Smartness as cultural wealth: an AsianCrit counterstory

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Asians have been defined by a range of negative and positive images that include the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, and the model minority. However, the negative images have been slowly and robustly replaced with ones that portray Asian Americans as high achievers, smart, and a model – especially when compared to other students of color. For many Asian American students, 'smartness' as a cultural practice and an imposed attribute has become synonymous with whiteness – impacting their academic, social, cultural, and language identities. Utilizing reflexive ethnography, I share what I name 'cultural wealth as smartness' as a Vietnamese refugee student growing up in a predominantly white community and the cultural capital gained and lost as a result. This article provides a counter-narrative to the Asian American experience and the deficit assumptions imposed upon immigrant families in the US.

Smartness as cultural wealth: an AsianCrit counter-story

I grew up in the suburbs of Virginia in schools where I was one of very few Asian students in a racialized social context of black and white. Recognizing the pervasiveness of dominant culture and the power of cultural assimilation as a means of success, I learned what it meant to be considered smart. Through the power of language and the acquisition of English, I eventually learned how to use 'smartness' to my advantage. By the time I graduated high school, I exemplified smartness within and outside my cultural community, or so I thought. However, when examined critically, smartness has been redefined by scholars to include more than just intelligence or academic achievement that is obtained. Instead, smartness has been referred to as a cultural practice – one that must be seen as a 'tool of control and social positioning' (Hatt 2012). In her study of one kindergarten classroom, Hatt (2012) describes how smartness is 'outside students – culturally produced – before moving through students as spoken discourse and embodied practice' (5).

As a young adult, I believed that smartness came from education – a gift that I embraced with both arms. It is ironic that although education was the force that pulled my family out of poverty, it was a privilege I never fully understood I had until after my first trip back to Vietnam. As a college student, I traveled back to the war-torn country we fled in 1978. On that visit, I learned my most important life lesson from nothing more than a bar of Dial soap. Upon arrival at my grandmother's modest 400-square foot home that was occupied by six people, I was struck by a reality I had been spared. This dwelling had mud floors, small cots for sleeping, one hole in the ground that was identified as the bathroom, and a large barrel filled with water was used for bathing. However, located on the right side of the house was what looked like a modern work of art – numerous rows of perfectly positioned and methodically

stacked bars of Dial soap protected by its original brown and yellow packaging. This soap was sent by my family in care packages over fifteen years. Amidst a backdrop of destitution and desperation, this soap was left untouched and preserved like a work of art, a purposeful expression of creativity. When asked why they were never used, my grandmother told me that the sweet clean scent of this soap allowed them to escape their daily realities of poverty, missed opportunities, and dependency. Outside of this cultural context, one could argue that to preserve soap in this way would not be a smart practice.

Leonardo and Broderick (2011) in their examination of whiteness and smartness state, 'whites and smart people are only real insofar as social institutions like education … recognize bodies as white and certain people as smart. Historically and materially, these ideologies have operated not in isolation from one another, but as inextricably intertwined systems of oppression and exclusion' (2226). Overwhelmingly, ways of speaking, behaving, and funds of knowledge most closely aligned with being white and/or wealthy are framed as smart in schools (Hatt 2012). Rarely has it been asked what happens when students of color, particularly those from immigrant communities, begin to encounter these beliefs and experience dissonance as a result. They can be faced with complicated choices such as resistance or, worse, internalization of the beliefs that denigrate their families and home communities.

How can smartness be understood within Asian immigrant communities? This identity –both 'Asian' and 'immigrant' complicates notions of what smartness means in the US context. Narratives equating Asian-*ness* with high achieving *model minorities*, or 'smart' in its most traditional forms, permeate the educational landscape yet become muddled at best when considering the diversity within the Asian community. Within this one pan-ethnic label, the richness of individual cultural differences is ignored and the experiences of Asians who fail to live up to this label. Experiences shared by diverse ethnic communities are lumped together and generalized. Asian Americans maintain a duality of identity – one as 'model minority' and the other as 'perpetual foreigner' (Kim 1999; Tuan 1998). What are the consequences for Asian students, particularly those from newly arrived immigrant communities, when smartness and whiteness are intertwined as forms of oppression? In this article, I first contextualize smartness for Asian communities, as they have been traditionally understood. Then, I historicize and problematize what it means to be a model minority and to have an honorary status. Lastly, I use Critical Race Theory (CRT), specifically AsianCrit, to present a counter-narrative that asserts smartness as cultural wealth within one Vietnamese immigrant community.

CRT has been applied within educational domains to challenge dominant paradigms, center race and racism, critique deficit thinking and stereotypical thinking about race, and legitimize the educational experiences specifically of students of color within a broader context (Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Smith-Maddox and Solórzano 2002; Solórzano and Bernal 2001). Asian scholars complicate the ways in which Asian Americans have been racialized within a broader social, political, and structural position (Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante 2009). Thus, CRT has been offered as a framework to counter traditional constructions of Asian Americans and as a way to honor the knowledge, values, and skills each community brings (Buenavista 2010; Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante 2009). Thus, the purpose of this article is to reframe smartness as cultural wealth using select narratives from my personal experiences as examples. This counter-narrative serves to provide an example of how Asian immigrant experiences abound in cultural wealth and can challenge traditional notions of smartness.

Contextualizing smartness

According to Yu (2006), 'Asians are arguably the least homogeneous of all racial groups and Asian Americans possess an unusually wide range of social characteristics marked by diverse ethnic, social class, and immigrant experiences' (327). With over 33 different Asian languages spoken by 10 million Asian Americans, this population remains distinctly heterogeneous (Asian Pacific American Legal Center [APALC] 2011).

Despite the overwhelming evidence that the educational experiences of Asian American students are diverse, particularly within subpopulations of Southeast Asian communities (Museus 2009; Teranishi 2007), the stories of individual struggles are less visible. In this way, and within the broader educational

discourse, the experiences within individual Asian communities continue to become marginalized (Wu 2002).

Smartness as constructed in schools and by teachers is harmful for racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized students (Hatt 2007, 2012). Hatt (2012) states, 'Hence, smartness becomes largely about possessing the cultural capital most valued by the teacher … [Smartness] teaches us about our academic identities by answering the question, "Do I have something worth saying?" "Do I have authority in this context?" and "How should I behave?"' (19). With popularized portrayals of Asians as high achieving and successful when compared to other racial minorities, coupled with being 'well-behaved,' and 'docile' in the school context, smartness for Asian Americans has become normalized and expected. This article asks the questions: What is lost in the process for Asian students? How are the ways of being and knowing by their parents and grandparents devalued under the guise of the model minority?

To counter the single model minority narrative, AsianCrit scholars acknowledge the diverse experiences of Asian communities regarding racialization processes, discrimination, representation, history, and politics. Thus, AsianCrit has been used to address the multiple layers of racism and forms of subordination within this community of diverse people. Using the lens of AsianCrit, I offer a counter-narrative to the model minority construction of smartness and its relationship to whiteness. Specifically, a counter-narrative, or form of counter story telling (Solórzano and Yosso 2002), is used to push against the popularized Asian American experience.

Historicizing model minority

In William Petersen's 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article 'Success Story, Japanese-American Style,' Asians first became characterized as a model minority. In 2012, the Pew Research Center published the 'The Rise of Asian Americans,' an article which included both census data and social trend polling of the six largest Asian-American ethnicities – Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese. This report stated that, 'Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States' (1). Despite arguments from Asian American scholars and advocates who problematize this oversimplification of Asian American experiences, reports that showcase the achievements of this group work to cement the myth of Asians as a model minority (Hartlep 2013). Over the past 50 years of research, the inclusion of Asian Americans in debates about race has usually been framed in the context of their high achievement, or smartness.

While the image of Asian Americans has been transformed into the popularized model minority, this construction was not always prevalent. Historically, Asian students experienced school while negotiating both negative and positive generalized representations that have been created and maintained by the media (Spring 2004). These dominant images include the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, and the gook (Lee 1999). However, these images have been slowly and robustly replaced with ones that portray Asian Americans as high achievers, smart, and a model, especially when compared to other students of color (Sakamoto, Takei, and Woo 2012). Some argue that this has been used to devalue the experiences of other racial and ethnic groups (Takagi 1998). As the media shaped new narratives, 'Asian' became less associated as the 'servile Asian worker, an opium abuser, or an immigrant who would eventually overrun the US labor market' (Spring 2004, 68), and synonymous with 'smartness' and constructions of 'model minority,' 'model student,' and even as 'honorary whites' (Liu 1998).

Asian as model minority creates one collective identity for numerous and diverse ethnic groups with complex histories (Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante 2009). In fact, there is growing evidence that highlights the struggles within particular Southeast Asian communities that include Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Filipinos (Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante 2009; Okamura and Agbayani 1997; Teranishi 2007). Ignoring these groups dismisses the unique and varied histories, struggles, languages, pathways of immigration, and educational experiences across the Asian diaspora and succeeds in the marginalization of the Asian American experience (Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante 2009; Escueta and O'Brien 1995; Fadiman 1997; Su 2009). The overall

expectation of Asian American students to succeed ignores the diversity of successes and failures of diverse communities by creating an image of sameness (Lee 2009; Sakamoto, Takei, and Woo 2012). This collective identity of Asians as model, 'smart,' or 'successful' works to create one narrative of the Asian American experience (Hartlep 2013; Hune and Chan 2000), while misrepresenting and dehumanizing Asian Americans in the process.

Honorary status

Socially positioned above other communities of color for educational success, Asian students are still considered to be the highest achieving and most easily accepted into the mainstream (Lee 2001; Li and Wang 2008). Research has shown that Asian students often adapt academic, behavioral, and social patterns of their white peers in order to achieve success (Lee, 1999; Koshy 2001). Further research has shown that Asian students have equated 'smartness' with 'whiteness' by changing their physical appearances and choosing white friends over African Americans in their schools (Quach, Jo, and Urrieta 2009). In a memoir that offers another perspective, Eric Liu (1998) writes:

> I never asked to be white. I am not literally white. That is, I do not have white skin or white ancestors. I have yellow skin and yellow ancestors, hundreds of generations of them. But like so many other Asian Americans of the second generation, I find myself now the bearer of a strange new status: white, by acclamation. Thus it is that I have been described as an 'honorary white', by other whites, and as a 'banana' by other Asians … to the extent that I have moved away from the periphery and toward the center of American life, I have become white inside. (34)

What Liu (1998) writes about is a common experience for those Asian Americans who learn to negotiate the cultural journey from *Asian* to *American*. When one is not born as a member of the dominant group, one can gain or access the knowledge needed to participate in the culture of power, which Delpit (1996) explains as the culture and language within schools and society that is seen as normal and therefore privileged. According to Delpit, there are five tenets to the culture of power that include: (1) Issues of power are enacted in classrooms; (2) There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a 'culture of power'; (3) The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power; (4) If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier; and (5) Those with power are frequently least aware of or least willing to acknowledge its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (Delpit 1996, 289). Thus, schools have been long argued as the transformative spaces for students from Communities of Color – as formal schooling is where much of these knowledges can be accessed (Yosso 2005). For Liu (1998) and many other Asian Americans, becoming members as 'honorary whites' meant a negotiation of not only place but space. To gain such status, Asians participate in a dance of cultural and linguistic identity that often results in the loss of heritage language and culture (Kouritzin 1999). Thus, to succeed, one must acquire the different forms of linguistic, social, and cultural capital that is valued, possessed, and legitimated by upper and middle class members of the dominant culture (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Researchers have long used access to cultural capital to explain academic and social differences within Communities of Color (Yosso 2005). For those who 'lack' the valued cultural and social capital needed for mobility in this society, education becomes the beacon of hope. Through formal education, students can acquire the necessary capital to successfully participate in school. Thus, for Asian Americans, access to education means access to the cultural capital of the dominant culture needed to solidify the Asian American success story narrative popularized by media (Takagi 1998) and manifested in school practices (Hartlep 2013; Li and Wang 2008). For many Asian American students, 'smartness' as a cultural practice and an imposed attribute has become synonymous with whiteness while impacting their academic, social, cultural, and language identities (Liu 1998). That is, for some students from specific communities, this knowledge is more accessible than for others. For Asian Americans, high academic achievement has been often used to compare the deficiencies of other racial groups.

While the framing of 'Asian as smart' has helped catapult this racialized minority to what Wu (2002) refers to as 'honorary whites,' researchers have found the impact of this to be negative on cultural

and ethnic identities (Tuan 1998). This 'positive' stereotype presents an alternative to the original construction of the Asian American and has been successful in creating great racial tensions among African Americans and Latina/os. Consequently, it has been used as a tool to criticize low-achieving minority students (Spring 2004).

Other researchers have provided evidence that Asians have been the victims of racial micro-aggressions through assaults on their identity by the changing of their ethnic names to, 'ones Americans can pronounce' (Kohli and Solórzano 2012). In a study of 41 participants who were mostly female and Asian American and Latina, the researchers found that this act of racial micro-aggression affected the participants negatively and had a long-term impact. Participants in the study internalized this racism by feeling shame, rejecting their language and culture, and struggling with their identity as adolescents and young adults. According to Kohli and Solórzano (2012), it 'subtly reinforces a hierarchy of non-white inferiority' (455) and is the most dangerous when students of color begin to doubt their self-worth in this society. Even with an elevated status of being successful and with attempts to anglicize Asian Americans by renaming children in school at a young age, some argue that this community is still considered 'perpetual foreigners' with laws and educational policies that until recently prevented them from gaining access to the same education as their mainstream peers (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007).

Critical race theory

Solórzano (1998) explains, 'critical race theory in education challenges the traditional claims of the educational system and its institutions to objectivity, meritocracy, color and gender blind- ness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity' (122). Many scholars have used CRT as an important theoretical and methodological tool to understand and explain the experiences of Communities of Color (Ladson-Billings 1995, 2006; Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann 2002). Within education, CRT has been used to challenge existing dominant ideologies and validate the rich, diverse, experiences of communities that have been historically silenced (Solórzano 1997, 1998). CRT has been a powerful tool in centering voices from the margins as a way to empower and transform experiences.

Although CRT has made a great contribution in advancing and deepening racial conversations and understandings, many scholars have critiqued CRT for failing to recognize non-black minorities within this body of work. With much needed emphasis on expanding our understanding of racism and oppression beyond the black/white binary in the US, various subgroups within CRT have emerged and expanded to include LatCrit, AsianCrit, TribalCrit, FemCrit, QueerCrit, and even WhiteCrit (Brayboy 2005; Wing 2003 Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Each of these groups emphasizes the unique experiences and subject positions inherent within their individual communities to work against oppression while recognizing the multiplicity of lenses and identities that exist from which to achieve this work. While some communities share similar experiences on issues related to the particularities of immigration, language rights, citizenships, and discrimination based on national origin or accent (Delgado and Stefancic 2012), each branch of CRT centers the lives and experiences of particular groups while addressing racism and oppressive forces specific to that population.

CRT has been a useful tool in the critique of deficit models of thinking (Smith-Maddox and Solórzano 2002). Specifically, in education, it has been used to challenge or unlearn stereotypical understandings about race and racial inequities. Researchers support the need to use CRT to challenge current dominant discourse – specifically those that frame Asian Americans as model minority within educational landscape (Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante 2009; Teranishi 2007). The use of CRT provides an alternative framework that enables researchers to center 'Outsider' (Hill Collins 1986), 'mestiza' (Anzaldúa 1987), or 'transgressive knowledges' (hooks 1994). Writings and conversations in AsianCrit emerged in the early 1990s among Asian American scholars in the field of law (Matsuda 1987) and continue to enrich and empower the voices of Asians in the US by using narratives as an effective tool for social change. AsianCrit scholars have tried to uncover racist structures in the legal system and helped to utilize the legal system to bring justice for subordinated and oppressed people of Asian descent (Matsuda 1987).

Reframing smartness

Smartness for the Asian immigrant is often translated as high academic achievement, good grades, and success [defined broadly] in school. According to Hatt (2012), smartness is culturally produced and is:

> … made real through discourse and tangible artifacts such as grades, standardized test scores, entrée to gifted programs, and academic credentials. Such artifacts become connected to and underlie students' academic identities, influencing students' perceptions of themselves and their own abilities over time. (Hatt 2012, 455)

For communities of color, particularly within the Asian immigrant experience, collecting these artifacts requires a kind of smartness that cannot be acquired through the study of books alone. What is often dismissed is the knowledge that is possessed by only specific communities that is necessary to achieve what it means to be 'smart' in the US educational context. These systems can include benign examples such as manifestations of dress, social conduct, modes of transportation, access to reference materials, ways of speaking, or participation of parents through volunteering for example. Together, the navigating of these systems requires a specific kind of knowledge that immigrant families often do not have access to, knowledge that is implicit to most with privilege, but has to be explicitly learned by outsiders. This knowledge, or forms of capital, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1989), as traditionally discussed can exist in three forms.

> … in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural good (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments machines, etc.), … and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital in which it is presumed to guarantee. (47)

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) assert that within the US mainstream, the upper- and middle-class members of dominant culture possess the forms of capital that are most valued.

Thus, having valued cultural capital usually implies that there is an advantage to be had or there is some form of advancement opportunity for those who possess it. Despite the argument that cultural capital implies that only high status culture is relevant in these discussions, Prudence Carter (2003) asserts that what matters is the relative value of that cultural knowledge – which is dependent on the context. In a study of immigrant status on kindergarten students, Lee and Kao (2009) suggest that immigrants are not aware of what is or is not considered high status. Even if immigrants, for example, have high status cultural capital, such knowledge may not be as significant unless it is acknowledged or recognized by 'gatekeepers' such as teachers. For example, students who are functionally literate and proficient in multiple languages but struggle with English, do not possess the high status, therefore rendering their multilingualism insignificant within the space of a US classroom. They assert, '… having high-status cultural capital that is not recognizable to gatekeepers does not accrue benefits to the holder' (204).

Yosso (2005) explains that within the context of social inequality and schooling, Bourdieu's theoretical insights regarding cultural capital can be reinterpreted as a way to explain the great differences in academic achievement between white students and students of color. For white students, the language of instruction, standard form of English, modes of speech, interaction with peers and teachers, or pedagogical tools used to teach them are aligned with what they know and are familiar with (Delpit 1996; Gay 2002). These students navigate school without the same challenges that their non-white peers face. Specifically, some researchers argue that for *most* students of color, limited access to these forms of capital can create cultural dissonance that can manifest itself as negative social outcomes or low academic achievement (Sirin and Ryce 2009; Valdés 1996; Valenzuela 1999). Some learn neither the native or second language well enough to perform at high levels and drop out while some experience subtractive rather than additive bilingualism - learning English at the cost of their native language, culture, and familial relationships (Fillmore 2000; Kouritzin 1999).

Other scholars, however, have criticized the inherent assumption that students of color somehow lack the cultural capital necessary to succeed in school. The framing of students of color as somehow 'lacking,' 'deficient,' or 'culturally disadvantaged,' only perpetuates deficit models of thinking (González

2005; Trueba 1988; Valencia 1997). Yes, students who are a part of the mainstream have privilege and certain advantages over their non-white peers. However, students from culturally-rich, diverse communities, do not have less knowledge (or capital), it is just that the forms they possess are not recognized or valued by gatekeepers. For students 'in the margins,' school becomes a space where students have to learn to navigate in order to achieve success.

In the context of education, re-examining the assets that students from diverse backgrounds bring to school from their homes and communities has the potential to transform the process of schooling (Moll 1992). To challenge the ways in which we view or legitimize traditional forms of cultural capital, or the construction of smartness of Asian Americans for example, I offer a counter narrative of the Asian American experience through a personal lens that has been informed by my experiences within US schools.

Yosso (2005) offers an alternative discussion of capital framed as *community cultural wealth*. Building on a body of work (see Auerbach 2002; Bernal 2002 , Solórzano and Bernal 2001), Yosso (2005) defines community cultural wealth as, '… an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts of Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression' (77). Based on a large body of work, Yosso (2005) identifies at least six different forms of capital described as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. Understanding how these intersect to form community cultural wealth validates the lived experiences of different communities of color. These forms of cultural wealth provide a counter definition to traditional notions of cultural capital and work against the stereotypical deficit views of communities of color. They focus on the strengths and possibilities of communities of color.

Smartness as cultural wealth

In the following narratives, I present examples carved from my experience that is later analyzed using Yosso's Community Culture of Wealth framework (2005). I offer these three snapshots as a way to name or legitimate smartness as cultural wealth. When framed as cultural wealth in the forms of what Yosso describes as aspirational, social, linguistic, resistant, familial, and navigational capital, smartness specifically applied within the Asian immigrant community can be redefined to reflect a more complex narrative.

Social capital

My father was an educated man, 'educated' by Vietnamese standards. He finished high school and had a few semesters of what we understand to be higher education. He spoke four languages fluently, Mandarin, Cantonese, a local Southern Chinese dialect, Vietnamese, and had studied English. As a natural cultural and linguistic bridge, he was tapped by the US to help them 'gather information.' Without the support from the American military, South Vietnam fell victim to a hostile Communist takeover. Americans evacuated and thousands of Vietnamese were left to find their way out of the country by any means possible. When the war ended, anyone who supported the US lived in a state of fear.

Eleven months old and in the arms of my father, I lay cradled, comforted by his protection. It was a sunny day, hot and humid as most days were in South Vietnam. Remembering this only through the eyes of my mother, I relive this memory each time I see a father and his baby. The year was 1975 and Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, was unstable and broken. My mother was in the kitchen. As she stooped on the hard dirt floors as most women do in preparation of the vegetables for the next meal, she was focused on getting things done. Through the long hallway, she heard the sound of four primitive car doors being slammed within close proximity. Not minding this distraction, she continued to peel and wash the greens in a big plastic bowl.

Four soldiers anxiously got out of their cars and quickly moved towards my father. As they started to approach, he backed away. Without hesitation, these four men grabbed me out of my father's arms and dropped me on the hard dirt. He was immediately handcuffed and violently shoved into the back

of a car as I was left, an eleven-month old baby helpless and alone in the front of the house. As she made her way to my screams, she found me lying on the dirt floor having just been taken from my father's arms, tossed aside and left vulnerable. The distance from the back of the house to the front was too great. She saw only blurred visions of soldiers, adorned with weapons, and slamming car doors. These images became forever burned into her memory. The sight of my father in the back of this unfamiliar car and the sound of the tires turning against this unpaved path driving away from his life and family. As the sound of small pebbles hit against the sides of a car, she felt a sense of fear overcome her. As she picked me up, keeping me pressed against her chest, she stood listless as her salty tears fell against my now bruised face. He was gone. They had taken him. She was left alone to raise three young children: one, two, and three years of age. In an instant, her life was left changed. The sole responsibility of raising three young children in a recently ravaged war-torn country was now hers. What would she do? How would she survive?

As a resourceful woman, my mother managed to find some work selling sugar cane drinks with her two daughters in tow. My brother, age three would wander in and out of the market begging for food. Despite the extreme poverty and volatile streets, he would somehow manage his way back to us with small amounts of food that he was given by neighbors and street vendors. We were no longer living, we were merely surviving each day. Days turned into weeks and weeks easily turned into months. After two years with no word of his whereabouts, he was released temporarily. He came home to us and immediately shared his plan for our escape. My father explained to my mother their choices. They could stay in Vietnam, a land destroyed by fighting with little promise for the future or they could risk their lives to leave in the hope that anywhere was better than there. To give their children any chance for a future, they knew they had to leave.

Social capital is dependent on networks of peers, community, and others who serve in different support roles to an individual or family, specifically in place to help navigate different systems (Yosso 2005). While my father was imprisoned, my mother was able to leverage her social capital in order to keep her children alive. When it was time, we fled.

Aspirational capital

Three years after the fall of Saigon, my parents embarked on the pivotal journey in the dark of night to bring their three young children to the US under heavy gunfire and protected by nothing but hope. My mother dressed us in as many layers of clothing as possible without bursting a seam or button. In the middle of the night, with three children now aged three, four, and five in their arms, my mother and father snuck through the dense jungle with only the moonlight to guide our path. As we approached the beach that would take us to another land, gunfire broke out from the soldiers who were tipped off by neighbors bought off with cigarettes and beer. Slow movements turned into a quick dash towards the sandy beach where two boats waited for those who had given every last cent to be included on that boat's roster. There were two vessels waiting on this beach. The once black night's sky was now illuminated by the sparks from gunfire and filled with screams and shrills from those who were hit. 'Don't look behind you!' my father told my mother as she held me tight in her arms running towards those boats. When we arrived on the beach, exhausted and bleeding from the cuts caused by our run through the thick canopy of untouched jungle, my father put my mother and all of us kids on a boat. He said, 'I will find you soon.' With tears running down her face, she knew that this was only the beginning of a journey in which she was not prepared.

What was it like for my mother on a boat crowded with screaming strangers and responsible for the lives of her three young children? When asked, she recalled a horrific sight of screaming and terrified women and children in the middle of a black sea in the dark night. Waves crashed and crying babies were knocked out of their mother's arms, disappearing quickly into a dark and unforgiving ocean. Some mothers chose to throw themselves and their children overboard as the fear of the unknown consumed them. She recalled sitting with nothing to do but wait as the boat was tossed back and forth

on those dark deep waters for five sleepless days and nights. Their dreams for their children to have better lives than themselves dictated each calculated risk taken on that unforgotten night.

According to Yosso (2005):

> … aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals. (77)

According to Stanton-Salazar and Spina 2000; resilience can be recognized as, 'a set of inner resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning' (229). Drawing from the work of Gandara (1982) and others, Yosso describes a*spirational capital* as the resiliency in communities to still have hope when faced with great challenges and barriers. Aspirational capital is manifested in the dreams parents often have for their children and the belief that there are great possibilities even when there are no clear paths. My parents demonstrated aspirational capital by choosing to flee Vietnam with three young children, despite extreme risks that included drowning and death. In order to make it to the US, our family had to rely on the community of friends and contacts he had to plan our escape route. Each of the decisions my parents made was informed by a rich body of knowledge and sophisticated understanding of the unique social, political, and educational structures they would need to learn to navigate to ensure the success of their children.

Linguistic, resistant, and familial capital

My introduction to the English language came from volunteers at a refugee camp in Malaysia. My first English lessons focused on the alphabet, colors, numbers, and key phrases such as, 'Thank you very much,' and 'I need help with this, please.' I began school in kindergarten one year after I arrived in the US. My physical appearance and language barriers clearly separated me from my predominately white, middle class classmates. Although some teachers embraced those differences, others did not. I struggled in school for several years. Over time, I learned to speak English fluently and flawlessly. More importantly, I learned the unwritten 'rules of school.' By the time I reached third grade, I had achieved a high enough score on my English language proficiency test to no longer need to attend lessons in the school's English as a Second Language program, which consisted of one volunteer teacher and the six Asian children in the school at the time. After only four years in the US, I had learned enough English to stay in my class the entire day with the rest of my classmates. I even won a prize from the school for having read the most books in my grade level.

My mother worked over 40 hours a week in a local hair salon where she shampooed hair, cleaned, and swept the floors. The salon owner, Mrs T, recognized her hard work and, as a result, spent any extra time not working teaching her about life in America. With a little encouragement, she introduced my mother to the opportunities available to a licensed cosmetologist. After six years of being in this country, my mother began an 18-month program in cosmetology school. By achieving this, she would no longer need to wash hair. She could in fact earn a livable wage, giving her a glimpse of some social mobility. With some communicative competence gained from the daily interactions at the salon with native English speakers, my mother registered for classes with the help of Mrs T.

When getting a Virginia cosmetology license or other beauty practitioner certification, you must attend a licensed school and complete the state of Virginia's minimum required training hours and then take the state's cosmetology board exams. After finishing the specified training, students are required to pass a two-part licensing exam issued by the Virginia State Board of Cosmetology.

Although relieved by a practicum component as a major part of the licensing requirements, she was still haunted by the written exam that she had to pass before she could get her license. She learned quickly from doing and easily passed the application part of her state board exam. Three nights a week for a year and a half, my mother attended night class and arrived home at 9:30 pm Every night after she returned home from work and or night class, we would work together demystifying the art

of cosmetology at our mix matched table that seated four. While other kids read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, I sat negotiating the scientific language in her textbooks trying desperately to make sense of a very technical read. Specific terms related to highlighting and coloring along with math involving measurements and proportions of color would be deferred to my older sister or brother, ages eight and nine at the time. Together, we would read passages that resembled Raber's (2000) description of the chemistry of hair coloring such as:

> There are two types of melanin protein found in the hair: eumelanin, which is responsible for hair shades from black to brown, and phaeomelanin, which is responsible for red and yellow-ish colors. … The primary intermediates are ortho or para diaminobenzenes, aminohydroxybenzenes, and to a lesser extent dihydroxybenzenes that develop color on oxidation. The color couplers don't oxidize readily but react with the oxidized primary intermediates to provide a wider variety of colors. …. (52).

When her children could not help bridge the specialized content she was learning with the general academic vocabulary we gained from our early years in elementary school, my mother would arrive early to class and stay late to seek the help from her teacher, MrsWood.[1] She passed the application part of her State Boards with ease, but she had to take the written exam three times before she successfully passed and received her cosmetology license in Virginia. After this success and five more years of working for Mrs T., she bought the salon in which she started as a shampoo girl.

In addition to serving as cosmetology support, my brother, sister, and I would be her practice models. For a year, I would go to school with different colored hair as she experimented with the right proportions to change black hair to blonde and straight hair to curly. We learned the hard way that this could not be achieved. When I began the next school year, I relished in looking like Cyndi Lauper. My siblings, on the other hand, failed to embrace their newly permed and colored hair as they walked into their classrooms to meet their new teachers and classmates.

Linguistic capital draws from research conducted by bilingual education scholars and includes the skills and knowledge of multiple forms of communication and languages that many communities of color bring to school; Whereas, *resistant capital* is grounded in challenging inequality. It is resistance or skills that could be considered 'oppositional behavior' because they challenge the status quo. According to Yosso (2005), '… maintaining and passing on the multiple dimensions of community cultural wealth is also part of the knowledge base of resistance' (80). *Familial capital* is defined as the relationships established within, between, and outside families that emphasizes the importance of community. *Familial capital* is a form of consciousness that de-emphasizes the self and places the family and community at the center.

Linguistic capital, or in my case the skills and knowledge of both speaking Vietnamese and the acquisition of academic English, allowed my siblings and me to support my mother through cosmetology school. The multiple languages in which my father was fluent along with his understanding of what it took to leave war-torn Vietnam during the most tumultuous times equipped him with the foundation to leave. My parents' devotion to preserve our heritage language and cultural identity with the forces of assimilation and the need to learn English at the cost of Vietnamese can be framed as a form of *resistant capital*. They ignored the teacher when they were told to speak only English at home, an action that could be considered 'oppositional' to school forces that centered the learning of English as quickly and effectively as possible, despite the cost of heritage language loss.

Navigational capital

Before completing elementary school in Virginia, all fourth grade students were expected to know multiple facts about the state, including its agriculture, political systems, history, and the like in one culminating project: the Virginia scrapbook. Although I understood the project on a general level, my focus turned to the scrapbook itself. What is a scrapbook? Where can I get one? Whatever it was, I knew that my family could not afford to buy one. As the first teacher that openly showed a disdain for me and 'my kind,' I made it a personal mission to win her approval and change her opinion of me. I decided I would prove my worth to her by presenting the most impressive scrapbook submitted. I

spent months researching, reading articles from the World Book and writing paragraphs. I summarized my new found knowledge using correct grammar and perfect handwriting. Unlike my peers who had access to unlimited materials, I had to scavenge in the art room for crayons and a few colored pencils that I used to draw the cardinal, the dogwood tree, and other images that reflected Virginia life, history, and agriculture. The content was easy for me. Obtaining the actual 'scrapbook' continued to haunt me.

I learned from my classmates that these scrapbooks could be purchased from the local Ben Franklin store, Virginia's answer to HobbyLobby. I wondered, 'What on earth is a Ben Franklin store?' When I went to this store with a friend and her mother, my eyes filled with wonder. After walking down each aisle filled with yarn, ribbon, unfinished wood knickknacks, and art supplies, I found the scrapbook I would need to complete this project. The cheapest scrapbook cost roughly $15. To my family, this was a fortune. With the responsibility of raising three children in a new country, my parents had to account for every penny. To save for the scrapbook, my mother started putting aside a portion of the tip money she earned every day as a shampoo girl in a local hair salon. For every woman who got her hair washed, my mother would get twenty-five cents. By the time I finished the content for the scrapbook, my mother had saved enough money to purchase not the cheapest scrapbook, but the best one available – 12 × 12 perfectly square, glossy, forest-green with two gold lines that adorned the front cover in a deliberate border. I sat down on the Sunday before the project was due to begin the process of assembling my work. After I laid out what each page would include, I realized that I had forgotten one major detail – we had no glue, no way to affix my carefully constructed materials to the pages of the book. For children whose parents have cars and some disposable income, this problem had a simple solution. With no car and any extra money spent on purchasing the most expensive scrapbook available, my fate was sealed. Tears streamed down my face creating soft puddles on the loose leaf paper that sat beneath me. After what seemed like an eternity, a blurred vision of my mother appeared. There she stood in front of me with bowl of freshly steamed rice held in two hands and an expression of hope I had often seen in moments like these. She set the bowl down in the middle of the table and sat down next to me. With two fingers pressing the perfect proportion of rice to the paper, she showed me how things were done in her country, where the concept of Elmer's glue did not exist.

Navigational capital is the understanding of negotiation of space or place. In other words, does one know how to navigate through different systems (whether academic or professional) in order to be successful? Used to describe the ways in which one moves through social institutions, *navigational capital* is the set of skills required to negotiate these spaces. In other words, how did my mother help me navigate the different educational systems or structures without having the traditional forms of cultural capital that scholars deem necessary for success? How did we negotiate this path or structure, a structure that many argue is permeated by racism, in the face of great challenges to be successful? In order for my Virginia scrapbook to be completed with success, my mother used her cultural knowledge to find a solution to a problem. When glue sticks were not available, she relied on the resources available to her. This set of cultural knowledge is often unrecognized as valuable in dominant culture. However, smartness as a cultural practice situates itself differently in the context of an immigrant household. In this snapshot into the daily interactions between my mother and myself, it is clear how she used *navigational capital* to ensure that I moved through the social institution of elementary school successfully.

While not directly addressed within the snapshots of my lived history, other intersections of familial capital, social, and resistant capital were also present in my life. The relationships established within, between, and outside my family all emphasized the importance of community. Growing up in my household, my parents de-emphasized the individual and placed our immediate and extended family at the center. This salon became the reified example of familial and social capital. After my mother received her cosmetology license, she worked for several years until they saved the money to buy the salon where she got her first job. After my aunts were sponsored to the US, my mother helped them through school. This salon was not only the source of capital gained, but became the source of employment for my extended family. With the *social capital* my parents acquired over time and much

effort, they became a resource to their community charged with the role of helping different family members and peers navigate different systems.

Discussion

The counter-narrative presented in this article highlights the struggles faced by my family during our journey to the US and the ways my family, especially my mother, negotiated social and hierarchical structures through the use of cultural power and language to access institutional knowledge. Utilizing Yosso's (2005) framework of 'community cultural wealth' as an analytical frame, I challenge the traditional ideologies of smartness and offer an honest and realistic portrayal of the struggles faced by one immigrant community of color learning to negotiate life in a new country and in a new language. Although I gained the *cultural capital* needed to become successful in this hierarchical society, assumptions that Communities of Color somehow lack the skills, values, intellect, and the like required for social mobility and traditional forms of success is critically flawed. Through the use of an AsianCrit perspective, I am able to center my voice, shifting away from deficit views of the immigrant family and focusing on the cultural knowledge, values, ideals, and power of resiliency that my parents drew from to create my path. In these snapshots, I hope to offer examples of the aspirational, navigational, linguistic, resistant, familial, and social capital described by Yosso (2005) and reinterpreted here as how smartness served as a form of cultural wealth for my family.

Considerations for educators

In *Other People's Children*, Delpit (1996) encourages teacher educators to 'recognize and overcome the power differential, the stereotypes, and the other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other. Those efforts must drive our teacher education, our curriculum development, our instructional strategies, and every aspect of the educational enterprise' (134). What lessons for teacher educators and teachers are left to be learned from counter stories provided here? How can a teacher's understanding one child's journey to the US help shape immigrant students' experiences in school? As we look at aspirational capital possessed by my parents, we can no longer construct the immigrant parent as a non-participant in their children's school, for example. We cannot judge parents for not volunteering in their children's classrooms or dismiss them as somehow disinterested. We have to acknowledge that their journey to that particular school may have been more complex than the car ride from home to classroom. Some families in fact travel across oceans, on top of trains, or across miles of desert to get to the US classroom. Then consider what it takes for an Asian immigrant family to achieve social mobility. For some, the success of the individual is dependent upon the centrality of family in some communities of color. Without the linguistic capital (i.e., the learning of academic English) gained by the children in my family and the familial capital that centered us, my mother could not have moved from shampoo girl to business owner. Lastly, I challenge us all to think about the cultural knowledge that Asian communities possess that may not be recognized by gatekeepers. A common classroom project, like the construction of a historical scrapbook, could create challenges for some communities that those with privilege would never even consider. When it mattered most, my mother used her wealth of cultural knowledge to help me complete a classroom project, in turn shaping my ability to be successful in school-despite the limited resources we had. In order for me be considered smart in school, I needed my family to help me navigate the complex racial, social, and economic systems that challenged us with every step we took. Drawing from my personal narratives from my family's journey to the US and my navigation through schools, I illustrate how AsianCrit can be used to provide a richer and more complex view of the immigrant experience. As an advocate for the use of alternative paradigms to understand the unique experiences people of color, I argue for the need to acknowledge cultural wealth as a legitimate form of smartness that should be valued.

Note

1. All names in this article have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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