would be legitimized among black students because she was Chinese American. But also, unlike other students who had been at FACTS since they were young and had long-standing friendships with black students, Jillian had only attended FACTS for a year before I met her, and had few, if any, close friendships with black students.¹⁹ She exhibited views about black people that were not in keeping with students who had been at the school for longer. Unlike Jillian, who told these jokes in Asian-only settings, other non-black girls felt more comfortable telling these jokes in mixed-race settings, often making passing references to weaves and displaying similar kinds of speech and semiotic performances as Jillian. Although students across the racial spectrum argued that these were simply indexical of the tightness of their friendships, these were highly problematic ways of exhibiting cross-racial intimacy because they reproduced the widespread devaluation of blackness. As Deidre’s poem, entitled “Just Because I’m Black,” delves

¹⁹ Jillian was friendly with a biracial Asian-black student, but she mostly viewed her friend as Asian, and glossed over her black heritage.

into, the perpetuation of these stereotypes were a constant attack on her sense of self and identity. The public sharing of her poem was a means of addressing the vexed practice of racial joking.

Just because I'm black doesn't mean I'm dumb
Being a black girl,
That's even worse
People label me as dumb and stupid
And are astounded when I say words like
Jurassic
Clandestine
Or intricate
Oh wait,
Am I not supposed to know three syllable words?
Just because I'm Black doesn't mean I'm poor
I don't wear all the latest brands
But I have affordable clothes to wear
I don't have to spend my allowance on one shirt
I might not live in a neighborhood where there is a fence around every tree
But does it matter?
Because I live where people love me
Admire me
Appreciate me
Treasure me
And that's what really matters
Just because I'm Black doesn't mean I'm rude
To be honest
When you see a group of black kids
You think they're ghetto
Trashy
That they have bad manners
That we curse
Litter
Throwing trash on the ground although we are two feet away from a trash can
And we fight all the time. . .
Well I'm NOT
One of those
'Black Kids'
I'm mild
Like the a beautiful sunset after a long day
I'm respectful
And not outright disgusting
Your stereotypes are like the tag on the back of a shirt

Annoying
 A burning irritation
 That continuously drives me insane
 I'm itching to rip it away
 Because its been there for so long
 But if I could just cut it away
 The stereotypical
 Whispers
 Slurs
 And judgments
 Then I could rests easy
 Die content
 Knowing that I wouldn't have to worry about something terrorizing me based on my race
 Categorizing me with lies
 So please,
 Read this and think about it,
 Really step back
 Put yourself in my shoes. . .
 If you heard stereotypes about your race
 What would you do?

Deidre began her poem by addressing the assumed cognitive deficiency of black people in general and black girls more specifically. In response to how “People label me as dumb and stupid/And are astounded when I used words like/Jurassic/Clandestine/Or intricate” she proves the spurious nature of these claims through displaying her own extensive vocabulary and by rhetorically asking, “Oh wait/Am I not supposed to know three syllable words?” Being the first stereotype she addresses, this indicates that it is of central concern to Deidre. The assumption that being a black girl is equated with being “dumb” and “stupid,” was an attack on a key aspect of her identity and her reputation as an intelligent, successful student.

In conversations I had with Deidre and her mother, Cathy, an IT professional, it became clear to me that to attain upward mobility, she and her mom had hitched Deidre’s wagon to academic achievement. Cathy spoke of supporting Deidre’s love of writing and

her desire to pursue a career in journalism. With a slight sense of remorse, Cathy mentioned how she had missed out on her opportunity to go to college because her and her husband's parents "didn't force us to go to college, or even mold us to go," and eventually, "families started and things like that." Both Cathy and her husband began working straight out of high school and they "were mature enough to know what [they] liked to do." Nevertheless, at some point she realized, "Now that I'm in this field...we do need to go back to school." These experiences shaped the way that they parented and the emphasis they placed on education as vehicle for career advancement. As Cathy said, "Neither one of us had our degree. So it kind of pushed us to make sure our children understood education early." Deidre, having been accepted into one of the city's most selective magnet high schools, internalized her parents' message and carefully planned out each step toward attaining her college degree. She was well on her way to achieving her goals. First and foremost, she chose to address the stereotype of a "dumb" and "stupid" black girl because this was not only an affront to her current sense of self as someone who was smart and excelled in school but also because it was an attack on her future prospects and the life she was making for herself.

In the poem Deidre positioned herself as antithetical to stereotypes of working-class blackness. Her felt need to assert this was in response to the way in which students in the school perpetually equated blackness with ghetto-ness. This equation of blackness with ghetto-ness was most likely related to how blackness is represented in popular culture. When I was hanging around with a group of students I asked Jill, one of the few white students at FACTS, how she would describe herself and how others would describe her. She responded, "Sometimes I act like ghetto, in quotes. So sometimes I'm black."

Making “ghetto” synonymous with “black” was a pattern I observed in various different conversations with students. This was often accompanied by an exaggerated performance of ghetto-ness that included black vernacular speech (e.g., “Yo shawty”), and an “open-minded” attitude—a misnomer that one Indonesian girl used to describe girls that were loud, in-your-face, and argumentative. Deidre confronted the pervasive equation of blackness with ghetto-ness in her poem. This was especially evident in the following lines:

Just because I’m Black doesn’t mean I’m rude/To be honest/When you see a group of black kids/You think they’re ghetto/Trashy/That they have bad manners/That we curse/Litter/Throwing trash on the ground although we are two feet away from a trash can/And we fight all the time. . ./Well I’m NOT/One of those/“Black Kids”

Interestingly, while she largely disaffiliated with stereotypical understandings of blackness that were associated with “ghetto” behavior, at one point she vacillated from the distancing term *they* and used the more affiliating term, *we*. Though the use of the term *we* indexed momentary slippage, perhaps in acknowledgment of her North Philly roots and the ambivalence she felt about this disassociation, she quickly returned to distinguishing herself from notions of blackness that assumed that she was “rude,” “trashy,” had “bad manners,” “[threw] trash on the ground,” and “[fought] all the time,” and emphatically pronounced, “Well I’m NOT/One of those/“Black kids.”” Like Jill’s reference to her acting “ghetto, *in quotes*” (italics added), Deidre’s use of scare quotes for the term *Black Kids*, recognized the problematic nature of these characterizations, though she and Jill stopped short of deconstructing its usage. Tellingly, the main point of Deidre’s poem was not to critique the bias raced and classed lens through which

dominant views of blackness were constructed but rather to disassociate and distinguish her from these views. She furthermore did this through characterizing herself as the polar opposite: “I’m mild/Like the a beautiful sunset after a long day/I’m respectful/And not outright disgusting.” Through public recitation of her poem, she was sending a message to her classmates that there were other ways of being black that were not “ghetto,” despite their frequent conflation of blackness with ghetto-ness.

At the same time, Deidre’s poem was a declaration of her blackness. Through use of the refrain, “Just because I’m black,” a phrase that presupposed her blackness, she was asserting that she could be all these things—“mild” and “respectful,” and still be undeniably black. This was likely in response to her friends’ refusal to identify her as black, precisely because she didn’t fit the stereotypical mold. For example, this refusal even played out in the recitation of her poem, which was emblematic of other times when her friends referred to her as “white.” Deidre retold an instance when she was reciting the lines, “Just because I’m black.” Each time she got to the word *black*, Darrell, an African American boy in her class, interjected and interpolated the word *white*, for *black*. Indeed, when I talked to other students in her class, they often jokingly identified Deidre as white for reasons related to her being “very very light skinned,” her preppy fashion style, and her “proper” use of English and as Asian for reasons related to her high academic achievement. In this manner of joking, racial identification was based less on phenotype, and more on stereotypical racialized behaviors and attributes. This kind of racial joking was prevalent and not isolated to Deidre since some Asian and white students were referred to as black.

This also occurred in her neighborhood, where, according to Deidre, people

would say, “[She’s] white because she talks white’ or acts white.” Because of these experiences, she admitted, “I feel so weird when I’m in my neighborhood cause I don’t fit in, but there’s some people that I do talk to and fit in with. Other people are like, ‘She’s all smart and stuff. Don’t talk to her.’” These experiences made it all the more important for Deidre to assert her blackness by distinguishing herself from prevalent stereotypes that people drew on to deny her of her blackness. As she vividly expressed in the last parts of poem:

Your stereotypes are like the tag on the back of a shirt/Annoying/A burning irritation/That continuously drives me insane/I’m itching to rip it away/Because its been there for so long/But if I could just cut it away/The stereotypical/Whispers/Slurs/And judgments/Then I could rests easy/Die content/Knowing that I wouldn’t have to worry about something terrorizing me based on my race/Categorizing me with lies

Deidre’s strong use of words to express her feelings included “annoying,” “A burning irritation/That continuously drives me insane,” “slurs,” “judgments,” “terrorizing me based on my race,” and “categorizing me with lies.” Sharing this poem was an outlet for her to publicly vent her frustrations regarding the lamination of these stereotypes and to set the record straight. It was one way for her to make a public statement about the ambivalent use of racial joking among her friends of different races. On the one hand, as students across the racial spectrum articulated, racial joking was one way of indexing their familiarity with one another and tight-knit friendships. As Darrell told me once, “We be saying racist stuff, but we’re joking.” And Caleb followed up with, “We all know we’re just them type of friends, so we don’t get mad.” On the other hand, this playful racial banter was a fraught way of constructing cross-racial intimacy and closeness. As Deidre informed me, “It’s cool for us to joke around in school about

it...sometimes...people take it too far....I wrote a poem about it before.” The recitation of the poem was then a mode of bearing witness to her inner thoughts and feelings that perhaps she wasn’t able to say in the fleeting moment of a passing joke, or was too uncomfortable to say in a more light-hearted atmosphere. Bearing witness in the form of poetry slams was one way for Deidre to express some of the more problematic ways in which stereotypes were used among students to joke around and to ensure that everyone understood the toll that this type of racial joking exacted on her. It provided an opportunity to remediate any hard feelings that might have emerged in the process of forming interracial solidarity and to address the inevitable problems that arise in any intimate community settings. In short, the poem enabled her to keep her friends in check and to prevent them from “tak[ing] it too far.”

Conclusion

This chapter discussed how bearing witness, or speaking to one’s subjective experiences of pain and racism in diverse and public settings, was an important strategy for how FACTS sought to build cross-racial solidarity. Particularly, I examined two school rituals—teachers’ “courageous conversations” that occurred during professional development day, and students’ spoken word performances during poetry slams. Through analyzing these rituals of speaking, I illustrated how developing interracial solidarity was, ironically, based upon speaking the specificities of one’s wounds of *difference*, rather than recourse to an assertion of our *commonalities* based on abstract generalities. As teachers shared, bearing witness on a basic level led to ways of combatting the “ignorance” of not knowing that certain statements or assumptions were

offensive to others. On a deeper and more intimate level, it was a way of “giving love, and getting love unconditionally.” This was evident in both Teacher Pheng’s and Teacher Zach’s vulnerable, raw, and heartfelt telling of their experiences of marginality based on race, class, migration status, gender, and sexuality. Their willingness to be honest and open with fellow teachers displayed their trust and offered an invitation to collectively imagine a different and more just future.

The poetry slams provided students with opportunities to speak to their embodied experiences as victims of racial stereotyping. Like teachers’ courageous conversations, the public recitation of these poems allowed others to gain insight on the common misconceptions that were a source of irritation and frustration for students. In John’s case, this meant sending a message that not all Asians were Chinese, and not all of them loved rice and math. Sensitivity toward countering Asian stereotypes was consistently broadcast throughout the school, so John’s poem simply worked to reinforce this message. While Deidre’s poem also challenged stereotypes, specifically black stereotypes, these tended to be highly negative portrayals that revolved around cognitive inferiority, materialism, and bad manners. The uneven racial joking among students, with negative black jokes being told more often, point to unexpected challenges of building an intimate multiracial family that will be explored further in the next chapter. But it also speaks to the strength of bearing witness as a process for resolving these unexpected challenges. Because bearing witness was a regular practice in the school, Deidre felt comfortable enough to send a message to other students that these forms of racial stereotyping were a “burning irritation.” It allowed her, and others, a protocol for

resolving the inevitable missteps that were bound to occur in such a community. Bearing witness to the adverse effects of stereotype-joking, Deidre's poem gave warning to students who may have spoken carelessly, or in a cavalier manner. This provided an opening for students to repair damaged relations. Though students argued that this type of joking was indicative of the closeness of their interracial friendships, it was nevertheless a fraught way of building interracial bonds, and signified, more broadly, the difficulties of building cross-race solidarity.

CHAPTER 6

MAKING GLOBAL COSMOPOLITANS

This chapter examines how FACTS' goal of implementing a folk arts education was partially retooled by the school's families to cultivate global cosmopolitans with a wide range of cultural fluency that can be parlayed into social and economic mobility. Given the emergence of China as a superpower, and the changing cultural cachet of Chineseness, students and parents spoke about the value of knowing Mandarin and being familiar with Chinese culture to achieve their future aspirations. For black students, being introduced to cultural traditions and experiences that were different from their own background helped them learn to be "comfortable anywhere," and "open-minded." In short, it facilitated the development of dispositions and embodied knowledge associated with global cosmopolitans. Subsequent chapters delve into the intended rituals that were constructed in order to recognize the Asian American experience specifically, while also promoting diversity and solidarity across races. This chapter explores the unintended ways in which this tension was mitigated by looking at student and parent aspirations, and their rationalizations for attending FACTS.

Good Tuition-Free Schools in Philadelphia are Hard to Find

Given the school's special commitment to teaching about Asian American history, struggle, and practices, it bears asking why FACTS continued to attract and retain a significant number of black families. While this chapter focuses on how becoming global cosmopolitans was part of the answer to this question, it is important to

briefly contextualize this within the larger political economy of Philadelphia's public education system, and to understand that it represents one, among other reasons, for why black families chose to send their children to FACTS.

By the time FACTS was founded in 2005, the School District of Philadelphia was under state takeover for four years. In December 2001, citing poor academic performance and fiscal debt, Mark Schweiker took over the embattled district after assuming the role of governor only two months prior. When the governor at the time, Tom Ridge, resigned to become Homeland Security Advisor to President Bush after 9/11, Schweiker quickly wrested control of the struggling school system in an eleventh-hour move that stunned the educational community. The School Reform Commission (SRC), a five-member board consisting of three members appointed by the governor, and two appointed by the mayor, were charged with improving Philadelphia's public schools.

As part of the state takeover, 45 schools were identified as the lowest performing and in need of immediate intervention (Useem, Christman, and Boyd 2006: 5). Governor Schweiker, along with the Republican-controlled legislature, saw this as an opportunity to introduce neoliberal market forces into the public education system. Though the governor recommended that Edison Schools, a for-profit company, be given control over all the schools, the SRC eventually opted for a "diverse provider model" in which seven organizations (a mix of for-profit and non-profit entities) managed these 45 schools (Useem, Christman, and Boyd 2006: 5). The diverse provider model was the largest educational experiment in the nation.

It should then come as no surprise that concurrent with a time period of district uncertainty and experimentation, enrollment in charter schools grew rapidly.

Pennsylvania's charter school law was passed in 1997, and in 1998, Philadelphia's Board of Education (now defunct, replaced by the SRC) approved 11 out of 25 charter school applications (Mezzacappa 2010). Only eight years later, in 2006, there were 60 charter schools in Philadelphia, serving 30,000 students (the school district had 177,000 students) (Useem, Christman, and Boyd 2006: 3). This dramatic uptick in charter schools sheds light on how many Philadelphia parents saw charter schools as a more attractive option than traditional public schools.

While charter schools, too, are an experiment in education, it is supposedly one in which parents can exercise choice, as the common refrain goes. What many parents soon discovered, however, is that not all charter schools are created equal. According to a 2008 report, Philadelphia students who attended charter schools made no greater academic gains than those in traditional public schools (Zimmer, Blanc, Gill, and Christman 2008). By and large, charter schools in Philadelphia were no magic bullet. On the whole, they provided no better education than traditional public schools, but a handful of them proved to be the exception. If waiting lists are indications, parents view a cadre of charter schools as more attractive than other charter and public schools. Recently, eleven charter schools in Philadelphia had a waiting list of over 1,000 students (Hardy 2015). According to FACTS' 2014 Comprehensive Plan, it had 635 students on its waiting list. This number will likely grow since for two consecutive years (2013–2014 and 2014–2015) FACTS has been top-ranked among K–8 schools according to the district's School Progress Report.

Given the educational climate in Philadelphia, FACTS is an attractive school for parents not only because of its academic rigor but for a whole host of other reasons. The

ones that were most commonly cited by FACTS parents and students included: safety; the feeling that FACTS is a “second home,” as one alumna stated; that it continues to provide arts and music instruction when many of these programs were gutted during the 2013–2014 “doomsday budget”; its diversity and inclusivity; exposure to a Mandarin and Asian traditions; and the commitment to social justice.

All of these things describe FACTS well, but not all these reasons played into why black parents initially decided to send their children there, since many of them considered other options like Russell Byers Charter School, Independence Charter School, and Christopher Columbus Charter School. Not all these schools were social justice oriented per se, not all of them were diverse, and not all of them had a strong arts program. Certainly none of these other schools taught Mandarin and gave its students so much exposure to Asian cultural traditions. Given the dearth of high-performing public and charter schools in Philadelphia, luck of the lottery was an element that played into how students wound up at FACTS.

I say all this to help readers know how to interpret black parents’ quotes in this chapter. This analysis is shaped by my own experiences as a Philadelphia parent who mulled over where to send my children to school. For example, while I often tell people how I love that my children’s daycare/preschool gives them so many opportunities for outdoor learning, and I love the sense of connectedness among teachers, parents, and children, these weren’t necessarily deal breakers. In other words, these weren’t part of my conscious decision-making process, but now that we’re at the school, they’re elements that I highly value.

In a similar way, when black parents talked about their appreciation for having

their children learn Mandarin, or developing friendships with culturally diverse students, or learning folk arts traditions, these are ex post facto rationalizations that speak to what they find *value-added* about FACTS. They weren't necessarily deal breakers, but now that they're part of the school, they are elements that they highly appreciate and value. It is with this context in mind that this chapter's findings should be read.

Multicultural Education for Cultivating Global Cosmopolitans

In a London-based research project, Diane Reay and her colleagues (2007) studied white, middle-class families and their motivations for sending their children to multiethnic schools. One of the main reasons included the desire to cultivate liberal values of tolerance, respect, and appreciation of different cultures. These parents didn't want to simply give lip service to these ideals but rather wanted these values to be lived out in their children's everyday lives. Avril, a parent in the study, and a journalist by profession, stated:

[T]here is an understanding of others you can only have if you are sort of with them all the time. It is something to learn *of* other cultures, but to actually learn *with* other cultures, of other cultures, it is a completely different thing. [Reay et al. 2007:1045, emphasis added]

Avril conveyed the idea that there was something qualitatively different, if not value-added, to learning about multiculturalism in a multiethnic context. Though many of the parents in this study could have afforded more selective private schools, they opted for multiethnic schools that also educated students who were more "disadvantaged," as another parent in the study put it, because they believed that lessons of diversity and respect for others were best learned in a multicultural/multiethnic context.

Drawing on Sayer (2005), Reay et al. (2007:1045) pointed out, "While it is

analytically possible to abstract out the moral from the instrumental and the conscious from the habitual, in practice the two are complexly inter-related.” In other words, though parents espoused values of multiculturalism for its own sake (that is, for civic good), there was also “a powerful strand of calculation regarding the gains to be made from multicultural urban schooling” (Reay et al. 2007:1045). This calculation and instrumentalism was aimed at helping their children “gain an advantage vis-à-vis others” (Reay et al 2007:1045), especially in an era in which “the ethic of multiculturalism reflects the realities of professional life and increasingly needs to be espoused in order to secure professional success” (Reay 2007:1046). Multiethnic schooling was put in the service of cultivating children with an impressive cosmopolitan worldliness that prepared them for their future professional lifestyle.

Ulf Hannerz (2007) provides a useful distinction between political cosmopolitanism and consumer cosmopolitanism. Political cosmopolitanism, he argues, “is often a cosmopolitanism with a worried face, trying to come to grips with very large problems” (Hannerz 2007:71). Consumer cosmopolitanism, in contrast, has a “happy face, enjoying new cuisines, new musics, new literatures.” (Hannerz 2007:71). It is then, “entirely possible for people to be pleased with their...personal levels of connoisseurship in regard to cultural diversity without having any strong sense of civic and humanitarian responsibility transcending national borders” (Hannerz 2007:71).

While these extreme characterizations of political and consumer cosmopolitanism are useful for parsing out the differences between them, a tempered version of these typologies better applies to how parents talked about what was value-added about FACTS. Though parents talked explicitly about how exposure to cultures that were new

to their children would be valuable in the marketplace, it wasn't quite the "happy face" of consumer cosmopolitanism that Hannerz explains. And though parents and students did not necessarily have a "worried face" that always grappled with problems of humanity, they did express a value for diversity and interracial relations that moved beyond their children's individual gain and entailed what was good for society. It is somewhere in between these poles that I locate the black parents in this study.

Both forms of cosmopolitanisms, however, "articulat[e] an appropriate ideology for the 'global village' of the new liberal managerial class" (Harvey 2000:530). Harvey (2000:530), quoting Marx and Engels (1952:42), reminds us of the "famous line in the *Manifesto*—'the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.'" Participating in this world market then requires displaying a degree of cosmopolitanism that is commensurate with the cosmopolitan character of production and consumption. For the parents in Reay et al.'s (2007) study, a multicultural/multiethnic schooling experience instilled in their children this cosmopolitan character. As Reay et al. (2007:1046) argue, "The global economy requires individuals who can deal with people of other races and nationalities openly and respectfully. So within the professional social fields these parents inhabit as workers, multiculturalism is increasingly a source of cultural and social capital."

According to Richard Harding, a barrister, and another parent in Reay's study, attending a multiethnic urban school yielded dividends in terms of his daughter's self-formation. Describing his daughter Sophie, he said, "She has a real social confidence and can get on with anybody" (Reay et al. 2007:1045). Reay et al. (2007:1046) describe this

as a “particular kind of middle-class formation”—one that entails being a “cultural omnivore who can access, know, take part in, and feel confident about using, a wide variety of cultures from high to low” (Reay 2007:1046). “Sophie is a classic middle-class omnivore. She is an accomplished pianist, loves classical music and the theatre but also enjoys Black music and clubbing and has many friends from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds” (Reay et al. 2007:1046). Sophie, like many of the young people in Reay’s study, has “the ability to fit readily and easily into very different social milieu” (Reay et al. 2007:1046), making it perhaps just as apt to refer to these youth as cultural chameleons.

For these white, middle-class youth, being cultural chameleons—that is, engaging fluidly, even naturally, in difference and otherness—can be “understood as describing a project of cultural capital through which [they] seek to display their liberal credentials and secure their class positions (Bourdieu, 1984; May, 1996)” (Reay et al. 2007:1047). “The ability to move in and out of spaces marked as ‘other’” (Reay et al. 2007:1047) was an integral part of their middle-class formation. It was how “this particular fraction of the white middle classes come to know themselves as both privileged and dominant (Razack, 2002)” (Reay et al. 2007:1047). I would add to this, it is not only how they come to “*know* themselves as both privileged and dominant” (Reay et al. 2007:1047), but how they *become* privileged and dominant. It is the way in which they reproduced their race and class privilege in a milieu that is different from their parents’ generation. Cultural capital, in Sophie’s generation, means successfully performing and embodying multiculturalism.

While Reay’s project sheds lights on processes that are similar to what I am

studying in terms of how multiculturalism is being repurposed today, it also departs from it in important ways. Foremost, the cultural chameleons that Reay referred to were white, middle-class (even upper-middle-class) youth. In that case, the cultural productions of the subaltern were appropriated to reproduce privilege and maintain long-standing class- and race-based inequalities.

In the case of FACTS, I am discussing black youth who came from class backgrounds ranging from those who struggled with putting food on the table, to those whose parents worked in stable back-office positions. Many of them lived in lower-income parts of North Philly and South Philly, some of which were gentrifying neighborhoods, some racially isolated, and a few lived in racially mixed, middle-income suburbs. Most of the black parents I talked with did not graduate from college. Some attended, but because of reasons having to do with family responsibilities and financial costs, were not able to complete their degree. Their social and economic status was not like the people in Reay's study, like Sophie's dad who was a barrister, and Avril, the journalist. The critique in the case of Reay's study is rather expected—there was an unsavory dimension to reproducing privilege through exploiting the cultures of marginalized peoples.

The case of black youth at FACTS has no easy, off-the-shelf critiques. They do not enjoy race or class privilege. Quite the opposite, many of the black girls and boys that I spoke with talked about the intentional thought they put into their clothes and their comportment (e.g., wearing clothes that were not too tight or too baggy, standing up straight, smiling to strangers) to disarm people, and prevent them from assuming they were “thugs.” Moreover, their integration of Asian cultural productions was not

superficial or kitsch. This hardly seems exploitative, especially when taking into consideration how learning to be cosmopolitan makes available opportunity structures that have long been closed off to black youth. Although Reay's study proves useful for thinking about how children learn to be more cosmopolitan through schooling experiences, and the increasing value of this in today's world, my analysis takes into serious consideration the social position of black youth and thus entertains the possibility that these processes are not only *not* exploitative but promote equality through advancing the socioeconomic mobility of historically marginalized groups.

One final note on terms: I have used *multicultural* and its cognates in this section because that is how the literature I drew from referred to it. In the sections that follow, I draw mainly from fieldnotes and transcripts, so I use the term that FACTS prefers—folk arts—to describe their practices. Exceptions to this are when the term *multicultural* was used by the people I talked with, or when I am speaking more broadly to processes outside the FACTS context.

Repurposing Folk Arts Education

During the 2013 Ethnography Forum, an academic conference held by the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, I attended a presentation that was given by FACTS' teachers and two of its students. One of these students was Deidre. Afterwards, I talked with Cathy, Deidre's mom, an African American woman who grew up in Philadelphia. Cathy works as an IT professional at a city agency. I approached the conversation expecting her to register some discontent about how there were fewer activities related to African American culture at the school. Instead, I was

surprised to hear her speak so effusively about the benefits of exposing her daughter to Chinese and other Asian cultures, and especially about her learning Mandarin. She struck me as being a positive person in general, but she was specifically enthusiastic about the fact that her children could carry on a conversation with her Chinese coworkers. This seemed to be a huge source of pride for Cathy. I smiled as she spoke, imagining Deidre being paraded around from cubicle to cubicle.

When I met with Cathy at her office downtown, I learned more about her motivations for sending Deidre to FACTS. Cathy lives with her husband, a younger son, and Deidre, in a part of North Philly that has been predominantly black since the 1960s. They live on the outskirts of a neighborhood that has been rebranded as “Brewerytown” as part of the rapid gentrification that has occurred over the past decade. The office was what you would imagine a city agency to look like—industrial carpeting, aged furniture, and modest décor. I noted that her job allowed her the flexibility to entertain my request for an interview during the workday, and to secure a conference room for us to chat in. She talked about the importance of wanting a good education for her children, and with a tinge of regret, told me that neither she nor her husband graduated from college. “I started, but I didn’t complete college,” she explained. She wanted her children to have the opportunities that she didn’t have.

When we started talking about FACTS, the very first thing she mentioned was that she liked the fact that it was “multicultural.” “I like the idea of a multicultural school,” Cathy said. “The type of person, or parents that me and my husband are is to expose the children to other things other than what’s in their environment.” Cathy used the term *multicultural* to refer to “things other than what’s in their environment.” Given

that this part of North Philly is mostly black but now has a growing white population, being “multicultural” meant exposing them to a range of cultures outside of black and white. Moreover, she said that FACTS “was actually the best thing to do for us” because it “expose[d] them to a different language. Not just the culture, but a different language.”

When I asked why she thought that was important, Cathy answered:

I don’t like the idea that a child should be boxed in. When I say boxed in I think of it as a child not exposed, but thinking, ‘This is all there is. This little square.’ Or because everyday I go to school with this group of people, this is primarily where it is.

While Cathy may have been referring to not wanting her children to be “boxed in” by the geographic limitations of North Philly, she is most certainly also referring to the limitations that being from North Philly connotes—socioeconomic limitations, and life limitations.

Being exposed to different things had everything to do with the kinds of people that she went to school with and became friends with. Attending FACTS, with its multicultural curriculum and diverse student body, then allowed Deidre to broaden her horizons. Cathy does not specifically reference race or class when she talks about not wanting Deidre to think that just because “everyday I go to school with *this group* of people, this is primarily where it is” (emphasis added). And yet there are unmistakable race and class undertones because she is talking about the context of North Philly that, for a long time and still today, gets coded as the “bad” part of Philadelphia. Even in a conversation with Deidre and Rochelle, Rochelle mentioned that Deidre was from a “poor area.” She only retracted her comment when Deidre chafed at this characterization of North Philly (or at least her part of North Philly). Sending Deidre to a “multicultural”

school where she could learn about other cultures and the Mandarin language was a way of exposing her to the wider world outside of North Philly that was often viewed as limiting because it was racially isolated and low income.

Some of the same threads in Cathy's interview, about broadening her children's horizons, appeared in my interview with Faith. Faith, the mother of Rochelle (the girl that students likened to Michelle Obama because of her high academic achievement and preppy fashion style), is an African American woman with a keen sense of style. When I met her at a Starbucks in the Fairmount area she was wearing a patterned silk blouse that, upon further examination, was a repeated pattern of Hello Kitty. As I gushed about the blouse, she proudly informed me that it was a Target find. During the course of our conversation Faith told me that her mother grew up in "one of the two poorest neighborhoods in the city," went on to graduate from law school, clerked for different judges, and then worked for IBM for the remainder of her career. Faith was in her third year at the University of Pittsburgh when she returned home because of an illness in the family. Marriage and children followed, and she had to "do something to make money." She went into the food industry and trained to become a chef. When I interviewed Faith, she was teaching cooking at a learning center that was "90% black" and "very, very low-income," and also at the Wayne Arts Center on the Main Line that was "mostly white" and affluent. She commented, "It's very night and day. I'm grateful for that. I have the opportunity to [be] in both worlds." She herself lived in a racially mixed, middle-income suburb of Philadelphia with her husband, Deidre, and her other daughter.

In preparing for this interview with Faith, I reflected on Cathy's enthusiastic support of FACTS and wondered if this was influenced by what she thought I, a Chinese

American woman who represented the dominant culture of FACTS, wanted to hear. So instead of posing more open-ended questions that might steer Faith toward a “feel good” response, I deliberately probed for her feelings about FACTS’ emphasis on Asian cultures. This had the unfortunate result of me giving a long and jumbled preamble before I got to my question. “Ask me again, I’m sorry,” Faith apologized. I repeated my question about whether she felt like her children’s cultural background was “still valued, or reflected, or respected,” given the school’s special commitment to Chinatown/Asian families. All the while, I tamped down my urge to counter-apologize for the wordiness of my question. Faith responded:

I definitely feel respected. And I think our culture is reflected. Is it as reflected as I would like it to be? Personally, no. But I think that speaks to the location, frankly, of the school. And the fact that AAU is so connected to the school. Would I like things to be more geared to Hispanic culture, and African American culture, and European culture? Yes. But I’m not sure if that matches with what the vision of the school is.

Let me pause for a moment to highlight a few key points that Faith makes. While she “definitely feels respected,” and acknowledges that her “culture is reflected,” it is not to the degree that she would like.

In addition, Faith said that she would like the school to focus more on “Hispanic culture, and African American culture, and European culture,” but she doubts that approach “matches with what the vision of the school is.” Here, Faith is making an astute distinction between the kind of education she would more like to see (one that cultivates worldliness), and what the school was designed to do (advance equality for marginalized groups). In doing so, she places a finger on the difference between folk arts education for the purpose of teaching anti-racism and collective action, and a multicultural education

that develops the individual's cultural capital characterized by global cosmopolitanism. Her comment—that she would like things to be more geared toward not just marginalized cultures, but also “European culture”—indicates that for her, a multicultural education is not solely for the sake of seeking equality. A folk arts education that is oriented toward social equality emphasizes subaltern alterity, not globally dominant cultures like “European culture,” except as a postcolonial critique of the legacy of colonial hierarchies. Her vision of a multicultural education allows her children to gain exposure to a range of different cultures in a way similar to that of a world traveler.

I am not arguing that there was a bright red line drawn between parents' conception of multiculturalism and that of the school's. Faith, and other parents who shared her viewpoint, were not antithetical to the goal of a folk arts education for social justice. In fact, many of these same parents expressed appreciation for the ways in which the school developed their children's social conscience, sense of fairness, and civic duty. At the same time, FACTS reasoned that they taught Mandarin because it “introduced [students] to an important world language” (Who We Are statement). So in fact, the parents that I spoke with supported the school's focus on social justice, and vice versa, FACTS understood that teaching Mandarin served an instrumental purpose of preparing its students for future success.

These differing emphases, however, index the transformation of multicultural education in our current era. Multiculturalism for social justice's sake is firmly rooted in the foundation of the multicultural movement that sought to remediate the historical denigration and devaluation of subaltern groups. Culture, in this respect, is mobilized for social equality. In contrast, multiculturalism that prepares students for a diverse, global

present and future is not primarily interested in seeking reparations for racial or ethnic minorities. Here, culture is used to develop a cosmopolitan repertoire that allows students to traverse national and cultural boundaries more seamlessly. Recalling Hannerz's (2007) explication of consumer cosmopolitanism, this cosmopolitan repertoire includes things like learning new musics, new cuisines, new celebrations, and new literatures. This is perhaps why FACTS board members were so conscious of wanting to create distance between what they did at the school (folk arts education) and the label *multicultural education*.

In the FACTS context though, students were not becoming superficial cosmopolitans—that is, cultivating “thin” understandings of different cultures. They were expanding their repertoire in a way that was concentrated, constant, and embodied (see chapters 4 and 5). Nevertheless, because of parents' concern with preparing their children for an increasingly global era, both for the labor market and for developing forms of sociality in keeping with a professional class status, they rationalized that FACTS' folk arts education promoted their children's individual social mobility. In practice, folk arts education for the purpose of social justice, and a multicultural education for global cosmopolitanism were difficult to distinguish. Indeed, successfully repurposing the first to meet the goals of the latter relied on the same kinds of socialization processes namely, open-mindedness, and exposure to “a little bit of everything,” as one parent put it.

Getting “a Little Bit of Everything”

Similar to what Cathy and Faith said about the importance of expanding her

children's cultural horizons, Sarah, a case manager at a hospice, spoke about wanting her kindergartener to "stay open-minded." At the beginning of our conversation, Sarah referred to "the African American community" as "our community." She also shared that she never felt like they were "*the* black family in an Asian school." Later on, when I asked about how her son fit into a school that was 70% Asian, she said, "I never really looked at it like 'Oh my god, he's going to be the token black kid.'" Sarah explained that she herself came "from a mixed family," and that her mom is "white and Native American." This "mixed family" background influenced the values that Sarah wanted to instill in her son, and how FACTS fit into this. Sarah talked about getting into a charter school "in West Philadelphia [which] is in a predominantly African American neighborhood." She decided against this school because "that's sort of not what he's used to." She later on elaborated that they live in "University City" where it's a "melting pot."

The distinction Sarah makes between "West Philadelphia" and "University City" is an interesting one. University City, as a designation, came about as part of the 1960s urban renewal efforts to develop the areas surrounding the campuses of a few universities that lied west of the Schuylkill River, namely the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and the University of Sciences. University City encompassed a neighborhood known as the "Black Bottom" that was predominantly African American. This neighborhood was razed and residents displaced as part of an effort to address urban blight and to rebuild the area to serve the growing needs of the universities. Sarah typifies West Philadelphia as being "predominantly African American," and University City as a "melting pot." But the differences go beyond race and ethnicity.

West Philadelphia has larger numbers of low-income, less-educated residents, whereas University City consists of more college-educated, working professionals. The difference that Sarah highlights between “West Philadelphia” and “University City” is analogous to the difference between “North Philly” and “Brewerytown.” University City carries greater cachet than West Philadelphia. This was clearly conveyed to me one day as I was strolling down Locust Walk on Penn campus, and overheard a student tour guide insisting to an attentive group of would-be students and parents that “We are in University City, *not* West Philadelphia.” Sarah’s decision against sending her son to the charter school in West Philadelphia (because “that’s sort of not what he’s used to,” since he is from University City) discloses Sarah’s preference of neighborhood in terms of race and class composition. By aligning herself more with University City, she is also identifying more with the racially mixed, middle- and professional-class people in that area.

Sarah explains her decision to send her son to FACTS, and not the charter school in West Philadelphia, by stating the following: “Like we strive to let him see that there are other people in the world in other places. So it kind of fit into the way we were teaching him.” As she elaborates elsewhere, “I just wanted to instill in him that just because he’s black doesn’t mean he has to be friends with just black people.” These statements should be read in the context of the distinction Sarah makes between West Philadelphia and University City, how she aligns herself, and how she is aligning her son. Developing his awareness “that there are other people in the world in other places,” and that “just because he’s black doesn’t mean he has to be friends with just black people,” is part of his formation as a black kid that comes from a “mixed background,” and has the

cultural experiences of kids that come from middle- and professional-class neighborhoods. Attending FACTS is then an important part of his identity formation because it allows him to see “other people in the world,” while physically remaining in Philadelphia. As a school that focuses more predominantly on Chinese and other Asian cultures, it exposes her son to people and experiences that are different from his own racial and cultural background. This in turn develops his cultural wherewithal to hang with middle- and professional-class kids, and to grow up to be a middle- and professional-class adult.

But as Sarah goes on to explain, learning about Asian cultures is just one piece of the cultural cosmopolitan puzzle that develops her son’s class formation. As she puts it, she wants him to have “different experiences” and to get “a little bit of everything.”

I want him to have experiences, different experiences. Different cultures do different things. So maybe one of his close friends in his kindergarten, they are Asian, and I can’t remember where they’re from. And so, you know, when he hangs out with him, he gets to learn the language that they speak, and some of their culture. He gets a little bit of everything. And then other friends, he gets to experience different types of cultures as opposed to just one.

This excerpt makes clear that the benefit of attending FACTS is not simply about the multicultural curriculum and activities that the school provides but also about the different kinds of friends Sarah’s son makes. By hanging out with his close friend in kindergarten, who is Asian, “he gets to learn the language...and some of their culture.” But as Sarah makes clear, she wants him to get “a little bit of everything,” by having still “other friends” who “he gets to experience different types of cultures” from, “as opposed to just one.”

This, in many ways, resonates with Faith’s comment about wanting FACTS to be

“more geared to Hispanic culture, and African American culture, and European culture,” and another comment she makes about wanting her daughters to “be open to anything”—that is, the range of cultural experiences that makes for a cosmopolitan kid. In that same conversation I had with Faith, I asked her point blank how she felt about her children being minorities in the school. She said, “Black, and white, and Hispanic parents who make the decision to enroll their kids are really well aware of that.” Hesitating a bit, she continued, “Nobody’s...well, I can’t speak for them, but for me, um, you know.” I joked by feigning a look of shock and surprise to put her at ease. Faith piggybacked on the joke, saying, “It’s not like, ‘Omigosh, what’s going on there?!’” We both laughed before she said more seriously, “We’re very aware of what we’re getting ourselves into. Well aware of that. Very conscious of the fact that we’re different, our skin colors are different, our histories are different.”

Nevertheless, as she put it, she wanted her children to understand that

we live in a really big world and, you know, there are diverse cultures all over the world. I want us to think more globally as opposed to, only their neighborhood or their community. [I want them] to be able to be comfortable anywhere, cause that was kind of how I was raised. To, you know, love yourself and be secure with who you are, and to be proud of your background, and your history and where you come from, as well as being open to anything.

Faith thought it was important for her children to “love [themselves] and be secure with who [they] are.” But she also wanted them to “think more globally,” to exhibit the qualities of being “comfortable anywhere” in the world, and be “open to anything.”

Sampling many different cultural traditions provided her children the cultural experiences to look and feel like they belonged anywhere. Black students’ exposure to Asian cultures unlike their own becomes a way of practicing and performing qualities of peripatetic

cosmopolitans. These were processes by which professional-class subjectivities were made. These aspirations were of course not only limited to black students at FACTS. Asian students who came from predominantly low-income immigrant households also expressed hopes of ascending to the upper middle class, and viewed learning Mandarin as part of the pathway to social mobility. But because black students were attending a school in which their cultural background was not centrally figured, their rationalizations were more pronounced.

For Sarah, she not only wanted her son to be comfortable with people of different races and ethnicities but also articulated a broader notion of liberal tolerance. Getting “a little bit of everything” meant being open to various kinds of subjectivities. According to Sarah:

I want him to know that its okay to try new things and be friends with whoever you want to be friends with regardless of their sexual orientation, poverty level, race, any of that. It goes back to him being a decent person.

Sarah wanted her son to befriend people “regardless of their sexual orientation, poverty level, race, any of that.” In particular, many of the black parents I interviewed with spoke of condoning, even encouraging, intraracial friendships with kids from less privileged backgrounds as a way of staying connected to where they came from. Speaking about the neighborhood in which Faith taught cooking to “very, very low-income” youth, which was also where her mother grew up and what she described as “one of the two poorest neighborhoods in the city,” she said, “I need [my children] to understand that this is where we come from. This neighborhood. And there’s no shame in that you know.” Befriending someone, even someone at the “poverty level” was part of the balancing act of growing roots and wings for socially mobile African Americans.

But befriending different people also, as Sarah said, “goes back to him being a decent person”—an idea that she communicated throughout the interview. There is every reason to believe Sarah wanted to develop her son’s comfort with diversity so he could learn how to be “a decent person,” since Sarah herself works in a helping profession. But as Reay et al. (2007: 1045) point out, “While it is analytically possible to abstract out the moral from the instrumental and the conscious from the habitual, in practice the two are complexly inter-related.” Personally, as a parent, I often articulate a similar commitment to diversity because of reasons related to raising “descent” children. And yet, I also concede that there’s an element of this, conscious or not, that works in “articulating an appropriate ideology for the ‘global village’ of the new liberal managerial class” (Harvey 2000: 530). There are class-based gains to be made from exhibiting the kinds of openness and liberal tolerance that is indexical of cosmopolitans. Therefore, being “friends with whoever you want to be friends with,” was related to Sarah’s earlier idea of getting “a little bit of everything,” and Faith’s articulation of wanting her children to be “comfortable anywhere.” That is, developing these were part of developing a cosmopolitan repertoire.

Anxieties of Being “Uncultured”

The importance of developing a cosmopolitan repertoire was evident in black students’ class-based anxieties of being perceived as “uncultured.” This was made apparent to me when I was catching up with Angela, an African American mom of two boys who subsisted on food stamps and Section 8 housing. I first met Angela during Black Heritage Night when we sat at the same table. I knew her older son, Jahzaire, from

shooting the short film, *Growing Up is Activism*. He and Brenda, an Indonesian girl, were the charming and precocious fourth grade step dancers that our audiences instantly fell in love with. When I watched Angela interact with her sons, it was obvious that Jahzaire's high academic achievement and maturity, in large part, came from his mom's guiding hand. She vigilantly turned every moment into a teachable moment, like when she encouraged her younger child to practice his literacy skills by reading the directions of a game, or when she called him out on his "cheating," gently chiding that there was something to be learned from "losing."

I also learned at that time that Angela and her sons were featured in a *Nightline* episode with Diane Sawyer on hunger in America. The episode was an intimate, even uncomfortable, look into her struggle to provide for the basic needs of her children. Because of Angela and Jahzaire's honest portrayal of their struggles, their savvy and outspokenness, they became the face of hunger for organizations lobbying to make change. Their personal story became a platform for addressing the broader issue of hunger. Through this, Angela and Jahzaire met with a number of prominent politicians, including Mayor Nutter, and Joe Biden, as an official-looking picture of Jahzaire with the vice president showed. This advocacy work also opened up an opportunity for Jahzaire to attend the Shipley School, an affluent independent school in Bryn Mawr, on full scholarship. Angela had high aspirations for her sons, and they seemed well on their way to fulfilling them. During Black Heritage Night, Angela shared that Jahzaire was interested in becoming an interpreter for the United Nations one day, and learning Mandarin at FACTS was a stepping stone to reaching this goal.

A few months after Black Heritage Night, I caught up with Angela as preparations

were underway for turning the schoolyard into a stage for the step-dance performance. She expressed friendliness and familiarity toward me that I happily reciprocated. We chatted about what was going on in her life and parenting. Angela became distracted by the teachers and students passing by us, carrying heavy amps and instruments. She commented how great it was that we could have a program that showcased “Asian instruments.” Catching herself for her lack of specificity, and not wanting to be culturally insensitive by painting broad brushstrokes of Asian cultures, she asked, “What’s the origin of these instruments?” “The đàn tranh is from Vietnam,” I responded. She laughingly informed me, “My son corrects me all the time and says I’m so uncultured.”

Angela, interestingly, invoked her son’s accusation of her being “uncultured” in the context of not knowing a traditional Vietnamese zither. The term *uncultured* has customarily denoted someone lacking knowledge of things associated with high culture. High culture has often been defined as the opposite of folk culture. But because of the school’s focus on folk culture, Jahzaire used the term *uncultured* to contrarily describe his mom’s unfamiliarity with the East and Southeast Asian *folk cultures* taught at FACTS. Additionally, since knowledge of a wide array of cultures has become associated with cosmopolitanism, “uncultured” not only meant lack of familiarity with high culture, but it also meant un-cosmopolitan.

Given Jahzaire’s aspiration of becoming a U.N. interpreter, and the prerequisite of being cosmopolitan in an organization that paradigmatically symbolizes international cooperation, anxieties over being “uncultured”—that is, un-cosmopolitan—loomed large. These anxieties were displaced onto his mother, who most represented where he came

from, and his apprehension over where he was able to go. Calling his mother “uncultured” had less to do with Angela and more to do with Jahzaire’s hopes for his own future, and his own class-based aspirations of being a U.N. interpreter.

In my interview with Cathy, the IT specialist who works at a city agency and lives in North Philly, she retold a story that struck a similar tone. She talked about how she was “humbled” when her daughter Deidre corrected her for homogenizing Asians. Recalling a trip to the northeast part of Philadelphia, where there is a sizeable population of Asians, she said she used to ask Deidre, “Oh, is that a classmate or something?” Cathy said her daughter often responded, “Mom, just because they may be Asian, that doesn’t mean I know them.” I appreciated Cathy’s openness and laughed with her over her cultural gaffe. She said that Deidre sometimes also pointed out, “Mom...that’s a Philippine person,” or “No, she’s not Asian.” “That really humbled me,” Cathy continued, “because I realized that I’m looking at it as one culture.” Because of these experiences, she “learned at a very early [stage], when they were young, to stop asking that question or to think that way too.” Otherwise, Cathy said, she would be subjected to her daughter’s admonishing eye roll, and, “No mom.” A few weeks later I caught up with Deidre in school and joked about the story her mom told me. She smiled, shook her head, and said, “I get SO embarrassed.”

In this example, Cathy failed to appreciate the differences that exist within the *Asian* racial category. While part of Deidre’s embarrassment is certainly related to her being a pre-teen, it is also related to what she viewed as her mother’s lack of cultural sensitivity that betrayed Cathy as being un-cosmopolitan. Her mom’s cultural faux pas transgressed coded aspects of the professional class that included displaying proper

knowledge of others' cultures, and speaking in a way that was culturally "PC." Like Jahzaire, getting "SO embarrassed" was less about Cathy, and more about how Deidre envisioned her future and her social class, and how being cosmopolitan fit into those visions of her future. Measurable aspects like getting good grades and testing well shaped the sense that both Jahzaire and Deidre were on the trajectory of upward mobility. But their social mobility was also shaped by how they exhibited qualities of the professional class that included being poised, confident, thoughtful, and importantly, *cultured*.

That is also why Deidre was distraught by the idea that there were countries and cultures in the world that she might have never known about had she not attended FACTS. In another conversation I had with Deidre, she recalled the "all black" school she first attended, and noted that before going to FACTS she had "no idea what Indonesia was; what Cambodia was." When she was in the second grade at FACTS she started studying different countries and people groups; she also began learning more about her classmates, and then with a look of mortification she said, "And I was like, 'How come you didn't tell me?!'" Here, "you" was most likely directed at either her parents, or her previous school, who did not tell her about these hitherto unheard of groups. I asked if she felt like she knew more about these groups now. She answered that the ensembles really exposed her to traditions she wasn't familiar with. "It opens you up to more diversity. When you're in the real world, you won't be like, 'What is this?'"

Embedded in this response is the trepidation of being in the "real world" and looking ignorant because she wasn't even aware of the existence of certain groups. Now, not only did she know that these countries existed, she was able to speak with some

fluency about these traditions and histories. Many schools can, and do, teach their students about various cultures and histories to cultivate students' world knowledge. What makes FACTS unique is that students' knowledge of cultures that were different and "other" went beyond book knowledge and became embodied knowledge. This was produced through being embedded, day in and day out, in a school climate, student body, and rituals and traditions that were different from the backgrounds they came from. This embodied knowledge allowed them to pass the "true" test of cosmopolitanism. They were not only able to rattle off a few interesting facts about different cultures, but, as Deidre's conversation with her mother revealed, displayed greater familiarity with that which was "other."

On Cosmopolitanism and Respectability

In talking to students and parents across races and ethnicities, multicultural education was certainly seen as a tool for students to gain a competitive edge in the global economy and to attain a high-paying job. But for a portion of the black parents and students that I spoke with (who were predominantly moms and girls), learning how to be cosmopolitan was not only about achieving a certain *economic* status but was also linked to *social* status. For some, like Faith and her daughter Rochelle, who no longer lived in a racially isolated, lower-income community, there was "no shame," as Faith put it, in acknowledging this was where they "c[a]me from." But just because that's where they "c[a]me from," it didn't mean that's where they were staying. The message that Faith often relayed to her daughters was: "You really need to be focused on school and succeeding so you can do better for yourself and the family that you one day would hope

to have.” Learning how to be cosmopolitan was part of an ensemble of signs (e.g., dress, comportment, speech) that signified their respectability, upward mobility, and “do[ing] better for [themselves.]”

For others, like Cathy and her daughter Deidre, these signs of respectability were important because they continued to live on the edge of a neighborhood that was more racially isolated and lower income. Performing upper/middle-classness meant distinguishing them from poorer blacks in the surrounding neighborhood. This was a fairly prominent concern of Deidre’s, as was apparent in the way she created distance between her and other North Philly youth, through pointing to difference in education, fashion, and behavior.

As we were chatting one day, we broached the topic of racial stereotypes. Deidre expressed irritation over people’s assumption that “we’re dumb,” meaning black people. But then she insinuated that she understood where these stereotypes came from and retold a personal anecdote related to what she perceived as the lesser value some North Philly youth placed on education. Deidre told me that one summer she was in a program with other North Philly youth from the surrounding neighborhoods. They were playing a game of hangman, and she said, incredulously, “No one was able to get the word *caterpillar*.” Deidre and Rochelle speculated aloud on some of the possible causes of this. Rochelle suggested that if their neighborhood school was subpar, they could “go to a school outside of that neighborhood.” Deidre and Rochelle thought that there were viable alternatives that these youth simply did not avail themselves of. Because of that, Deidre drew the conclusion, “They just don’t care.” If the “parents aren’t motivated, why should their children be motivated?” she asked rhetorically.

To Deidre, not being able to get the word *caterpillar* signaled a number of academic problems having to do with vocabulary, spelling, and problem solving. This, she thought, was emblematic of their lack of concern for education, not, for example, of urban schooling inequalities that starved poor youth of color of a basic education. She tied this lack of concern for education, once again, back to the parents. “You have those bad kids in your class, and you see the parents, and you think you’re not surprised because the parents are just as bad.” “And you can’t blame the kids,” she said more sympathetically, “because the parents don’t set a good example.” Now drawing social distance between herself and the North Philly youth she encountered, Deidre said, “That’s the only thing I’d be exposed to if I didn’t go to FACTSs.”

Deidre was casting FACTS in the role of the hero. But what did the school save her from? For one, it exposed her to other students who, like her, placed a premium on education. This was a widespread perception among parents across the racial spectrum I talked with. In my interview with Faith, the mom with the rockin’ Hello Kitty blouse, she debunked biological explanations that stereotyped Asian kids as being “smarter” and instead drew on familial explanations such as Asian students coming from “households that watch less TV.” She asserted, “Whatever is emphasized more in your family, that’s the direction that you’re really going to go.” And to Faith, the majority of the families at FACTS emphasized education. By attending FACTS, Deidre felt she was exposed to students and families who “cared” about their education, unlike the North Philly youth from her summer program who “just don’t care.”

Second, FACTS was also saving her from the isolation that often characterizes poorer, racially homogenous communities. This was implicit in the phrase “the only

thing I'd be exposed to if I didn't go to FACTS." While Deidre specifically made this statement in the context of schooling and education, given my earlier mention of her concern about not knowing about Indonesia and Cambodia, it is not too far fetched to draw this conclusion. Being at FACTS exposed her to people with the same laser focus on education, *and* to other races, ethnicities, and cultures that were presumably not available to the North Philly youth she encountered. This cultural exposure made her more cosmopolitan and further differentiated her from the kids in her neighborhood. According to Deidre, the clash in lifeworlds between herself and these youth made her feel "weird when I'm in my neighborhood because I don't fit in."

My conversation with these girls about race and class continued into the realm of fashion and other techniques they used to signal to white strangers that they were not a threat—that is, to differentiate themselves from other black youth. Deidre commented, "You see a white person and think, I hope she doesn't think I'm gonna—" "Steal her book bag," Rochelle offered. "Yah, or whatever, her jewelry," said Deidre. "You can tell when people kind of..." She paused. "They got their bag," Rochelle mimed out, clutching to an imaginary purse. "Or their leg, or they look at you a certain way," Deidre said, completing her sentence. Rochelle added, "That's why I smile at people, so they know I'm not a teenage thug."

Deidre then went into an extended analysis of fashion that imbricated with the previous comments about how to differentiate oneself from a "teenage thug," and the class status implied in that phrase.

I take the bus with my grandma. I'm not ashamed to go anywhere with my grandma. And these two girls look at me like I'm strange. I have a t-shirt that's not too tight or low, and I'm wearing, like, jeans and some sneakers, like a

regular person. But they got like a bunch of earrings, and there's cleavage, and short shorts. And they're like "Why isn't she dressed like that? She's white." Am I supposed to look like that? Do you want all people to think that we're all like that? Is it bad that I don't dress like that? To me, I think I look like a *regular* person, you look like, ugh...If you grow up on the corner, you're more likely to see people who have pants all the way down, than people like me and [Rochelle] that have sense (emphasis, added).

Clothing style not only reveals Deidre's class aspirations and trajectory but is also used as a tool for self-fashioning (no pun intended) her future. The kinds of clothes she wears, and how she wears them, mark Deidre as different from the girl on the bus whose clothes, according to her, are "too tight, or low," have "cleavage," and are "short shorts." She believed her style—"jeans and some sneakers"—conveyed good "sense" and what a "regular person" would wear.

Deidre's idea of what is considered "regular" is, of course, not simply about fashion. It is more importantly indexical of normative views of personhood that are raced, classed, and gendered. What Deidre deems "regular," and her complex speaker positioning, all work together to create social and class distance between herself and the girl on the bus (and what the girl on the bus represents). This is evident when she ventriloquates the girl on the bus that was looking at her and presumably thinking, "Why isn't she dressed like that? She's white." Here, Deidre assumes that the girl is accusing of her of being "white" because she's not dressed in "short shorts," and tight and low cut shirts that reveal cleavage—clothes that typically index a kind of black femininity more popular among poor and working-class black youth. Deidre is more sensitive to the accusation of acting white, not only because of the way she dresses but also because she expresses a repertoire of signs that diverge from hegemonic, stereotypical notions of blackness. That is, Deidre is also a high-achieving student, she speaks standard (or

“proper”) English, as she once said, and she is light-skinned. The fact that she defensively ventriloquates an accusation of being white gives us a window into Deidre’s head—how she self-identifies, and how she thinks people see her.

She presumes that the girl would accuse her of being white, just from looking at Deidre, and she preempts this accusation with a ready-to-go answer: “Do *you* want all people to think that *we’re* all like that?” Her use of the deictics—*you*, and *we’re*—reveals complex racial and class positioning. Deidre identifies as black, and uses the term *we’re*, to align with the girl on the bus who is also black, and perhaps to align with black people more generally. And yet her use of *you* also creates social and class distance from the girl, and positions herself as dissimilar from the girl, despite that she is black. She is contesting the dominance of popular understandings of black femininity that are linked to styles more popular among poor and working-class black girls. In other words, just because she isn’t wearing tight, revealing clothing doesn’t mean she’s any less of a black girl. Through this complex positioning, Deidre is essentially asserting the legitimacy of black middle-class styles of dress (and other signs of middle classness).

Though she attempts to broaden conceptions of blackness to include middle-class styles, in the process she also disparages lower-class blackness when she says, “To me, I think I look like a regular person. You look like, ugh...If you grow up on the corner, you’re more likely to see people who have pants all the way down, than people like me and [Rochelle] that have sense.” The style of the girl on the bus, and others who “grow up on the corner,” is deemed “ugh,” while Deidre and Rochelle “have sense.” She is then not simply attempting to make room for middle-class styles of blackness, she is trying to dislodge lower-class blackness as a metonym for blackness, by asserting middle-class

blackness as the preferred, and even superior, form of blackness. In her question—“Do you want all people to think that we’re all like that?”—there is a sense of concern over how others view blacks, and of wanting to put forth the “best” representation possible—that is, the middle-class representation. Performing cosmopolitanism is part of a repertoire of other signs that signal respectability. Being “open-minded,” and knowing a “little bit of every [culture], along with dressing with “sense,” and speaking “proper” English, are seen as working together to uplift the race and gain the respect of others.

Conclusion

I argued that the school’s black families, especially those with social mobility aspirations, viewed FACTS’ teaching of Mandarin, and exposure to Chinese and other Asian cultures, as an opportunity to cultivate cosmopolitanism and the lifeworlds they needed to ascend to their professional class futures. It was articulated that exposing black youth to cultures that were different and “other” developed in them the skills and dispositions of global cosmopolitans, such as being “open-minded,” knowing a little bit of everything,” and being “comfortable anywhere.”

CHAPTER 7
THE CUNNING OF COALITION

This chapter raises a discussion about the challenges that exist within progressive multiracial coalitional politics. By attending to moments in which students' and teachers' experiences of blackness did not fit comfortably within the rubric of people-of-color (POC) solidarity, this chapter discusses how solidarity based on a category—any category—is not simply assumed at FACTS. The intimate solidarities that have been forged must be understood as a continuous process of constructing and reconstructing tight-knit bonds. Generally speaking, the bright hope of what multiracial coalitional-building can accomplish can undermine broad-based social change efforts in two ways.

First, it may cause us to gloss over the very real and consequential differences that exist among people of color. POC solidarity that is based on weak ties is highly unstable and runs the risk of dissolving. An uncritical multiracial coalitional mentality fails to examine the complex ways in which “people-of-color” are differentially positioned in relation to processes of race-making and also may participate in the reproduction of racism against one another. Second, a serious exploration of difference can lead to what Jared Sexton (2014) has referred to as “Oppression Olympics,” thus pitting minorities against each other, and fracturing these solidarities. FACTS' radical openness to hearing and learning about each other's racialized embodied experiences offers up a third way. Through the rituals of constructing a sense of multiracial kinship and bearing witness to difference, FACTS *both* recognizes the deep differences that exist among people of color, *and* maintains these intimate solidarities.

Ferguson and Multiracial Coalitional Building

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, was fatally shot by a white Ferguson, Missouri, police officer. This shooting, as well as the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, John Crawford, and others that occurred in recent years, catalyzed nationwide protests and debates around the deadly use of police force in communities of color. Protests against the cavalier treatment of black lives, as captured in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, was noticeably multiracial in character even if not all colors of the rainbow were equally represented. One journalist remarked that the “Black Lives Matter movement got protests’ multi-racial groove back” (Smith 2014), while Asian American commentators noted the ostensible silence from their communities, perhaps largely because of the ambiguous position of Asian Americans in this country’s racial rubric.

At the height of these protests in November 2014, an article was published in *Time* magazine entitled, “Why Ferguson Should Matter to Asian-Americans” (Linshi 2014). The article took on an apologist’s tone, attempting to convince Asian American readers to stand in solidarity with those fighting for black equality. To rally Asian Americans, Linshi (2014) drew parallels between the deaths of Michael Brown, and Vincent Chin, a Chinese American Detroit man who was beaten to death in 1982 by disgruntled white autoworkers. These two men, one of whom had been laid off because of competition from the Japanese auto industry, mistook Chin for being Japanese and targeted him for this reason. Linshi (2014) wrote that in the cases of Michael Brown and Vincent Chin, their attackers were “both white, both uncharged in a racially-motivated murder; [and both] unified [their] communit[ies] to demand protection under the law.”

He provided further examples, focusing on Asian Americans fatally shot at the hands of the police. These included the 1997 death of Kuanchang Kao, a Chinese-American man who police said were threatened by his “martial arts moves”; Cau Bich Tran, a Vietnamese American killed in 2003 because police misidentified the vegetable peeler he was holding as a cleaver; and Fong Lee, a Hmong American shot dead in 2006 by police who thought he was carrying a gun. Linshi marshaled these examples to make shared suffering a point of solidarity between black and Asian American communities.

He then discussed the model minority myth, and how the “puppeteering of one minority [was used] to slap the other’s wrist” (Linshi 2014). Quoting Daryl Maeda, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, the article states that the model minority discourse “intends to pit us against other people of color. And that’s a divide and conquer strategy that we shouldn’t be complicit with.” Moreover, according to Linshi (2014):

[T]he Asian-American experience was once a story of racially motivated legal exclusion, disenfranchisement and horrific violence—commonalities with the African-American experience that became rallying points in demanding racial equality. That division between racial minorities also erased a history of Afro-Asian solidarity born by the shared experience of sociopolitical marginalization.

Linshi then went on to name key figures, such as Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs, who were emblematic of multiracial coalitional politics, or what others have referred to as “third-world solidarity.” By quoting Maeda, by highlighting Asian American deaths at the hands of police and by referencing Asian American figures in the civil rights and Black Power movements, Linshi attempted to recuperate the understanding that, despite the model minority discourse that sought to “divide and conquer,” Asian Americans shared a similar history and experience of oppression with African Americans. Those

shared histories and experiences, he argued, should serve as the basis for uniting people of color.

Those who “liked” and “shared” Linshi’s article on Facebook showed that his position was palatable among Asian Americans who ordinarily felt sidelined, indifferent to, or unable to relate to discussions about race in America. One Chinese American Facebook user who I am “friends” with commented: “Hey this is really important. It's such a rare experience for me to actually resonate really well with an article about race, but this is one of those rare ones.” This article, and more precisely, the position that Asian Americans should rally with black Americans because of a shared history and experience of sociopolitical marginalization, was successful in capturing the attention and political imagination of this college student, who had a nascent concern for issues around social injustice. Multiracial coalitional building holds political cachet, especially among youth of color activism (cf. Kwon 2013), at least in part, because of it strikes an emotive chord (cf. Wacquant 2007).

It is appealing to take the stance that people of color share a vested interest in combatting white supremacy and to emphasize shared suffering as a rallying cry. There are, however, problems with this position. Insisting that “Afro-Asian solidarity [is] born by the *shared* experience of sociopolitical marginalization” (Linshi 2014, emphasis added) obscures the “significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies” (Sexton 2010:46-47). In other words, not all social suffering is created equal.

Sexton (2010:48) refers to this refusal to parse out the historical, social, subjective, and embodied differences among racial minorities as *people-of-color*

blindness. Instead of refusing to acknowledge race, as the term *colorblind* denotes, *people-of-color blindness* refuses to acknowledge the differences that exist within and among people categorized by particular “groups.” “[I]t misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy—thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others” (Sexton 2010:48). *People-of-color blindness* downplays or completely ignores different forms of exploitation to the extent that racism is viewed as flat and one-dimensional, treating all minorities the same. And yet, as Sexton (2010:47) points out, it is both curious and telling that the experience of racial injustice is only conveyed most potently when blackness is used as the “grounding metaphor of social misery.”

No doubt other racial minorities also experience forms of structural violence. These include “racially motivated legal exclusion” (Linshi 2014) such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, racial segregation that led to the creation of Chinatowns across the United States and Japanese internment during World War II. But as Sexton (2014:54) argues, “It is the specific genealogy that links slavery to Jim Crow to the ghetto to the prison that warrants my claim about the singularity of racial domination of blacks.” Other racial minorities in America come out of “profoundly different historical processes and trajectories” (Sexton 2014:54). Although “black existence does not represent the totality of the racial formation...it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system” (Sexton 2010:48). In other words, black existence does not represent the first, last, or all examples of racial oppression. But the range and forms of racial

oppression can only be fully understood by examining the paradigmatic case of blackness and (the afterlife of) slavery. As Sexton (2014:48) contends:

Every analysis that attempts to understand the complexities of racial rule and the machinations of the racial state without accounting for black existence within its framework—which does not mean simply listing it among a chain of equivalents or returning to it as an afterthought—is doomed to miss what is essential about the situation.

And yet, efforts of building people-of-color solidarity often represent all forms of racial oppression and suffering precisely as if they were equal. In attempts to create more broad-based political alliances to advance social justice, simple approaches to multiracial coalitional building often obscure the singular structural position of blackness. This is especially true in our current zeitgeist where “diversity” and “multiculturalism” have taken on such politically correct meanings that it is seen as distasteful to focus on a particular group over others.

This is exemplified in the phrase *All Lives Matter*, a mimetic variation of *Black Lives Matter*. *All Lives Matter* was thought to be more inclusive and less divisive than *Black Lives Matter*. In a vacuum, there is nothing inherently problematic about the phrase *All Lives Matter*. Yet, given the fact that it alters a tagline that was created to legitimize black lives because of a long pattern of violence toward black folks, *in particular*, *All Lives Matter* dislocates the specificity of anti-black racism and the issue of black people’s rights in the afterlife of slavery and Jim Crow.

The next few sections examine how students and teachers talked about their experiences of anti-blackness in society and of the challenges of building multiracial coalitions before they came to FACTS. I draw on these quotes to illustrate the specific

ways in which forging these solidarities were problematic and to contrast this with the experiences they had at FACTS.

Fractured Solidarities

The tension between a multiracial coalitional approach versus an identity-specific approach was epitomized in Teacher Mel, who tacked between a “we all suffered” mindset, as she stated, yet also articulated the unique structural position of anti-blackness. Teacher Mel and I were chatting in the copy room, when the topic of conversation shifted suddenly and without warning. Like so many of our conversations, I could scarcely trace how the topic changed from small talk and exchanging pleasantries, to untangling the quandaries of building collective solidarity across racial divides. As I remember it, Teacher Mel started by reminiscing about a job she had long ago in which there was a “people of color work program” that put “blacks and Cubans together.” While the details were not entirely clear to me, I inferred that this program had something to do with promoting the collective interests of minorities and advocating for their rights in the workplace. She talked about how the group located its strength in the “collective power” of a racially diverse group. “But then,” she said, “when the Cubans started moving up, they left the blacks behind.”

Counter to a refrain she often expresses—that social justice was the “common denominator” that united us—the object lesson here seemed to be that the “people of color work program” was fractured when the self-interest of individuals came into play. But the ability to even act on self-interest and capitalize on opportunities is itself indexical of the different structural positions of minorities that allow for some minority

groups (Cubans, in this case) to have opportunities presented to them in the first place. Here, the social challenges of being black in the United States exposed the uncommon ground that the people-of-color alliance is based on. Savannah Shange (personal communication, October 21, 2014) has referred to this as the *cunning of coalition* to draw attention to the wiliness of multiracial coalitional building that make opaque these structural differences. Implicit in Teacher Mel's story was the message that being black in America was an experience unlike that of being Cuban, or any other ethnic/racial group, because it caused them to be "left behind" even other minorities.

As the methodical whirling of the copy machine sounded off in the background, I asked Teacher Mel what she thought about Kenny Gamble,²⁰ his non-profit organization, *Universal Companies*,²¹ and its ventures in the neighborhood. I specifically had in mind a 2007 article in *Philadelphia* magazine entitled "King Kenny," which talked about his vision for transforming the neighborhood he grew up in. Teacher Mel was unfamiliar with the article, so I did my best to recapitulate the gist of it. "Well," I began, "Kenny Gamble basically wants to do to South Philly what Chinatown did. He said something like, 'There's nothing wrong with the Chinese having Chinatown.' But then the reporter said that that sounded a lot like segregation."

In that instant, I felt like I was wading into rocky racial waters. "I mean," I stammered, choosing my words carefully. "Go ahead and say it," Teacher Mel

²⁰ Kenny Gamble is a Grammy Award-winning producer and songwriter, well known for the hit song, "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me." He was born and raised in South Philly and continues to be active in the community he grew up in.

²¹ Universal Companies is a non-profit development corporation that takes a holistic approach toward neighborhood revitalization, including creating schools and affordable housing.

encouraged, “Say what you want to say.” “Well, I guess I think about, kind of that tension between wanting to keep a neighborhood primarily African American and what that means for newer immigrants to South Philly.” I started babbling. “I mean it’s like Chinatown. Yes, Chinatown is mainly Chinese, but then I think of the Mexican workers and how if we want to keep it mainly a Chinese neighborhood, what does that mean for other people who aren’t Chinese, and is that being exclusive or segregating?”

Teacher Mel responded that she didn’t know Kenny Gamble’s plan that well, and for all she knew, there might be some “crazy” in him but that I should view what he was doing for South Philly as “something good” because he was trying to keep people from getting pushed out of their neighborhoods because of gentrification—people who could no longer afford to live there because the price of homes increased so drastically. As she saw it, he wanted to maintain black businesses, as well as preserve the history of the neighborhood and people’s livelihoods. “If they want to move out,” she said, “well then, that’s their choice. But he’s giving them a chance to stay in that neighborhood.”

Our conversation meandered to the topic of race dynamics in South Philly. She informed me that when Cambodians and Mexicans started moving into the neighborhood, they lived in apartments where rent was too high. According to her, they could barely afford it, so they were forced to have “so many people living together in these cramped conditions, and conditions that were sometimes horrible.” “You see,” Teacher Mel said in a more conspiratorial tone, “they tried to get people against each other, to fight against each other. But we should be looking at the way things are set up.” By “set up” I took this to mean that we should fight the systems that allowed these conditions to occur and that pitted minorities against each other. In other words, she seemed to be saying that

Mexicans, Cambodians, and African Americans shouldn't be fighting each other, but rather, we should unite to fight against "the system" that created unlivable conditions for people in South Philly.

Then I reminded her of the story she had just told me to point out the contradictions of multiracial coalitional building. "But didn't you just tell that story before?" I succinctly recapped elements of what I thought was the moral of the story—of the people-of-color work program in which the "Cubans started moving up" and "left the blacks behind." "So it's sometimes hard to band together too, right?" I asked. She then reinterpreted the story, now using it as an example of how the system tries to "split us up and get people against each other." As Teacher Mel talked, she seemed to be trying to work through the puzzle I presented her concerning the potentials and challenges of building multiracial solidarity. She playfully chastised me for making her think so hard that it exhausted her. She repeated several times that she thought what Kenny Gamble was doing was good and tried to elaborate on why it was good. In this elaboration she insinuated there was something different about the history, condition, and experience of being black that was different from the experiences of other racial minorities. She told me that African Americans "throughout history and because of slavery...[were] on the bottom."

Teacher Mel's analysis differentiates among various racialized experiences, indicating that the history of slavery created a situation in which blacks were "on the bottom." As Orlando Patterson (1982) articulated, the legacy of slavery has meant "social death" and "genealogical isolation." Place-based ties, and kinship ties in "both ascending and descending generations" were severed in order for the slave to be the

“ultimate human tool” for the master (Patterson 1982:7-8). Sexton (2010) refers to the social and psychological toll of slavery in the present as the “afterlife of slavery” to draw a temporal line that connects the transatlantic slave trade to the current conditions of blacks. It is this specific history that differentiates the black condition from other people-of-color. There are, he argues, “significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies” (Sexton 2010:46-47). This is similar to what Faith alluded to when we were speaking about her feelings on being black in an Asian-majority school. If you recall, she is the mother of two daughters that I mentioned in a previous chapter who was wearing a very stylish Hello Kitty blouse. She commented, “We’re very aware of what we’re getting ourselves into. Well aware of that. Very conscious of the fact that we’re different, our skin colors are different, *our histories are different*” (emphasis added). As Teacher Mel, Patterson, Sexton, and Faith all seem to argue, the structural position of blacks in the afterlife of slavery is unlike other American minorities. This calls into question any simple attempts to build people-of-color solidarity based on an uncritical assertion of a shared history of suffering among minorities.

“Blacks Are Still...Hated So Much in this Country”

The exceptional experience of black suffering was also raised by Teacher Anita, an African American woman known for her uncommon wisdom and her keen ability to frame the terms of a conversation in ways that are both enlightening and productive. During a meeting I had with some of the school’s leaders, Teacher Anita was explaining the rationale for the establishment of Afrocentric charter schools. She took in a deep

breath and said, “There’s so much here,” alluding to not only the complexity of the issue, but also to a painful personal reality. With conviction and emotion, she said, “All throughout time, since the beginning of schools, they were designed with a particular student in mind, whether or not it was explicitly stated.” She explained that in the context of America, public schools were implicitly designed for white, middle-class students. They served as the privileged unmarked category “whether or not it was explicitly stated.” Though Teacher Anita did not go into further detail, one can infer that she was indexing a long and complicated history of school segregation and of mandated desegregation in which black students were bussed out of their communities to face angry and oftentimes violent mobs. She expressed this sentiment much more clearly when she reasoned, “Because blacks are still a group that is hated so much in this country, there needed to be schools that specifically worked against this, and taught kids to love themselves.” She questioned, “Do *we* really love ourselves? *We* had to work to love ourselves before anything else” (emphasis added).

Teacher Anita’s use of “we” positions her in alignment with black people more generally. One can sense in her words, a deep sense of pain, and what she asserts as the struggle of black folks “to love ourselves” because they continue to be “hated so much in this country.” Here, instead of generally referencing minorities, Teacher Anita specifically states, “*Blacks* are still a group that is hated so much in this country” (emphasis added). Her comments regarding the social hatred toward black people, the inner turmoil this produced, and striving “to love ourselves,” bears resemblance to Patterson’s (1982) insight into the social death and genealogical isolation of black people, as well as Sexton’s (2010) discussion of the contemporary psychological toll that slavery

has wrought. The specificity in her statement suggests that this is a history and a present condition that other minority groups in America do not share in. The existence of Afrocentric charter schools—schools that were designed to focus *specifically* on black students—worked to combat this ugly social truth. These schools, she said, “Specifically worked against” this hatred, and “taught [black] kids to love themselves.” Afro-centric charter schools combat the prevalence of anti-black ideology through centering school-based activities on black history, culture, and traditions. These schools, by design, counter the social and psychological trauma that black youth are subject to in broader society by consistently legitimizing black existence. They are intended to uplift students by sending an explicit message that black cultural practices and black personhood are points of pride.

A rigorous attempt at building multiracial solidarity in a multiracial school would require what Sexton (2010:48) refers to as a relational analysis. Such an analysis accounts for the “true scale and nature of black suffering—political, aesthetic, intellectual, and so on...[and] “the true scale and nature of nonblack nonwhite existence,] its material and symbolic power *relative* to the category of blackness” (Sexton 2010:48). This type of relational analysis was present in Teacher Mel, Faith, and Teacher Anita’s comments. A relational approach to understanding the challenges of multiracial solidarity was present in students’ analysis of how racial joking unevenly targeted blackness, and the way in which “model minority” jokes and stereotypes stood in relation to jokes that pathologized blackness.

“There’s a Lot of Negative Stuff About Us”

While talking to Rochelle about the pervasiveness of racial joking among students at FACTS, she articulated to me her opinion that “there’s a lot of negative stuff about us” that other groups (specifically, Asians) did not come up against. Her comment speaks to the uncommon experiences of racism among people of color, and it challenges simplistic approaches to multiracial solidarity that do not account for this imbalance. This “negative stuff” was evident in students’ racial joking, even if many of them explained the practice as being innocuous, or even beneficial because it was an outcome of their tight-knit cross-race friendships.

I was talking with Dwight, Joel, and Darrell over some Trader Joe’s sesame cracker snacks one day. Dwight, you may recall, was the African American boy who softheartedly admitted he was going to “be the first one to cry” during graduation. Joel is a Puerto Rican boy with curly hair, and unblemished skin. Darrell is an African American with boyish features, both in terms of his personality and his physical characteristics. When I asked about the racial joking among students, Dwight was the first to answer. “We be saying crazy stuff.” Darrell added, “We be saying racist stuff, but we’re joking.” “We all know we’re just them type of friends, so we don’t get mad,” said Dwight. I gave an inquiring look that must have signaled to him that I wanted an example, so he offered, “Say I’m with [Arun (who is Khmer American).] I call them the “n” word, and they be laughin. And when the light turn off they be like, “Where

[Dwight]?” He insisted, “We can say that and no one gets mad.”²² Darrell suggested it was because “we know each other for a long time,” and Joel flat out stated, “If I don’t know you, and you say it, I’ll punch you.”

As Dwight clearly explained, “We’re just them type of friends”—that is, the type of friends that “be saying racist stuff” but know that it’s all in good fun and “joking.” In this sense, racial joking was not only a barometer of the closeness of their cross-race friendships but was also a ritualized practice that *built* a sense of interracial camaraderie. Successful joking legitimates the relationship and takes it to another level. The most prominent kind of racial joking was the association of someone’s race/ethnicity with particular types of foods. Black students were associated with fried chicken and Kool Aid and Asian students with roast pork bun and rice. This type of joking occurred frequently and in the most unsuspecting moments.

One day, in the middle of class an Asian boy got up to get a piece of paper. A black girl walked by, and he disguised the word “fried chicken” under a cough. She smiled at this inside joke that was lost on the teacher, who continued to give instruction. Part of the efficacy of racial joking in building stronger interracial friendships was that this practice was kept from teachers and was an inside joke known only to the students in the building (and perhaps a few adults, like me, that were not seen as strict authority figures). In fact, this type of joking occurred so regularly that toward the end of the school year, students said it lost its humor, and was “not really funny anymore” because

²² One teacher told me that the “water cooler talk” was that Cambodian and black students tended to be better friends because they grew up in the same neighborhoods, and/or because of the darker complexion of Cambodian students.

of its frequency. To students who adhered to values of interracial and intercultural respect, racial joking was acceptable because they “kn[e]w each other for a long time” and were like a family.

Racial joking was a double-edged sword though. While it signified familial bonds and an insider status, it also unevenly relied on blackness for getting laughs. Let us return to Dwight’s examples—of him calling his Khmer American friend the “n word,” and of Arun returning the joke by asking “Where [Dwight]?” when the light was turned off. In the first instance, part of what makes this funny is that Dwight is deliberately troping on the more frequent usage of this term to refer to other blacks when he refers to his Khmer American friend using the “n word.” The misalignment between the term (the n-word) and Arun’s ethnic Khmer identity is part of what makes it humorous. It is also apparently funny because he is reproducing something that he knows would receive express disapproval in FACTS, an environment that upholds interracial respect so highly. In the second instance, what makes the joke supposedly funny is that it pokes fun of the darker complexion of some black people by equating them with the lights being turned off. The fact that Arun is using this joke on his friend, who is, in fact, darker skinned, is thought to achieve the point of the joke.

In both these instances, achieving humor is premised upon making blackness the target of the jokes. Whose race (and language, ethnicity, and culture) gets joked about, and, whose doesn’t, comes to signify the privileged unmarked racial category (cf. Hill 2009). By and large, the racial joking among students revolved around blackness as in the use of the “n word” and the joke about dark-skinned blacks. Darker complexion was also the target of jokes in other instances, such as when Jamir likened a darker-skinned

African American girl in the school to “midnight,” a “raisin,” and “300 degrees in the oven.” Recall also the joke that Darrell liked to tell—What’s the difference between Batman and a black man? They can’t go a day without robbin’. These jokes confirm Teacher Mel’s assertion that blacks are treated as being “on the bottom” of society and Teacher Anita’s claim that “blacks are still a group that is hated so much in this country.” The fact that African American students were the main purveyors of these jokes simply reaffirms the degree to which negative portrayals of blacks are propagated so widely in society, such that black students have internalized them. This proves Teacher Anita’s other point that “there needed to be schools that...taught kids to love themselves” to fight against the degrading images of blackness that were reproduced in broader society.

Rochelle and Deidre came to a similar conclusion about how much “negative stuff” there is about black people and the irony that black students were perpetuating these ideas. Like many other students, they initially talked about the jokes as being funny because, as Rochelle said, “We do it to each other,” indicating there was mutual agreement between both parties. Yet as our conversation continued, Rochelle and Deidre changed tones. They were the only two students in the school that I spoke with who took a more critical view of the racial joking. Referring to Darrell’s joke about Batman and “robbin,” Deidre said, “People in our class will laugh cause [they think] that’s funny. That’s dumb.” She blasted Darrell for “making all these black stereotypes.” Rochelle, speaking to the uncritical way in which he promoted stereotypes that ultimately harmed his own race, said, “The people who tease us the most are black students, which is crazy.”

When they stopped to analyze the jokes relationally, and in aggregate, Rochelle said, “There’s so many things against black people that people think, but there’s not that

many for Asian people—just the eye thing.” Deidre agreed, saying, “Eating rice and that stuff is not bad, but *there’s a lot of negative stuff about us*” (emphasis added).

To be clear, students understood that anti-Asian jokes were also demeaning because it was dehumanizing. But there were, indeed, a number of instances in which “negative stuff” was linked to blackness. For example, Sharon, an Indonesian girl, admitted to associating criminality and violence with black people:

[I]f we see someone killed someone, everybody be like, “It’s probably a black person.” And then as soon as we see the video and it’s a white guy, we’re like, “Omigod, I didn’t know it was a white guy.” But this school teaches us not to be racist, but sadly...[trailing off]

As Sharon pointed out, despite the school’s attempt to “teach [students] not to be racist,” these negative assumptions about blacks were so rampant that they invaded the implicit biases students held toward black people.

Similarly, when I talked to a group of Asian girls, they said that many Asian parents expressed the view that blacks were more predisposed to violence. When I mentioned them that I heard parents liked sending their kids to FACTS because it taught Mandarin, and asked them why, Jillian, a Chinese Mandarin-speaking girl bluntly responded, “Because they’re racist.” The girls laughed over Jillian’s well-known frankness in talking about issues of race in informal settings. In the formal classroom setting, however, she tended to toe the line and articulated more politically correct stances. Jillian continued, “They really are. Asians are racist. They don’t want...” “She didn’t mean that,” her friend Sharon said with a nervous smile, trying diplomatically to put a better spin on her friend’s undisguised honesty. Not taking Sharon’s cue, Jillian went on, “They don’t want to put you in a school where there are like a lot of black

people because they're known for violence." "No comment," Sharon said in a journalistic manner, as she spoke into the recorder. The growing list of "negative stuff" against black people now also included the supposed penchant that black people have toward violence.

Black Aesthetics and Intellect

Similarly, Rochelle told about an instance that occurred in the school that speaks to Sexton's call to plumb the "true scale and nature of black suffering" in terms of aesthetics, among other things. She said, "One time, there was a couple, a black guy and Asian girl, and someone said 'They don't look good together.'" When Rochelle asked why, the response she got was, "because he's black." She suggested, "I think people say it quietly to themselves...like, people make little side comments, but you don't realize what they say until later." Unlike Darrell whose jokes were forthrightly offensive to Deidre and Rochelle, this student's remarks (who was most likely Asian since Rochelle was telling this story in response to my question about whether she ever felt like she didn't fit in), took more decoding because they were "little side comments" in which "you don't realize" the connotation "until later." But once she had time to reflect on it, Rochelle realized that a "black guy and Asian girl" were viewed as not "look[ing] good together," *specifically* "because he's *black*" (emphasis added)—that is, according to this student, their failure to "look good together" was not a failure on the Asian part. Rather, black aesthetic was in question and seen as undesirable. Though students attended a school in which it explicitly worked against these wider views in society, it nonetheless infiltrated students' unconscious biases.

Other “negative stuff” about black people included assuming their intellectual inferiority. According to Sexton (2010) any effort to build multiracial coalitions must also acknowledge the nature of black suffering in terms of intellect, and the “material and symbolic power [of non-black people of color] *relative* to the category of blackness” (Sexton 2010:48). This is particularly salient given how positive stereotypes about Asians co-constitute notions of black intellectual inferiority. In my conversation with Rochelle, she pointedly stated, “People think you’re smart, they think we’re dumb.” Since Rochelle was addressing me, “you’re” referred to Asians, and “we’re” referred to African Americans. These stereotypes, which were mobilized by students, drew upon widely circulating national narratives. Asian Americans, once considered the “yellow peril,” are now portrayed as the “model minority” who, purportedly, by dint of hard work and achievement, have become emblems of the American dream. The model minority trope has been constructed as a foil for racially shaming blacks through bolstering the Horatio Alger myth that, through hard work and effort, anyone can attain the American dream, and its inverse—that those who fail to grasp the American dream do so because of their own lack of effort.

One strand of the model minority myth purports that Asian Americans are a preternaturally smart race. This stereotype emerged in conversations I had with students when they explained what it meant to act black, Asian, or white. Interestingly, because *Asian* was the privileged unmarked category in this setting, it took some prodding before someone was able to explain to me what acting Asian meant. Maddie offered, “If you’re Asian you’re just like, if you’re Asian, you’re super smart-ish. You’re super smart, you’re Asian.” When I asked what it meant to act white, Jill, one of the few white

students in the upper grades, explained, “Like if you’re white, you’re like very proper, sit up straight.” Katrina, a Cambodian American girl, performed this notion of properness by speaking in a high nasal voice, and articulating her syllables, “Ahem, excuse me.” Jill also said, “Sometimes I act like ‘ghetto’ in quotes. So sometimes I’m black.”²³ Later on, she elaborated on this by saying in an awkward and unconvincing manner, “What makes you black? So like, ‘Yo, my man!’” Katrina, who grew up in North Philly and was more fluent in black vernacular English said with greater ease, “It’s like, ‘Yo shawty.’”

To these students, “acting black,” included using informal speech. Though sometimes students drew on black vernacular English to perform a particular brand of urbanity and coolness, it was more often performed in garish- and caricature-like ways that derided ghettoness. Drawing on mass media depictions, the social persona of someone from the ghetto was loud and argumentative, such as when an Asian girl wagged her finger at me while gyrating her neck and spoke in loud and irate tones. Although non-black students never explicitly linked ghettoness or blackness with being “dumb,” the notion that blacks are intellectually inferior disturbingly holds sway in American life and exists as part of racist ideologies about blackness.

This was made apparent in the April 2010 example of the Harvard Law School “racist e-mail controversy,” in which a student wrote the following text as a post-script to a conversation that took place over dinner:

I absolutely do not rule out the possibility that African Americans are, on average, genetically predisposed to be less intelligent. I could also obviously be convinced that by controlling for the right variables, we would see that they are, in fact, as intelligent as white people under the same circumstances. The fact is, some things

²³ For a fuller discussion of this, see chapter 5.

are genetic. [Hill 2010]

Although the law student's view—that it is possible that “African Americans are, on average, genetically predisposed to be less intelligent”—permeates social interactions and racial ideologies, it is rarely articulated in such forthright terms. However, by typifying that acting Asian meant being “super-smart,” one can deduce the inverse logic of this: If you're *not* Asian, you're *not* super-smart.²⁴

Devon, a fifth grader, summed up this point best when he critiqued the way in which the Asian model minority trope is used as ammunition to degrade the intelligence of blacks. During a lesson on Asian American history, I observed Teacher Tom, who is Vietnamese American, lead a discussion about racial stereotypes. I was impressed by his line of inquiry and by his ability to engage fifth graders in a sensitive topic. He explained to the class, “We make assumptions based on how people look. Stereotypes are when we make assumptions that are harmful to other people.” He then asked students for examples of stereotypes. Naya, a spritely African American girl with long braids, offered an example of a harmful stereotype, “I was walking down the street and someone said, ‘You're dumb because you're black.’” Teacher Tom entertained a few other examples of stereotypes from students before he said, “In my experience we all have thoughts that are harmful that are stereotypes, like, ‘You're Asian, so I think you're smart.’ Is that harmful?” he wondered aloud. Without skipping a beat, Devon, an African American boy, quickly responded, “It's harmful for un-Asian people.”

²⁴ Whiteness gains a pass on this because it is linked to being “very proper,” which is linked to other positive attributes including intellectual aptitude. More generally, white privilege means being conferred subjectivity, so that whiteness is less often reduced to stereotypes.

Perpetuating stereotypes about the supposedly natural intelligence, or hardworking nature of Asians has been argued to be harmful because it is dehumanizing and one-dimensional. But it is also harmful because it constructs black people as being intellectually deprived and lacking in work ethic. Moreover, the “model minority” is mobilized to place the blame on black individuals for conditions of poverty and structural racism. This serves as an erasure of the historical events and structural inequalities that have led to the contemporary condition of blackness. The list of “negative stuff” assigned to blacks—criminality, aesthetic undesirability, and intellectual inferiority—makes the experience of anti-black racism dissimilar to the kind of racism faced by Asians. Given these conditions, forging multiracial solidarity requires accounting for the discrepant histories between blacks and Asians in order to more fully appreciate the unequal ways in which different “people of color” are positioned within society and experience racism.

Difficulties of Being Multiracial Kin Folk if You’re Not Skin Folk

This section focuses on how society’s “negative stuff” about black people mediated social relations within the school. In this section, I discuss how anti-black sentiments expressed by some Asian parents hindered their children’s desire to pursue friendships with black students. Although the school “teaches [students] not to be racist,” as Sharon put it, and went to great lengths to foster students’ sense of belonging to a multiracial FACTS family, these efforts were undermined by these parents. Even if students surreptitiously skirted or sidelined their parents’ rules, it nevertheless structured social relations among students.

In the same conversation I had with Jillian in which she informed me, “[Asian parents] don’t want to put you in a school where there are like a lot of black people because they’re known for violence,” she further explained what she meant. “Your Asian parents will always tell you to go to a school where there are a lot more Asians. So it’s not really about the school or anything. It’s mostly about what kind of people, like, go to that school.” The school’s large Asian population, and relatively small black student population, then played into why some Asian parents wanted to send their children to FACTS. This may have been related to their children’s (or their own) previous experiences of being harassed because they were Asian, their discriminatory views, and the complex interplay between these things. Whatever the case may be, because FACTS is an Asian-majority school, it was an attractive alternative for some of them who were zoned for neighborhood schools that were majority Black.

In an interview I had with Teacher Tom about the racial dynamics among students, he told me, “There were racial tensions and I don’t think it was influenced on their own, but rather by families.” He explained by retelling the story of a black student in his class who asked why her Asian friend’s parents would not invite her over for a sleepover.

I had one black girl whose best friend is Asian ask me how come her parents don’t let me come over for sleepover but lets other Asian friends...I didn’t know how to answer her question. I could say, “Perhaps because your friend’s parents might have a different perspective on your community.” I can’t say, “Your friend’s parents are racist.” But how do we respond to those types of questions? Do we let it alone? Do we leave it alone and the girl resents certain communities? Or do we tackle it in a certain way? These are the beliefs that are presented, but are they just, are they right? I think the focus is sometimes we have to adopt our own opinions on what we think is right and wrong. But teachers at [FACTS] try to separate themselves by projecting their own perspectives.

Teacher Tom was not prepared to have this discussion with his student because he strongly suspected that racism underpinned the reasons for why the girl was not invited to her friend's house for sleepovers.

He struggled with the various ways he could have approached the situation, which included presenting a more sanitized view of her best friend's parents ("Perhaps because your friend's parents might have a different perspective on your community"); outright claims of racism ("Your friend's parents are racist"), which he did not feel comfortable doing; or ignore it ("Do we let it alone?"). He was concerned that "leav[ing] it alone" would result in the girl's "resent[ment of] certain communities," namely the Asian communities represented by the girl's best friend's parents. This concern reflects Teacher Tom's positionality as a Vietnamese American and the discomfiting reality that Asian families practiced racially exclusive tactics. In some instances, this prevented black students from socializing and creating deeper bonds with their Asian friends outside of school.

In a nutshell, the message that was being sent was that black students were tolerable as school friends, perhaps because not much could even be done to prevent this in a school that promoted these friendships, but the line was drawn when it came to bringing that friend home. And in my conversation with groups of Asian girls, the line was definitely drawn when it came to choosing a future husband. The girls who came from more conservative homes had parents who strictly expressed that they wanted their daughters to marry within their ethnicity. However, even the girls who came from homes that held more liberal views on race still expressed the sentiment: anyone, *except*, a black person.

While the details of the stories varied, the storyline remained achingly similar—black and Asian friendships were formed, an Asian parent hindered the further development of it, and the friendship was “never the same after that,” according to a teacher who told a similar story. Referring to another story similar in nature, Teacher Maya, the school’s music coordinator, said that the school “handled it well to say that we know that that happens in some families, but to say we don’t believe in that.” Although the school’s values encouraged students to continue to pursue these friendships, it was difficult for students to go against the wishes of their parents.

In general, the practice of going over a friend’s house was limited because students were geographically dispersed throughout the city. In addition to geographic distance, other reasons included having “overpro[ective] parents,” as Sharon put it, and apprehension over whether one’s house was presentable to guests. Despite this, there were instances in which students talked about what they did in their spare time and noted going over a friend’s house. For example, Lisa said, “With Lauren, I know her for a long time, so I go to her house and stuff and we plan stuff, like go out and stuff.” Though Lisa explained going over Lauren’s house as related to “know[ing] her for so long,” it is worth pointing out that both these girls are Asian (Lauren is of Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese ancestry, and Lisa is Cambodian). Indeed, it was rare to find instances in which friends of different races had gone over each other’s houses, particularly instances of black friends being invited over to an Asian household.

Blasian Futures

One of the few exceptions to this was the relationship between Jamir and Caleb—the classroom clowns with a sensitive side that I mentioned in earlier chapters. Their tightknit black-Asian friendship was evinced through Jamir having been over to Caleb’s house, and their hybrid self-identification as “Blasian” and “Blackanese.” As I chatted with them over lunch one day, knowing their love for basketball, I told them about a summer league that was hosted by my church in Chinatown. I told them how my husband, Stan, who was pushing 40 at the time, used to play in the league. I was ribbing on how he sometimes enjoyed tell stories of his glory days in college, like when he *once* dunked in a game. This became an ongoing point of connection between us, with Jamir regularly commenting on Stan’s ability to dunk.

I invited them to come out to some games that summer. Then, referring to how much time they spent together outside of school, Jamir responded, “We did a lot of stuff. We did a lot of stuff. I member I went to his grandma’s house.” “In South Philly?” I asked. “Yah, it was scary,” he told me. “Why was it scary?” I wondered. “I never been in South Philly before. And...I never been in South Philly before.” Sensing some hesitation and discomfort that went beyond being in an unfamiliar neighborhood, I listened a bit more intently. “South Philly, its nice right?” Caleb asked a bit nostalgically since he had recently moved to the suburbs, or what they referred to as “the bubble.” “Yah. I never been there and then, like, I was like, oh...” Though he was already speaking softly, Jamir’s speech became even quieter, more mumbled, and difficult to hear. The only word that I could make out during this time was the word “black.” Jamir then said that he wondered, “Like your grandma, what they gonna say? I went in

there...” He let out a big exhale and said, “I was terrified of them. Then his dad...I see his dad...he walked away.” “Were they okay about it?” I wanted to know. “Yah,” they both answered. Caleb added, “They don’t really care.” “His dad’s funny. His dad’s funny,” Jamir recounted, indicating that he received a friendlier reception than he initially expected.

It is telling that Jamir was anxious about what kind of reception he would get upon meeting Caleb’s grandma and dad. His feeling of being “terrified” was likely shaped by previous negative encounters, whether personally or through others’ experiences that conveyed the expectation that there was something to be feared. As communicated through Jamir’s muttering of the word “black,” the subtext was that there was something unusual about him (a black student) going over his friend’s (a Laotian student) house. The norm that Jamir was operating under was that these cross-racial friendships often did not traverse the boundaries of school. Understanding this, my question (“Were they okay about it?”) and the response (“They don’t really care”) was in reference to this cross-racial invitation and specifically to Jamir’s race. Though the phrase “they don’t *really* care” (italics added) communicated some hesitation, the fact that Jamir had been over Caleb’s house and received a friendly reception was still significant and out of the norm.

Every now and then over the course of our conversations, sometimes out of nowhere, the boys would refer back to the time Jamir went over to Caleb’s house. This event was often mentioned as a demonstration of the uniqueness of their friendship. Caleb and Jamir’s ongoing reference to having been over the other person’s house was not because this was a frequent occurrence. As far as I could tell it only happened once

or twice. Ever since Caleb moved outside of Philadelphia, he had to take the “E1” crosstown to the last stop, then a trolley, and then walk home. All in all, this took him at least an hour. The geographic distance hindered them from hanging out at each other’s homes more frequently. Instead, they often hung out at the Gallery Mall, located close to the school. The common reference to going over the other person’s house was one way, among others, of demonstrating the uniqueness of their cross-racial friendship. It contrasted them against the more “typical” interracial friendships at FACTS that remained confined within the category of school friends. Going over Caleb’s house was proof of the closeness of their friendship, and traversed a boundary that was not often crossed at FACTS because of some Asian parents’ anti-black discrimination. This exception to the rule simply underlines the more pervasive practice of excluding black students from social activities outside of the formal school setting.

Teacher Mel, at one point, brainstormed the idea of having an unstructured space where students could socialize with one another in informal ways. Realizing that interracial social opportunities were rare outside of school, and that this was an obstacle to the school’s goal of fostering a multiracial family, she floated this idea by Teacher Matt. Recapping their conversation to me, Teacher Mel, with a foreboding tone, said that he warned her that having unsupervised time, especially among the teens, might result in some “dangerous behavior” (i.e., the possibility of sexual activity). She said that Teacher Matt’s warning made her reconsider that particular idea, but she still thought there should be some outside school activity in which students of all races could come together and develop their friendship further.

To be clear, there were also instances that indicated Asian parents' view of black people in a positive light, albeit ambiguously since it specifically referred to black folks who performed middle classness. In a hallway conversation I had with April, a Chinese mom who had immigrated from Fujian and worked at a smoothie stand at Reading Terminal, we talked about high school options for her eldest child. She said that she heard from a Chinese teacher who worked at Central (a highly selective magnet high school in Philadelphia), that the school was in decline because it accepted a lot of *lao hei* (black people), which subsequently created a sense of chaos. When I pointed out to her that there were also *lao hei* at FACTS, which she had just unequivocally raved about, she said that the black students *here* were the “good” kind (*hao*), and the ones *there*, at Central, were the “bad” kind (*huai*). Upon talking to other Chinese immigrant moms, I learned that these understandings of “good” and “bad” blacks were typically predicated on class distinctions and values.

According to April, the black students in Central were *hen luan*—that is, were chaotic and disorderly. This phrase is often used to describe demonstrations and protests that lack control, proper order, and civility. In terms of its application to students, those who came off as disorderly and chaotic were assigned the ignoble classification of a “bad” black. When I spoke to another Chinese parent, I asked her how she felt about her child attending school with black students. She straightforwardly informed me that they were good blacks because they came from middle-class homes. “Good” blacks valued education, did well in school, and were well-mannered. These Asian parents, like some middle-class black parents and students in the school, created a distinction between “good” blacks and “bad” blacks which hinged upon classed styles and performances. In

so doing, they reinforced the idea of a multiracial FACTS family, but one that was constituted only through discursively folding in the “good” blacks (who successfully performed middle classness), and casting aside the “bad” blacks (who performed lower classness). Despite the fact that April herself worked at a smoothie stand, and her husband was a bus driver—that is, they worked in relatively low-paying, and low-status jobs—her vision of a multiracial FACTS family was decidedly middle classed and left little room for lower-class blackness.

And still, there were examples in which friendly relations existed between black and Asian parents. When I interviewed Faith, she spoke fondly about Maddie’s mom. She said that Maddie and her daughter had been friends since they were three or four years old and best friends in kindergarten. Even though language was a barrier since she spoke Fujianese, when Faith saw Maddie’s mom at a high school expo, she said, “[W]e gave each other a hug. We’ve known each other for almost ten years.” “It’s crazy,” she said reminiscently. During graduation when they saw one another, they exchanged a heartfelt embrace like old friends. Veena Das, writing about the complicated and fraught social arrangements that occurred when a Muslim woman and a Hindu man decided to marry in a volatile post-Partition context, she noted, “It carries within it the potential to unleash great violence—but also an opportunity for intimate aspirations to be realized by all who have to re-create their relations around the couple” (2010:378). In a similar sense, intimate friendships among FACTS students had the potential of creating wider, renewed sets of social relations among parents and others who were close to the students.

A Difference in “Communication Styles”

FACTS provides an *institutional* example of how to acknowledge the specific social experience of blackness and the “negative stuff” that is associated with this, while forging deep and intimate interracial solidarities. I have argued in other chapters that there are a number of school rituals that are designed to allow students and teachers to speak their specific truths and experiences. These stories highlight the different ways in which race is embodied and racism is dealt with among different people. These ethnographic examples contrast with reductive and one-dimensional notions of POC solidarity. This section focuses on how the school’s rituals allow teachers and leaders to be hyperaware and reflective of the “negative stuff” about black people that exists in broader society and to work toward not reproducing those beliefs in FACTS.

It is a widely cited educational statistic that in America black boys are disproportionately disciplined and over-represented in special education settings (cf. Blanchett 2006). Since the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty in the 1960s, culture of poverty explanations have permeated scholarly and popular discourse. In education, culture of poverty has taken the form of blaming poor black and Latino students for their low academic achievement. According to culture of poverty explanations, their disproportionate numbers in disciplinary and special educational settings are the result of the supposedly disorganized homes they come from, their penchant for violence, and an inability to delay gratification.

Indeed, these discourses are so widespread that one of my committee members queried about the relative absence of these discussions in my dissertation. I responded that these explanations were largely not used to talk about the disproportionate number of

black and Latino students who were involved in discipline, or their higher numbers in special education. In fact, documents and conversations with teachers indicated that they were aware of these issues, worked toward addressing them, and proffered alternative explanations to culture of poverty.

A handout presented at the November 2008 board meeting provided an analysis of disciplinary issues at the school. It stated: “In relation to the grade 4-7 group there is a significant disproportionate allocation of African American students who have been truant or suspended.” Truancy was defined as “at least 10 unexcused absences,” while suspensions were defined as “out of school suspensions” and did not include in-school suspensions or bus suspensions. The document further noted that truancy or suspensions were “disproportionately high when compared to the Asian population when looking at percent of population.” However, “the actual numbers the figures represent are low (7 students for truancy, 6 students for suspension),” and these figures did not “correlate with students who are not achieving according to test scores.” In other words, students who were truant or suspended were generally not low-achieving students. Also, the smaller black student population meant that a few students significantly skewed the statistics, and this was a possible explanation for the disproportionate percentage of truant or suspended black students. Though this was a possible explanation, the document also suggested, “[I]ssues of culturally responsive classroom practices for teachers working with African American students...need to be address [sic] in a number of ways.”

Instead of sweeping these statistics under the rug and chalking it up as being statistically insignificant, FACTS’ teachers and school leaders were highly reflective of the data, what this meant for their community, and how to not reproduce the pernicious

anti-black actions and sentiments that existed outside of its walls. Early on in my fieldwork I chatted with different teachers about the topic of my research. Teacher Ann, an Asian American woman, suggested that I focus on the difference in “communication styles” between black students and teachers. With a sense of crisis and urgency, she mentioned the over-referral of black students to special education as a possible focus for my research study. She said with a tight and pained look on her face, “There’s a problem.” With an edginess in her voice that I was unaccustomed to hearing, she continued to say, “There’s a problem with the way black students are feeling in the school that makes them feel like they’re not part of this community.” With widened eyes, she said that the school was “doing a great job with the Asian kids and making them feel part of the school, but not the black kids.”

Though this was Teacher Ann’s perception, all of the black, Latino, and white students at FACTS that I spoke with actually articulated a deep sense of community and belonging to the school. This was especially evident when students compared FACTS to schools they previously attended. One black student mentioned how, in his previous school, he was required to refer to the principal by the honorific term, *Officer*. He also suspected that when that school received funds, the principal pocketed the money. He contrasted this with FACTS by giving an example from a few years ago in which the school’s founding principal used money (perhaps, personal money) that she received to purchase supplies for students. While the details of the story were unclear to me, the point of these comparative cases was to highlight his impression that many schools are “selfish,” as he put it, but that FACTS was not. It cared about its students, *all* its students, and this was expressed in practical, and financial ways.

Teacher Ann’s theory that black students were over-referred because they “feel like they’re not part of this community” was simply an example of the way in which teachers at the school were highly reflective, and even self-critical. This openness to criticism was not uncommon among practitioners at FACTS whose devotion to its students and families meant that they were willing to entertain ideas that were uncomfortable to them, for the sake of fostering an even deeper, more intimate community.

As Teacher Ann continued to talk, she wondered why kids who had been with the school since kindergarten “all of a sudden had IEPs”²⁵ and were being labeled LD.²⁶ Rhetorically and sincerely, she asked why such a high proportion of black students were being referred to special education. She was clearly not interested in entertaining an answer that had to do with blaming the child. Theorizing in the moment, she offered up a second possibility—“communication style” Teacher Ann said. “I can be saying the same thing to two kids, but one kid hears it one way, and another kid hears it another way.”

Whether she knew it or not, by referring to a difference in “communication style,” Teacher Ann was reinforcing a long line of scholarship that countered culture of poverty explanations (cf. Heath 1981, 1982; Michaels 1981; Philips 1982). By identifying the problem as a mismatch between instructional styles and students’ performative styles, the problem did not lie in the supposed deficiencies of black students. The solution then had to do with teaching teachers how to read and interpretive students’ actions differently.

²⁵ An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is written for a child in need of instructional modifications and special services.

²⁶ *LD* refers to learning disabled.

Understanding the “Realities” of Students’ Lives

Keisha, a black mom that I interviewed also spoke to the difference in “communication style,” but referred to as learning to be “culturally competent” and understand the “realities” of students coming from “the public school system,” or “African American students who have serious other issues.” Keisha provided an example:

So if you have a kid for example, whose parents fight, they take care of themselves at home. They take care of the little ones. In the sixth grade or the fifth grade, allowed to do everything... You come in knowing that this kid has all that responsibility at home, who is the *woman* at home, the person in charge, and *you’re* directing that person. Like, ‘Why must I listen to you?’ You’re not my mom, you know? And that’s disrespect, that’s disrespect at [FACTS]. ‘How dare you talk to me like that?’ But it’s a cultural thing. Are you going to accept that? No, but there are ways to redirect rather than removal or referral, ya know? (emphasis added).

According to Keisha, black girls were seen as disrespectful if they exhibited qualities of bossiness.

This point was made manifest to me during a conversation I had with Michelle, an African American mother whose daughter used to attend FACTS. We were making small talk about the recent collapse of a Salvation Army store in Center City. She was referred to me by another parent, and was one of the few parents I spoke to who no longer attended FACTS. As we talked over the phone, I asked her why she no longer attended. She began to say, “The real reason...” and then corrected herself, saying, “I mean not the ‘real reason,’ but the reason...” She then talked about how she felt that there was a disconnect at the school, “not by the students at the school, but the teachers.”

Michelle said she felt like teachers at FACTS interpreted her daughter as being “bossy.” “She is like her mother,” she admitted. “I’ve had to work, run the home, and do all these things and that’s what she sees.” She explained that her daughter took on many of her own dispositions because she was a single mother that had to juggle it all. As a result, Michelle felt like her daughter’s assertive personality was interpreted as bossiness and that some teachers viewed this as disrespect.

Like Michelle, Keisha mentions how some students come into FACTS with heavy responsibilities like taking care of the home, and taking care of their younger siblings. Because of these responsibilities they are “the woman at home,” “allowed to do everything,” and accustomed to being in charge. Given this, when they are told what to do by a teacher, they may question why they have to listen to someone who is “not my mom.” This behavior then gets interpreted as a challenge to authority and as disrespectful.

Keisha gave another example of how different kids might respond differently to a teacher’s instruction.

For example...a teacher may give a directive to a kid, a Chinese kid. They’re upset, but the way they respond, may not communicate disrespect, ya know what I mean? Even if they’re disrespectful. But an African-American may, “Oh my gosh!” [in a loud outburst while throwing her arms up in the air] or throw a chair. But that’s the only response they know. Is it good? No. Should that response be encouraged? No. But there might be another way.

Keisha makes an important point here about how different behaviors, performed by different people, are interpreted as respectful or disrespectful. An African American students’ loud outburst and “throw[ing] a chair” is viewed as disrespectful, while other forms of behavior, performed, for example, by a “Chinese kid” may not be interpreted as

disrespectful, even if it is. While she notes that the response should not be encouraged, “that’s the only response they know,” and suggests, “there might be another way.”

Toward “Another Way”

Finding “another way” to address outbursts and behaviors like “throw[ing] a chair were used at FACTS. Dwight, Darrell, and Joel, the two African American boys, and one Puerto Rican boy mentioned earlier talked about their interactions with the school’s dean of students. Dwight was reminiscing about his earlier years at CMCS, and how having an older brother in the school and knowing his friends made him “cool.” Darrell then wistfully told me he missed the “old days” when he “used to get good grades all the time.” Since those days, his grades started slipping and he was “messin up in school.” Joel challenged Darrell’s revisionist memory in which he portrayed himself as a model student, reminding him, “You used to get infraction slips,” and informed me that if you get 10 slips, you get expelled. Joel then laughingly said, “I got it every day.” Darrell also commented that he got infractions every day, as if it were a point of camaraderie. Joel explained to me that your record clears at the end of the month, and with a bit of bravado, stated that he accumulated over 200 infractions over the course of the years. With calm disbelief, Dwight said, “I don’t believe it. 200 infraction slips?” Once again, Joel confirmed the number.

I myself questioned the exaggerated number and asked how it was possible that he didn’t get expelled. They talked about the previous dean and how “nice” she was. Instead of taking a zero tolerance approach, which has been documented to disproportionately punish black youth (cf. Fine and Smith 2001), Joel said the dean tried

to hear him out, “She was just like... ‘What did you do?’” Other students also mentioned to me how the current dean took similar approaches—that is, seeking to build relationships with FACTS’ students, rather than taking on the role of a police officer that criminalized them. One student said that the dean often had a friendly rapport with students and reenacted how she would address students with an enthusiastic, “Oh, yo, wassup?”

In my own interactions with Dean Smith, an African American woman in her thirties, she struck me as being extremely committed to the school’s students, easy to get along with, and a person who dug deeper to understand students more holistically. When we talked about her role in working with students who had disciplinary issues, she said, “I try to connect as best as I can,” and then also talked about her attempts to get parents, especially fathers, involved in the school. These provide examples of “another way” of addressing issues of discipline involving black students beyond a zero tolerance approach. These methods attempt to understand the “realities” of students’ lives, to work with those realities, and to keep them in intimate community.

Conclusion

Coalitional attempts to build multiracial solidarity often confront cleavages that reveal the strains that exist among people of color. Specifically, this country’s history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, de facto residential and school segregation, and the “negative stuff” in society about black people index the deeply entrenched and pervasive experiences of anti-blackness that are unlike the experiences of other minority groups. FACTS did not try to avoid or gloss over these discrepant histories, or the different ways

in which white supremacist racial regimes were experienced by students and teachers. Rather, they addressed the anti-blackness in broader society head on by proffering alternative explanations to culture of poverty, and using “another way,” a more relational way of addressing black students in the school.

CHAPTER 8
INSCRIBING NEW FUTURES

During the course of fieldwork and writing this dissertation, I was faced with a question that has been agonized over by many Philadelphian parents: What school should I send my kid to? This choice reflects many values—values not only having to do with instructional styles but also those concerning what kind of person you hope your child will one day become. As a Chinese American who grew up in the NYC public school system, I experienced firsthand the pains of being “different.” From the awkward stares I got when I brought in fried rice for lunch, or being told by my fifth grade teacher that immigrants should primarily identify as Americans, the implicit (if not explicit) message I received was that my cultural background was not as important or esteemed as that of dominant mainstream society. I wanted my children to grow up with a different kind of schooling experience—one in which they developed a healthy sense of belonging and ethnic pride. But along with this, I also wanted them to attend a racially and economically diverse school so they could learn how to relate well to others, and I wanted to instill in them a concern for social justice. I wanted all this in a tuition-free Philadelphia public school because of the value I have for urban public education.

My search naturally landed me at FACTS. If it weren't for the conflict of interest because I was writing about the school, and the long waiting list, it would have been the perfect place. At FACTS, my daughters' Chinese cultural background would have been healthily affirmed in a number of ways. Moreover, although the school was majority Asian, there was a considerable African American population, and some Latino students,

which meant that the school was not racially homogenous. So in addition to learning about their own histories and cultural backgrounds, my children would have developed a value for diversity, and a broad concern for social justice. It was, in many ways, everything I wanted in a school.

When Asian friends of mine, particularly those who were Chinese American, asked me what I thought about the school, I was unequivocal in my enthusiasm for FACTS. It was easy for me to explain how the school would be a “perfect place” for them as well. But I wondered if non-Asian friends of mine would feel similarly, after all, although FACTS sought to build multiracial solidarity, the school articulated a special commitment to Chinatown and Asian American communities. Would these goals seem incommensurate to them? Clearly, after reading my dissertation, it did not. It both surprised me, and didn’t, when friends who were of other ethnicities and races were just as enthralled by FACTS’ vision and what it has managed to achieve. Friends with a deep commitment to racial justice, and black liberation said they were moved by what a beautiful and hopeful place FACTS is, and how they wanted to send their kids to the school as well.

In the FACTS context, the school’s attempt to uplift Asian Americans, *and* to cultivate intimate cross-racial relations were parts of its vision to enact a more liberating, and just future society. This dissertation argues that it advanced such a future through its incredibly rich and intentional rituals that allowed members to express embodied differences among people of color *as the basis for* building intimate interracial solidarities.

Beyond “PC”

Political correctness today is the surest way of closing down the conversation and retreating to the status quo. It prevents us from having the kinds of serious conversations about race and difference that are necessary for creating a more just and equitable future. Conversely, uncomfortable conversations about embodied and irreducible difference, however awkward, stumbling, inchoate, or unpolished, can cultivate greater understanding among “others.” FACTS’ practice of bearing witness to difference provides a promising alternative to PC discussions about race, to the common attempt to forge solidarity through universal abstractions (like references to our common humanity), and even to attempts at securing recognition, in the strict sense of the term. These practices were not intended to garner formal and public recognition of a particular group. Instead, they were intended to create a different pattern of relations among groups who, in broader society, were encumbered with conflict and contention. This was a form of prefigurative politics—an example of what convivial race relations could look like, and a small, but significant way of constructing a different kind of future.

Bearing witness to difference was often transformative for both speakers and listeners. This was, in large part, because the school had cultivated in students a strong sense of being part of a multiracial family. Creating the feeling of kinship among school members was accomplished through disciplining everyday habits so that students regularly practiced the dispositions of engaged listening, care, and intimacy. The motto, “We are what we repeatedly do,” which hung on the front of a teacher’s door, was assiduously put into practice. This occurred most frequently in the daily ritual of morning meeting in which teachers and students policed each other’s behaviors so they

fell in line with the value of treating each other with care and attention. An inappropriate laugh was expected to be stifled. Making eye contact showed that one was engaged. And disclosing the most vulnerable aspects of one's life showed the level of trust that was present, even if it teetered on the edge of confessional. These rituals of intimacy included telling personal stories of racism, loss, love, friendship, and everyday life. Whether they specifically addressed issues of difference or not, the end result was fostering intimacy among students who were differently positioned within society. These forms of bearing witness were profound ways of learning about otherness and of reconceiving the object as subject.

As scholars warn, to the extent that people-of-color solidarity represents all marginalized groups as equally oppressed, is the extent to which multiracial solidarity will fail, precisely because it obscures the singular condition of (anti-) blackness in America (Sexton 2010). Bearing witness, in its fullest and most robust form, prevents against this because it allows people to speak their truth, and through this, the *specific* structural position of blackness in America is made apparent. This allows for a truly liberational form of multiracial solidarity that accounts for the discrepant histories among people of color, and the way in which blackness serves as the paradigmatic example of social suffering.

As this pertains to identity-based schools, Afrocentric charter schools have often pointed to the unique experience of anti-blackness in America, and indeed elsewhere, as proof of its necessity. These schools are intended to fight against the widespread denigration of blackness through providing students with life- and identity-affirming messages. Afrocentric schools, along with other charter schools, have often been

critiqued for turning back the hands of progress by reinstating racial segregation. These schools are also often evaluated as “failing” because they do not meet academic measures of success. However, in light of our discussion, other barometers of success warrant consideration, such as the school’s ability to teach black students to love themselves and counteract the experience of living on the “margins of society and margins of humanity” (Smalls 2015). Some scholars who came of age in the era of desegregation have wed notions of racial equality to racial integration. But the prevalence and perdurance of black suffering calls into question assertions that integrating black youth into majority-white schools are *the* best solution, even if this course of action provides for additional resources. I am not suggesting that resources are unnecessary, for it is certainly an important piece of advancing racial justice. But so much of the scholarly discourse in education about what’s good for black youth boils down to test scores, or how integrated the school is. I simply mean to open up the conversation in terms of how we evaluate the success of schools that serve black students by including in the mix the ability of schools to teach black youth how to survive and thrive in this world.

Future Research

In this dissertation, I discussed how a number of the school’s black families repurposed culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to meet their professional class aspirations. The school’s focus on Asian, particularly Chinese cultural practices, was an attempt to right the historical wrongs dealt to a national minority group. However, the rising value of Chineseness in today’s global market has meant that CRP can serve other

purposes as well. One need only casually surf news websites to be bombarded with a litany of articles about China's growing power. Headlines such as "CHINA'S GLOBAL AMBITIONS," "AT GLOBAL ECONOMIC GATHERING, U.S. PRIMACY IS SEEN AS EBBING," and "THE WORLD ACCORDING TO CHINA," all chronicle the unabated global influence of China today. According to one of these articles, "China's foreign investments grew nearly tenfold from 2005 to 2013, helping it win allies, increase trade and secure oil and other natural resources" (Aisch, Keller, and Lai 2015). The unparalleled scope of "overseas spending has helped it displace the United States and Europe as the leading financial power in large parts of the developing world" (Aisch, Keller, and Lai 2015). Because of the current (and likely future) prominence that China enjoys on the world stage, learning the language and having cultural familiarity with all things Chinese better positions students to achieve career success. There is then a growing desire among parents of various races and ethnicities to provide their children with the kind of Chinese language and cultural training that will give them a leg up in this new global economy.

What then are the implications of this for future research? Of central importance is learning if and how CRP is being repurposed from a pedagogical approach rooted in the advancement of social justice for the *collective* good, to one that advances social mobility for the *individual*. My main concerns are, first of all, that individual social mobility has come to represent *the* goal of American education, and secondly, what this portends for the future of acting collectively for social change. Nearly two decades ago, Labaree (1997:39) presciently articulated the "growing domination of the social mobility goal" in American education that rendered less significant the goal of democratic equality that teaches young people how to be "good" citizens. Democratic equality, as a goal,

teaches civic-mindedness, a concern for social equality, and the power to act collectively to effect change. Social mobility, as a goal, reshapes education as a commodity for personal advancement (Labaree 1997:42).

While these changes are cause for concern, the fact that black families in my study ranging from poor to lower middle class, and families across the people-of-color racial spectrum were repurposing these goals further complicates things. To put it bluntly, the argument that they were coopting CRP to maintain their race and class privilege does not apply here. The fact of the matter is, for many of these families, their children were on their way to becoming one of the first (if not *the* first) in their family to go to college. Don't they have a right to improve their life chances? Some educational scholars certainly think so. These scholars, who have a deep commitment to issues of justice, have argued that not only is it their right, but that equipping students of color with the new culture of power allows them access to opportunity structures that were hitherto closed off to them (e.g., Paris and Alim 2014:89). This, in a way, can be seen as advancing social equality.

And yet, the mode of achieving this form of social equality (if one accepts it as such) is nevertheless fraught. It raises the gnawing question of whether social equality should now be defined incrementally—as individuals breaking through structural barriers one person at a time. Should we accept that individual social mobility is the reigning goal of American education and work within those limits, or should we hold out hope for something else—something that creates change, not for the few but for the many? In a contemporary context in which both education and culture are so commodified, can CRP still achieve its promise of advancing group rights, or is it, to be dramatic, doomed to the

fate of commodification for individual gain? This remains an open-ended question that requires further research.

Another strand of research could focus on how FACTS friendships are reconfiguring (or not) social relations among family members, neighborhood friends, and other social circles more broadly. Because my research question focused more on the strategies used to mollify the potential tension that emerged from the school's dual goals, this was a lesser focus of my study. Nevertheless, my research pointed to some promising aspects of this, such as when a black mom talked about her daughter's longtime friendship with a Chinese American girl and how this cultivated fondness between her and the girl's mom. Also, Jamir talked about how his friendship with Caleb required his friends outside of school, who were mostly African American, to accept Caleb because, as he said, "They don't accept [Caleb], they don't accept me." Conversely, some Asian parents remained obstinate to the school's message and, in fact, sent the opposite message by restricting friendships with black students. This strand of research would attempt to understand how widespread are the social effects of attempting to build interracial solidarity among youth.

Finally, a strand of research could be longitudinal to understand how students, in the long-term, shape their life decisions based on their schooling experiences. I argued that students and parents were repurposing a social justice-oriented curricular approach to meet their class-based aspirations. I presented this as worrisome because it indexes the dominance of individual social mobility as the reigning purpose of education today. And yet, certainly people's strivings are more fluid and less logical than what is articulated in the moment. My findings, admittedly, only provide a snapshot of their rationalizations at

a moment in time, and does not account for how such an education reshapes their life decisions moving forward. Future research could provide greater nuance of the different ways in which people straddle between the necessities of everyday life in a capitalist world system, and cultivating ideals of equality, pluralism, republicanism, and civic duty.

What Can Educators and Activists Get Out of This?

I started out my career in education brimming with the hope and excitement of transforming schooling for marginalized students. I was armed with plans to implement the things I learned from my undergraduate methods courses, especially culturally relevant pedagogy. I felt ready to change the world. Almost immediately, I was faced with a number of questions I hadn't anticipated. Which cultures should I present? What aspects of those cultures should I focus on? How would students that didn't come from those cultural backgrounds feel? I was well intentioned, but ultimately my inexperience, resulted in some pretty superficial attempts at doing multicultural education. There was a growing disquieting sense that, through my instructional practices, I was essentializing culture (though I didn't have the language to describe it as such then). Worst yet, the students for whom the lesson was intended to be relevant to, didn't seem particularly engaged.

The impetus for this study comes out of a desire to help young educators think through the thornier aspects of this social justice-oriented instructional approach. When I began learning more about FACTS, I recall emphatically thinking, *Where was this school when I was a novice teacher?!* It embodied the values that I thought were critical for young people of color to possess, namely, an affirmation of their identity and an

engagement in others who were unlike themselves. The school's rich practices toward advancing these goals show how complicated CRP actually is—practices that too often are assumed to be self-evident. In *FACTS*, young educators can find productive and generative practices to be modeled after.

Despite how some people who are most invested in the school may read this dissertation, I have always intended it to be largely read as an example of what *to do*. But in keeping with my role as an ethnographer, it also presents the surprising ways in which the most well thought out plans are subject to recalibration by agential beings. Even this latter point is meant to be less of a pointed criticism, and more of a commentary on the hyper-commodified contemporary life that we live in today that everything seems subject to commodification, not least of which are education and culture. In this context, what hope is there of promoting understandings of marginalized cultures for the purpose of advancing justice?

FACTS itself provides a partial answer to the very entangled questions it raises. While it is difficult to not be influenced by today's zeitgeist of individualism, the school envisioned and enacted a different kind of ethic. Through its focus on community, collective action, and family, the school undoubtedly counteracted the tide of individual social mobility. This was apparent in the many students who relayed to me the simple, but powerful message that the school taught them to care about others. Activism begins with the ability to even imagine an alternative to the present condition. The founding of the school and the education it provides furthers the vision of a more socially just tomorrow rooted in equity-based principles and “the greater good” that challenges the spirit of individualism that defines our period. By inculcating in the next generation an

ability to think beyond themselves, this relatively small school was doing significant work in forging toward a different vision of tomorrow. The dominance of individual social mobility and racial tensions are neither primordial, nor a certain fate. The school's very existence is a solid encouragement that what may define us today does not necessarily define our tomorrow.

Likewise, FACTS offers help to activists of multiracial progressive politics, particularly in its practice of bearing witness to difference and the various rituals used to construct multiracial kinship. It is important to keep in mind the words of the school's black teachers and parents who intimated to the discrepant histories that exist among people of color and the notion that "blacks are still a group that is hated so much in this country." In attempts to advance racial justice, advocates of people-of-color solidarity are faced with the responsibility of addressing how people are differentially structured within racial schemes. Organizations with a special commitment to a particular group must also account for the unique history, extent, and depth of black suffering. Only in this way can we hope to better understand the totality of racial logics. The possibilities of what multiracial solidarity can accomplish remains an open-ended question, which is not to say that it is a blank canvas, as much as a palimpsest that provides traces of the past, even as we try to inscribe a different future.

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