

# **A Critical Review of the Model Minority Myth in Selected Literature on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education**

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*This article presents a critical review of 112 works of research on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) in higher education. It focuses on ways previous scholarship framed AAPIs in higher education, and specifically on how those works engaged in a sustained project of countering the model minority myth (MMM). Many publications on AAPIs in higher education mentioned the MMM and neglected to account for the original purpose of the MMM—to maintain anti-Black racism and White supremacy. We identified four key and interconnected limitations implicit in the counter-MMM framework that result from a lack of a critical recognition of the model minority as an instrument to maintain White dominance. Our analysis suggests that the well-established counter-MMM scholarly project is fundamentally flawed in its ability to humanistically reframe and advance research on AAPIs. Therefore, we call for a reframing of research on AAPIs in higher education.*

**KEYWORDS:** Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, higher education, model minority myth

The model minority myth (MMM) has long dominated the racial framing and perceptions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) in educational research, policy, and practice (Hune, 2002; Suzuki, 1977, 2002). This racial stereotype generally defines AAPIs, especially Asian Americans, as a monolithically hardworking racial group whose high achievement undercuts claims of systemic racism made by other racially minoritized populations, especially African Americans (Osajima, 2000). As a tool of racial wedge politics, the stereotype has

assisted in the advancement of a color-blind racist ideology and agenda (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008). In response to the myth's pervasiveness and persistence, researchers with an interest in AAPIs have engaged in a prolonged scholarly project of debunking the MMM—what we call a counter-model minority myth project.

Previous scholarship and literature reviews on Asian Americans in education have discussed the ubiquity and centrality of efforts to counter the MMM (Hartlep, 2013; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007; Ngo & Lee, 2007), the start of which can be traced back to the publication of Suzuki's (1977) exploration of the MMM and its implications for higher education in *Amerasia Journal*. Since then, many have argued for complicating (Ngo & Lee, 2007), going beyond (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007), deconstructing (Museus & Kiang, 2009), challenging (Park & Teranishi, 2008; Suyemoto, Kim, Tanabe, Tawa, & Day, 2009), demystifying (Inkelas, 2006), overcoming (Nadal, Pituc, Johnston, & Esparrago, 2010), and contesting (Ng et al., 2007) the MMM. More recently, Museus, Maramba, and Teranishi (2013b) edited a volume seeking to correct *misrepresentations* of AAPIs in higher education. After several decades of scholarly production seeking to counter the MMM, we contend that the campaign to disprove the MMM need not be as central in the future of research on AAPIs in higher education.

This critical review of literature questions the normative application and connection of the MMM frame to research on AAPIs in higher education. It set out to examine the ways previous scholarship on AAPIs in higher education was conceptually framed, paying close attention to how research discussed the MMM and engaged in a counter-MMM project. It also identified examples of research that did not use the MMM concept when including AAPIs in studies on higher education. By doing so, we sought to rethink educational discourse and inquiry on AAPIs in higher education and how scholars are often “complicit in framing non-dominant students and their communities in ways that reinscribe and support dominant narratives” (Gutierrez, 2006, p. 227).

Our analysis identified four key and interconnected limitations of the counter-MMM framework in research on AAPIs in higher education. These limitations included the presentation of ahistorical definitions of the MMM, void of critical analysis of its fundamental purpose as a discursive device to discipline minoritized populations and uphold Whiteness (Kumashiro, 2008; Leonardo, 2009; Osajima, 2000); the reproduction of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) underlying calls for ethnically disaggregated data and presentations of educational failures among some AAPIs; an unintended reification of other hegemonic ideologies; and the maintenance of the MMM's centrality, rather than privileging human perspectives and experiences. In the end, the continued dominance of the counter-MMM project in research on AAPIs in higher education problematically privileges narratives of what AAPIs are not, rather than who they are.

In the remainder of this article, we discuss concepts in our theoretical framework, the analytical approach, the various ways the reviewed research engaged with the MMM concept, and the resulting implications. We then provide an in-depth discussion of the counter-MMM project's four key limitations. Oppositional culture has often been examined among marginalized students in education (Ogbu, 2008; Willis, 1977). In this literature review, we set out to understand the implications of

the ubiquitous, scholarly oppositional practice of countering the MMM. We suggest that a new project of reframing, rather than a limited oppositional project, is needed to advance a more critical scholarly agenda on AAPIs in higher education.

### *Conceptual Framework*

In this section, we define the panethnic terms of *Asian American*, *Pacific Islander*, and *Asian American and Pacific Islander* and why we are intentional in our use of these distinct panethnic terms. Second, we detail the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) and its relevance to the present study. Third, we explain the MMM through the lens of CRT, accounting for the ways systemic Whiteness is preserved and advanced through the MMM. Finally, we review the concept of framing and how efforts to counter the MMM contrast with a social justice agenda of reframing.

#### *Panethnic Distinctions: Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans*

The terms *Asian Americans*, *Pacific Islanders*, and *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders* are not interchangeable. These demographic categories are distinct and have emerged from complex, politically contested social processes that construct meanings of race and ethnicity (Omi & Winant, 1994; Perez, 2002). We respect demands by Pacific Islander studies scholars (Benham, 2006; Kauanui, 2008) and community advocates to not subsume the distinct voices and experiences of Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (NHPI) into an “Asian/Pacific Islander” panethnicity. The “homogenisation and racialisation [of Pacific Islanders with Asian Americans is] detrimental to indigenous self-determination—a central issue among Pacific Islanders” (Perez, 2002, p. 469). The crafting of the model minority terminology in the 1960s was directly tied to the racialized experiences of Asian Americans, but not of Pacific Islanders. Moreover, Asian American group interests are not principally defined by Indigeneity as a predominantly immigrant and refugee-based population. Therefore, in this article, which critiques the role of the MMM in higher education research literature, we are careful and deliberate in our usage of specific panethnic terms.

Some published research on Asian Americans in higher education has conflated Pacific Islander populations with Asian American populations under a pan-AAPI label, which mirrors the U.S. government’s amalgamation in 1977 of these two distinctly racialized groups in data enumeration (King, 2000). Even when some reviewed publications implied that they included Pacific Islander populations by using terms like *Asian Pacific American*, *Asian Pacific Islanders*, or other amalgams of an AAPI panethnicity, if there was no evidence to suggest that Pacific Islanders were meaningfully included, we discuss the publication as being concerned with Asian Americans. Referring to publications that meaningfully included both Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, we use the term *AAPI*. Regarding publications focused solely on NHPIs, we use the terms, *NHPI* or *Pacific Islander*.

#### *Critical Race Theory*

The state-determined racial consolidation of Pacific Islanders with Asian Americans in the United States for population inventories is just one example of how diverse populations have been structurally marginalized by the state. Many

have commented on how the racial conglomeration of disparate AAPI ethnic groups has produced improper assessments of this diverse population's educational experiences (Escueta & O'Brien, 1995; Hune, 2002; National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2008; Teranishi, 2010) and the exclusion of their interests from the discourse on race and education (Museus & Chang, 2009; Nakanishi, 1989). Although ethnically aggregated achievement data (test scores, college entry, etc.) suggest that AAPIs are achieving high levels of educational success, these narrow measures of educational well-being obscure a more comprehensive understanding of how racism affects AAPIs in education.

Nonetheless, the public discourse on race and education has long been defined by a focus on the racial achievement gap and largely informed by hegemonic deficit thinking (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The deficit thinking model posits "that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, it is alleged, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behavior" (Valencia, 1997, p. 2). Accordingly, deficit thinking calls attention to the test score achievement gap between Black and Latino students relative to White students. Occasionally, AAPIs as an aggregate are coupled with Whites in distinguishing a racial achievement gap. Consequently, Asian Americans are implicated as honorary Whites (Tuan, 1998; Zhou, 2004) and the racial disparities many experience are neglected (CARE, 2008).

Moreover, Pacific Islanders and other Indigenous populations are altogether disregarded. As a result, the complexities of AAPI lived experiences with race, racism, and settler colonialism in education remain concealed within this dominant framing of education and race. Not only does deficit ideology distract from a more critical analysis of how race and racism operate to sustain Whiteness in education (Ladson-Billings, 2006), its reinforcement is intimately intertwined with presumptions of AAPI educational success. The deconstruction of this relationship requires a critical analysis of racism that accounts for how racial stratification is produced. CRT is one approach to conducting such an examination of the production and reproduction of White supremacy.

CRT in education works to unveil how systems of Whiteness maintain racial inequalities and oppression in educational contexts (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Accordingly, it challenges dominant ideologies such as color-blindness, meritocracy, and deficit notions of education. It seeks to disrupt the reproduction of these notions that distract attention from relationships and systems of power and subordination. In confronting hegemonic social dynamics, CRT in education explicitly starts from the premise that race and racism play central roles in structuring inequality and relationships of power and subordination in education (Solórzano, 1998). Second, it recognizes the importance of intersectionality in oppressive systems. In other words, although race and racism are central, they do not operate in a vacuum. Instead, they work in synergy with other forms of oppression like classism, sexism, and heterosexism.

Third, CRT is explicitly committed to social justice. CRT seeks to eradicate structures of racial, gender, class, and other forms of domination. Driven by values

of social justice, it pursues a transformative agenda of empowering subordinated groups to resist systems of inequality. Fourth, CRT privileges the experiential knowledge of people of color, which is “critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). By focusing on people’s lived experiences, CRT scholarship can powerfully expose “deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Fifth, CRT engages in transdisciplinary research to challenge “ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in both a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 123). Guided by CRT, this literature review illuminates how the counter-MMM project can unintentionally reproduce the integrally related deficit thinking model when texts lack a critical analysis of race and racism that accounts for broader contexts of race relations and racial inequalities.

### *A Critical Race Definition of the Model Minority Myth*

Because a key tenet of CRT is to combat ahistoricism in analyzing how White dominance operates and is reproduced, a critical race definition of the MMM must acknowledge how it aligns with the middleman minority thesis and consequently global structures of racial domination. The MMM applied to Asian Americans in the United States represents just one example of a middleman minority. First conceptualized by Blalock (1967), middleman minorities have long served as “buffer groups or as pawns in the power struggle between the two major classes—elite and peasant” (Jain, 1990, p. 28). Bonacich (1973) expanded on this definition of middleman minorities by highlighting the importance of these groups’ status as foreigners set apart from the host society. The popular notion of Asian Americans, a predominantly immigrant population in the United States, as a model minority thus follows historical and global precedents of middleman minority groups such as Jews in Europe, Armenians in Turkey, and Indians in Uganda (Bonacich, 1973; Jain, 1990). Although middleman minority status brings some economic privileges, it does not grant political or social power, and engenders hostility from both elites and masses in the host communities (Bonacich, 1973).

The MMM, as an example of the middleman minority notion, is a tool that exploits Asian Americans, placing them in a racial bind between Whites and other people of color. This racial arrangement benefits the White elite in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Osajima, 2000) as demonstrated by the concepts of racial triangulation (C. J. Kim, 1999) and cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). The model minority label is often attributed to William Petersen (1966), who presented socioeconomic success among a select segment of Asian Americans as an antithesis to African American claims of persistent racial oppression and barriers during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and at the height of Black-led urban uprisings across the United States.

Figure 1 provides an illustration of C. J. Kim’s (1999) theory of racial triangulation, which illuminates the mechanisms of the middleman minority’s role in maintaining systemic White supremacy. According to the theory of racial triangulation, Asian Americans are simultaneously limited in their political and civic voice and presented as an example of success, despite being racially minoritized,

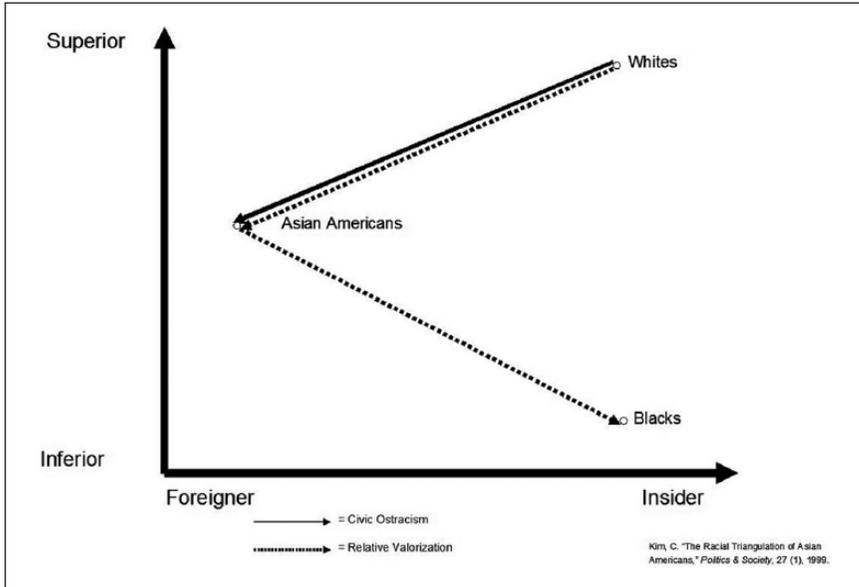


FIGURE 1. *Racial triangulation.*

Note. Reproduced from “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” C. J. Kim, 1999, *Politics & Society*, 27(1), 108. (Copyright 1999 by Sage Publications, Inc.)

in order to preserve White supremacy (C. J. Kim, 1999). It is, at its core, a patronizing practice that maintains White dominance by disregarding the lived experiences of one group to shame another group.

The MMM is also the embodiment of a process of cultural racism, whereby Asian Americans as a middleman minority are used to discipline other minoritized groups to ultimately distract scrutiny away from systems of White dominance (Leonardo, 2009). Cultural racism, one of four elemental frames in color-blind racism, explains racial inequalities as outcomes of a racially minoritized group’s “lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values” (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011, p. 193). Therefore, the MMM, through the process of racial triangulation, bolsters cultural racism and color-blind racist ideology by discrediting one racially minoritized group’s real struggles with racial barriers and discrimination through the valorization of oversimplified stereotypes of another racially minoritized group. Consequently, the MMM is not simply a stereotype of self-sufficient, high-academic minority achievement. Instead, it is a much more insidious racial device used to uphold a global system of racial hierarchies and White supremacy.

Therefore, our sociohistorically accurate, critical race definition of the MMM acknowledges two key, interlocked elements that symbiotically reproduce and reinforce White dominance. First, Asian Americans are strategically presented as a model of self-sufficient minority success. Second, the stereotype of success among Asian Americans is used to blame another minority group for its struggles,

thus perpetuating the deficit thinking model prevalent in education. In both elements, factual information is not necessary, as they depend on racial generalizations and stereotypes.

### *Framing*

The concepts of framing and reframing help further guide our analysis of the literature. According to Lakoff (2004),

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change. . . . Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what counts as common sense. Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently. (p. xv)

In other words, framing can determine how we identify, understand, and seek to address social problems (Kumashiro, 2008; Sexton, 2010). As a cognitive frame, the MMM organizes the public's general interpretation of the role of Asian Americans within racial hierarchies and inequalities.

Many scholars have identified the persistence of the MMM framing of AAPIs in public discourse as a key problem for this diverse population in higher education. Applying the concept of framing, in our analysis of literature, we were interested in the implications of the routine evocation of the MMM. How are research problems informed by scholarship that discusses, or does not mention, the MMM? A significant amount of research on AAPIs in higher education has sought to undermine the validity of the MMM by countering this hegemonic framework point for point. Much of this intended counterhegemonic work has assumed the logic of oppressive dominant frameworks like deficit thinking and has consequently reinforced hegemonic frames and systems. For example, some research that ahistorically defines the MMM as a stereotype of universal high academic achievement among AAPIs has focused attention on the deficiencies found among some AAPIs to counter the stereotype of universal high academic achievement among Asian Americans. This project of highlighting AAPI educational failure assumes, and advances, a deficit framework.

As Willis (1977) explained, projects of countering hegemonic ideas that do not also shift fundamental viewpoints can actually lead to unintentional bolstering of hegemonic ideology. In seeking to counter the MMM, research that presents ahistorical definitions of the myth ironically maintains the invisibility of the process of racial triangulation and reinforces deficit thinking. Other research has also highlighted the paradox of efforts in counterhegemonic frames that unintentionally reinforce oppressive structures. For example, K. Yeung, Stompler, and Wharton (2006) examined the attempt of gay men to challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity within the college fraternity world by establishing a fraternity for gay men. By adopting the traditional structure and characteristics of a fraternal organization, however, the fraternity and its members ended up inadvertently

endorsing and reproducing aspects of hegemonic masculinity (K. Yeung et al., 2006). Without a fundamental shift in the foundational understanding of the ways the MMM operates in higher education, research in this field will fall short of reframing and advancing knowledge about AAPIs.

### *Critically Examining Scholarly Evocations of the MMM*

Informed by CRT, we have constructed a historically grounded definition of the MMM in this section, which draws attention to its primary purpose of reproducing color-blind ideology, anti-Black racism, and ultimately White dominance. In this literature review, we identified whether and how the texts evoked and defined the myth, comparing their definitions to the critical race definition of the MMM we have presented. We assumed that how texts engaged in and defined the MMM informed their conceptualization of the relationship between AAPIs, race, racism, and higher education, and thus how they approached studies on this population. We theorized that manuscripts that presented and intended to counter an ahistorical definition of the myth employed and unintentionally reinforced dominant oppressive frames like deficit thinking that contribute toward the reproduction of racial inequalities in education. The next section discusses how we conducted our literature review with an interest in identifying the consequences of how various texts engaged with the MMM concept.

### **Method**

This critical literature review presents an analysis of the emerging body of research on AAPIs in higher education, guided by the following questions:

- How is the MMM applied in published higher education research to justify and frame the significance of AAPIs in this scholarly field?
- What are the implications of various ways such research is framed?

As Kumashiro (2008) argued, framing determines how educational issues are identified, defined, prioritized, and addressed. Therefore, the framing of research on AAPIs determines how the relationship between AAPIs, race, racism, and higher education is understood and studied. Overall, the goal of this literature review was to engage in a critical race examination of scholarship on AAPIs in higher education.

Given our collective familiarity with this literature as longtime educators and scholars in the fields of higher education and student affairs committed to AAPI communities and social justice, we anticipated finding a significant amount of literature presenting the MMM as a way of framing the significance of research on AAPIs in higher education. Accordingly, the following questions guided our analysis of texts:

- Is the MMM presented in this text? If so, for what purpose was it presented, and how is it defined?
- How does the presented definition of the MMM compare with the critical race, two-pronged definition of the MMM provided in the conceptual framework section of this article?

- If the MMM was not presented in the text, how was the relevance of Asian Americans and/or Pacific Islanders discussed in relation to race and racism in higher education?

### *Literature Search and Selection*

Systematic reviews seek to reduce bias in selection of literature and subsequent critique of included texts (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). They must be reproducible processes and answer the research questions through a clearly defined process (Cook, Mulrow, & Haynes, 1997). For the current study, electronic library databases particularly in the field of education were culled. The search terms in this study were *Asian American*, *Pacific Islander*, *Native Hawaiian*, *Samoan American*, *Chamorro*, *Korean American*, *Cambodian American*, *Hmong American*, *Vietnamese American*, *Indian American*, *Chinese American*, *Filipino American*, and *Asian American Studies*, in combination with *higher education*, *college*, *college students*, *graduate students*, *student affairs*, *college administrators*, and *faculty*. Other databases were searched, including, but not limited to, Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCO Host, Educational Research Complete, and ERIC. For this review, we did not limit ourselves to journals within the field of higher education (e.g., *Review of Higher Education*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*) because much of the literature on Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders relevant to higher education can be found in journals outside the field. Therefore, we focused our search on AAPIs, higher education literature, and studies that focused on U.S. higher education. Publications that did not include Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders as a population for study in higher education were excluded.

If a publication nominally incorporated Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders, we included it in our study. Our analysis was interested in how scholarship discussed AAPIs in higher education. Consequently, publications did not need to be exclusively focused on AAPIs, race, or the MMM. We attempted to review works published between 2000 and 2013 (the last complete year of publications prior to the submission of this article). In 2002, Jossey-Bass published a noteworthy issue of the *New Directions for Student Services* monograph series titled “Working With Asian American College Students,” edited by McEwen, Kodama, Alvarez, Lee, and Liang. Prior to this notable high-profile publication, few studies on AAPIs in higher education were published. We did, however, include a handful of seminal works published before 2000 when appropriate, because they informed many works long after their publication date.

The reference sections for all texts were then examined to identify additional publications. In summary, a text was selected for review if the study (a) was conducted within the United States; (b) was published between 2000 and 2013, or was deemed a seminal work on Asian Americans and/or Pacific Islanders in higher education (see McLesky, 2004, and Patton, Polloway, & Epstein, 1989, for identifying seminal works); (c) reported information about Asian Americans and/or Pacific Islanders and higher education; and (d) was published in a peer-reviewed journal, scholarly book, research report, or selected dissertation.

For this review, we examined the abstract of each piece and determined if it met the criteria outlined. If the criteria were not met through reading the summary descriptions, a cursory review and word search of the text was conducted to determine whether it met the criteria. If the publication did not meet the criteria, it was not reviewed. Initial appraisals indicated that some relevant scholarship was embedded within studies on racial minorities. When these texts explicitly stated that data included Asian Americans and/or Pacific Islanders, we incorporated them into the review. The number of texts included was extensive, but still manageable, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of patterns in how this area of scholarship engaged with the MMM.

### *Analytical Approach*

In all, 112 texts were selected for review. For our analysis, we organized the amassed body of scholarship into six topical categories, which reflect significant aspects of the literature on AAPIs in higher education: contexts and implications of studying AAPIs in higher education; college access, admission, and college choice; undergraduate students; graduate students and faculty; student affairs staff and institutional leadership; and AAPIs in the curriculum. Table 1 summarizes the number and types of texts we included by topical category. The full list of literature included in this review is provided in the appendix (available in the online version of the journal). One research team member reviewed works within assigned units and developed an initial set of codes related to our research questions. Coding in this way allowed us to analyze the literature across groups and within groups. A second team member reviewed the coding for trustworthiness (Tierney & Clemens, 2011).

Through this process and multiple research-team dialogues, we observed patterns and themes in how the MMM was defined and discussed in relation to AAPIs. Most of the texts cited the MMM, but presented a definition of the concept that lacked a critical perspective. The second largest group made no mention of the MMM. The smallest group of publications cited the MMM and provided a critical definition of the MMM. As a result, we regrouped the texts into three thematic categories: (a) uncritical definition of the MMM, (b) no mention of the MMM, and (c) critical race definition of the MMM. We then reanalyzed the data to identify the consequences of how the texts framed AAPIs in higher education, and engaged with, or ignored, the MMM concept. How publications framed AAPIs in higher education in relation to the MMM concept generally resulted in varying justifications of the significance of studying AAPIs in higher education.

A key limitation in this analysis is that it did not account for the peer review publication process. Anecdotally, scholars interested in AAPIs in higher education have encountered critiques in the publication process that question the authors' decisions to use a critical definition of the MMM or to not mention the MMM. Therefore, our intent is not to exclusively place blame on researchers in this area, especially given the "publish or perish" system of power related to scholarly publishing. By identifying the implications of the ubiquitous presence of the MMM, which are highlighted in the next section, we hope to encourage scholars in this field to consider different ways to frame research on AAPIs in higher education.

**TABLE 1***Types of texts reviewed by topic*

| Topical section                                 | Books | Book/<br>monograph<br>chapters | Education<br>journal<br>articles | Non-<br>education<br>journals<br>articles | Research<br>reports | Dissertations | Total |
|---|-------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---------------------|---------------|-------|
| 1. Contexts                                     | 1     | 8                              | 2                                | 2   | 7                   | 0             | 20    |
| 2. College access,<br>admissions, and<br>choice | 1     | 6                              | 13                               | 10  | 2                   | 0             | 32    |
| 3. Undergraduates                               | 2     | 10                             | 14                               | 0   | 0                   | 3             | 29    |
| 4. Graduate<br>students and<br>faculty          | 0     | 5                              | 3                                | 0   | 0                   | 1             | 9     |
| 5. Institutional<br>leadership                  | 0     | 4                              | 1                                | 0   | 1                   | 8             | 14    |
| 6. Curriculum                                   | 0     | 1                              | 0                                | 7   | 0                   | 0             | 8     |
| Total   | 4     | 34                             | 33                               | 19  | 10                  | 12            | 112   |

## Results

How scholarship frames and describes a problem determines “the terms of debate and the guiding questions [which] rhetorically delimit prescriptions for redress and shape the perceptions of actors involved in mobilization toward that end” (Sexton, 2010, p. 88). In this section, we highlight three different ways authors confronted and engaged with the model minority concept in framing AAPIs in higher education. The great majority (more than 63%) of the reviewed publications cited the MMM, but presented incomplete and uncritical definitions of the myth, overlooking the broader racist implications of the rhetorical concept. About a quarter of the reviewed texts made no mention of the MMM. Publications presenting a critical race definition of the MMM were the least common in our review. Just slightly more than 10% acknowledged the myth’s historical, White supremacist purpose.

Each of these broad approaches to framing AAPIs and higher education resulted in different explanations for the significance of including or focusing studies on AAPIs. Research that applied uncritical definitions of the MMM often led many studies to address a concern over invisibility by justifying the study of AAPIs as a racial minority experiencing disparities and deficiencies. By doing so, they often unintentionally advanced a deficit framework. Literature that made no mention of the MMM either presented research comparing the experiences of various racial groups or simply focused attention on AAPIs or Asian American studies (AAS) in higher education. These publications explained the significance of their studies with broad scholarly frameworks. Finally, scholarship with critical definitions of the MMM were intentional in seeking to incisively deconstruct at least one aspect of the stereotype through argumentation and presentation of data and analysis. Some asserted the need to increase research on AAPIs that simultaneously offered

opportunities to advance solidarity between communities of color. Although we also analyzed the research for connections between methodological approaches and how a text engaged in the MMM concept, we did not find any discernable patterns. The reviewed research used a wide range of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods.

*Countering Invisibility: Uncritical Definitions of the Myth*

Most of the reviewed literature fell into the category of presenting uncritical definitions of the MMM that overlooked the historical purposes of the myth in promoting racial wedge politics. This group of literature characterized the MMM in two general ways. The most prevalent explanation presented the MMM as a stereotype of AAPIs as a homogenous population experiencing exceptional academic and socioeconomic success. For example, Museus and Kiang (2009) explained that “the model minority stereotype is the notion that Asian Americans achieve universal and unparalleled academic and occupational success” (p. 6). Other texts provided a wide assortment of conceptualizations of the MMM including stereotypes of studiousness, seriousness, submissive obedience, and social introversion, as well as being hardworking, adaptive, demure, shy, and possessing strong family values. None of these publications addressed the historical purposes of the MMM to uphold White supremacy through the racial disciplining of other people of color.

All these texts framed the significance of their presented research on AAPIs by expressing a primary concern over the invisibility of AAPIs in higher education scholarship, policies, and practice due to the MMM. They suggested that because the MMM characterized AAPIs as self-sufficient and successful, it led higher education researchers (e.g., Maramba, 2008; Museus & Chang, 2009; Teranishi, 2010), educators, and policy makers (e.g., CARE, 2013a; Chhuon, Hudley, Brenner, & Macias, 2010; J. K. Kim & Gasman, 2011; Park & Millora, 2010; Suzuki, 2002) to overlook the diversity of the population, and neglect its educational needs and interests. For example, Suzuki (2002) claimed that “because Asian American students are stereotyped as ‘problem-free’ high achievers, institutions of higher education have tended to neglect and ignore the many serious problems and needs they have” (p. 29).

By seeking to counter incomplete or uncritical definitions of the MMM, the reviewed literature generally engaged in two approaches to arguing against the MMM. First, many countered claims of universal academic and socioeconomic success among AAPIs by demonstrating educational disparities between AAPI populations. Accordingly, they often called for the use of ethnically disaggregated AAPI data in research and critiqued the limitations of research designs that did not recognize that not all AAPIs are academically successful. A second response in countering the MMM involved demonstrating barriers to achievement and persistent experiences with racism faced by AAPIs, thus arguing that AAPIs continue to be racially minoritized. Both approaches spotlighted deficits among segments of the AAPI population to disprove and counter stereotypes of AAPIs, but both are limited in their ability to effectively undermine the MMM, because they draw from and respond to an ahistorical and thus incomplete definition of the MMM. Moreover, they followed an assumption that “authentic” racial minorities in

higher education exhibit educational deficiencies, and therefore focused on demonstrating deficits among AAPIs.

*The MMM as a Homogenous Success Narrative*

In an effort to counter a stereotype of universal success, much of this research implicitly drew on a dominant lens of deficit thinking, by arguing that it obscured deficiencies found among AAPIs that would generally warrant research attention and investment on other students of color (Museus & Chang, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009). Thus, they attributed the relative invisibility of Asian Americans in research to the misalignment between the dominant deficit framework and the MMM. Accordingly, the strategy of countering the MMM involved demonstrating socioeconomic disparities among AAPIs to align with deficit understandings of race and racism in education (e.g., Asian Pacific American Legal Center [APALC] & Asian American Justice Center [AAJC], 2011; CARE, 2008; J. M. Kim, 2009; S. J. Lee & Kumashiro, 2005; Museus & Chang, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Museus & Truong, 2009; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012). Employing a deficit framework, these publications tended to spotlight Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans and the barriers and disparities they face to justify increased research on AAPIs. Their explanations for why AAPIs remained invisible in education and research placed blame on a model minority stereotype of high achievement, which does not fit the deficit model.

The demonstration of disparities and deficits to counter the MMM was apparent in the budding research on the establishment of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI). This scholarship positioned the AANAPISI program as a vehicle for debunking the educational success narrative of the MMM and resulting omission of AAPIs in policy discourse on racial inequalities in higher education (Laanan & Starobin, 2004; Park & Chang, 2010; Park & Teranishi, 2008; Teranishi, Maramba, & Ta, 2012). It suggested that advocacy for, and establishment of, AANAPISI challenged perceptions of AAPIs as self-sufficient and successful by presenting data on deficiencies and disparities, particularly those experienced by Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans. In addition to providing resources and services to underserved AAPI students, they argued that the AANAPISI designation would also establish AAPIs as an “authentic minority group” (Park & Chang, 2010). Such argumentation represents an effort to fit AAPIs into a dominant deficit framework in order to gain more policy attention for this population.

Scholarship on undergraduate and graduate student experiences also engaged in a counter-MMM project by demonstrating how AAPI students experienced educational disparities that justified more institutional and research attention. Some studies argued for a need to better understand Asian American undergraduates as racially marginalized students whose shortcomings fit within a dominant framework of deficit thinking, justifying an increase in institutional support. They attributed difficulties faced by Asian American undergraduates in developing relationships with non-Asian American peers, staff, and faculty, either directly or indirectly to the MMM (Y. K. Kim, Chang, & Park, 2009).

Nadal et al. (2010) directly engaged in an effort to counter the MMM within their conceptual framing to justify the value of ethnically disaggregating Asian

American populations and studying Pilipino Americans as a distinct graduate student population. They defined the MMM as a stereotype of Asian Americans “being well-educated and successful citizens in the United States” (Nadal et al., 2010, p. 695). However, rather than fundamentally reframe racialized rhetoric on Asian American graduate students as the MMM, they troubled the panethnic Asian American category by distancing Pilipino Americans from other Asian Americans. Nadal et al. (2010) rightfully argued that the MMM image of Asian American students rendered Pilipino American students invisible. However, by distancing Pilipino Americans away from other Asian Americans, they indirectly reinforced and left the MMM, as applied to other Asian Americans, intact. By demonstrating and arguing the ways Pilipino Americans experience “deficiencies in their graduate school experiences” (Nadal et al., 2010, p. 702), they also directly asserted a deficit framework to the study of Pilipino Americans, playing into a hegemonic racial framework to justify the need for more institutional attention and support.

Similarly, Hune (2011) defined the MMM as the portrayal of Asian American academic faculty as a racial success story, while F. P. F. Yeung (2013) problematized the perception of universal AAPI overrepresentation in higher education tied to the MMM. In calling for ethnic disaggregation in future research, Hune (2011) argued that educational institutions should recognize the racially minoritized status and deficiencies of this population. Likewise, F. P. F. Yeung argued that the MMM “masks many academic challenges that Asian Americans experience” (p. 281). Presumably with ethnically disaggregated data and more attention to barriers to Asian American academic success, it can be shown that some Asian Americans also lag behind Whites, and therefore fit within a deficit framework.

### *The MMM as a Nonspecific Stereotype of AAPIs*

Our review of literature also revealed that some scholarship used the term *model minority* as a catch-all phrase that incorporated practically any racial or cultural stereotype about Asian Americans. Defining the MMM in a variety of ways, including generalizations of AAPIs being quiet or silent, demure, hard-working, and exotic, none of these texts acknowledged the broader racist implications of the MMM outlined in the conceptual framework of this article. This group of scholarship also blamed the MMM for the invisibility and institutional neglect of AAPI educational needs and interests. To counter the MMM in these cases, this scholarship generally presented data and evidence to show how AAPIs are a diverse population with varied experiences in higher education. Central to this effort to counter the MMM was the argument that AAPIs continue to experience racism, and thus should not be ignored or made invisible in higher education research, policy, and practice.

Defining the MMM as a stereotype of cultural silence, research on undocumented Asian American college students poignantly described how these students were pressured into silence by their immigration status and the MMM (Chen & Buenavista, 2012; Eusebio, 2012). Eusebio (2012) detailed how her personal experiences clashed with dominant views of Asian Americans as a middle-class and successful model minority. To counter the perception of Asian Americans as a silent model minority, Chen and Buenavista (2012) memorialized the work of

undocumented student activist Tam Tran as efforts at breaking silences that veiled the experiences of undocumented Asian students. They presented contradictions between the MMM and Tran's activism, arguing that cultural "silence is coerced, learned, and conditioned, and not limited to Asian Americans" (p. 50).

Other texts also set out to counter the MMM by complicating, or presenting evidence to directly contradict, various stereotypical narratives of Asian Americans. Studies by J. K. Kim and Gasman (2011) and Park (2012) defined the MMM as an image of Asian American studiousness and hard work leading to academic achievement. To complicate this image, J. K. Kim and Gasman presented a qualitative study about variations in Asian American access to quality information in their college choice struggles. Park (2012) responded to the MMM by examining high participation rates among Chinese American and Korean American students in SAT preparation programs using social capital theory to demonstrate the importance of structural inequalities hindering educational attainment. In defining the MMM as an assumption of racial homogeneity among Asian Americans, Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, and McDonough (2004) illustrated ethnic and socioeconomic class differences in the college choice process through their quantitative analysis. Each of these texts set out to complicate or counter their respective notion of the MMM.

Other definitions of the MMM were also found in college student development literature on Asian Americans. This area of the scholarship often defined the MMM as a stereotype of academic excellence that exerted psychosocial pressures that produced negative mental health consequences for Asian American students (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2001, 2002). Leadership development and student involvement research often referenced the MMM, but defined it as a stereotype connoting studiousness, seriousness, social introversion, and obedience, which are characteristics often deemed antithetical to traditional conceptions of leadership (Lo, 2011). Much of the leadership research discussed the ways in which these stereotypes may negatively influence views of Asian Americans as leaders in comparison with other racial groups (Balón, 2005; Kwon, 2009; Lo, 2011). Each of these studies featured data and analysis to demonstrate the harms these stereotypes inflicted on Asian Americans students (Balón, 2005; Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Kodama et al., 2001, 2002; Lo, 2011), and how some of these students' actions contradicted these racial notions (Kwon, 2009).

Scholarship on AAPI graduate student experiences also aimed at presenting nuanced portrayals to combat various stereotypes of this population attributed to the MMM. For example, in their study on Native Hawaiian graduate student experiences and the important role of family in supporting their persistence, Museum, Mueller, and Aquino (2013) briefly defined the MMM as a problematic assumption of AAPI students as a uniform population, and one that requires research to demonstrate diversity and barriers to their academic attainment. To counter the assumption of racial homogeneity, they presented data on Native Hawaiian graduate student experiences to demonstrate diversity among AAPIs.

Research on Asian American student affairs professionals and higher education administrators also presented various definitions of the MMM. They explained that the MMM described Asian Americans as people who do not

challenge authority (Kobayashi, 2009; Mella, 2012; Wong, 2002), assimilate well (Fujimoto, 1996), and are demure, shy, and isolated (Chung, 2008; Kobayashi, 2009; Mella, 2012; Wong, 2002). Others suggested that the MMM depicted Asian Americans as adaptive, demure, and isolated (Chung, 2008; Mella, 2012; Wong, 2002), capable of overcoming disadvantages based on hard work and strong family values (Hu, 2008; Li-Bugg, 2011), and as smart, quiet, and obedient (Kobayashi, 2009). All of these definitions exhibited ahistorical descriptions, void of a critical understanding of the MMM. They also stemmed from a hodgepodge of cultural stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans. To combat these stereotypes, which were all attributed to the MMM, these studies presented qualitative data and analysis demonstrating a diversity of experiences among Asian Americans. They also sought to illustrate racialized challenges and barriers to success faced by their research subjects, thereby affirming the racial minority status of Asian Americans.

The definition of the MMM in these areas of scholarship is generally inconsistent and disconnected from a critical understanding of the racist trope. Rather, the MMM is used as an umbrella term for all racial stereotypes related to Asian Americans. This indiscriminate application of the MMM distracts from a sharper understanding of Asian American leadership development and student involvement. Classifying any racial or cultural stereotype of Asian Americans as the MMM obscured the racist purposes of the myth. Although this research complicated various stereotypes about Asian Americans, their utilization of uncritical and ahistorical definitions of the MMM prevented incisive critiques of the myth. Although these studies are important, they do little to upend the function of the MMM to maintain Whiteness.

#### *No Mentions of the Myth*

Among research literature in higher education that included AAPIs, about one out of four reviewed texts made no mention of the MMM. Many featured comparative race studies to discern differences in educational outcomes and experiences. Others chose to solely focus their attention on Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders in higher education to advance knowledge about the diverse population. In both cases, research findings highlighted the unique experiences of AAPIs in higher education, and contributed toward a better understanding of these understudied groups. Research on the field of AAS represented a third group of literature that made no mention of the MMM. These publications focused on the significance of curricular intervention in the academy and engaged a variety of critical theories including postcolonialism and critical pedagogy.

Most publications that made no mention of the MMM featured comparative race studies that included AAPIs. Despite conducting data analyses to discern racial differences in college choice, student experiences, and administrative leadership, these texts (An, 2010; Buenavista, 2012; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Espenshade & Chung, 2005; Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; J. Kim, DesJardins, & McCall, 2009; Kodama & Dugan, 2013; Park, 2009, 2013; Turner, 2007) did not cite the MMM. They included Asian Americans in their research design without justifying it as an effort to counter the MMM. By doing so, each study presented scholarly findings that highlighted unique experiences among Asian Americans in higher education. For example, Park (2013)

explained that focusing on Asian Americans on college campuses where they represent a large proportion of students allows us a rare opportunity to “hear students of color reflect on what it is like to be part of the numerical majority in a traditionally White institution” (p. 112). In most of the studies, findings suggested that Asian American outcomes and experiences in higher education are unique from other populations. Other studies drew attention to the similarities of Asian Americans with other people of color. For instance, Turner (2007) featured narratives of women of color and their pathways to the college presidency and highlighted strategies the women used to advance in their careers. Therefore, Turner advanced an asset-based perspective in studying women of color in the academy.

Not all comparative studies in this collection of literature engaged in critical perspectives. Though the MMM was not explicitly mentioned, Espenshade and Chung’s (2005) statement, “Asian applicants are the biggest winners if race is no longer considered in admissions. Nearly four out of every five places in the admitted class not taken by African-American and Hispanic students would be filled by Asians” (p. 298), is a prime example of advancing color-blind racist ideology. This conclusion juxtaposes an Asian American high-achieving model minority against African Americans and Latinos, who are positioned as racial groups that are deficient of characteristics meriting elite admission. Neglecting to account for multiple preferences and numerous factors in selective admission processes, the authors perpetuated a framework that maintains a system of White dominance. This case suggests that a lack of awareness or critical consciousness of the model minority concept can also lead to a reproduction of racial wedge politics.

A second group of literature making no mention of the MMM exclusively focused on descriptions of AAPI populations in higher education. Some presented research and data on diverse experiences and demographics of AAPI populations (APALC, 2006; Benham, 2006; Chang et al., 2007; Neilson & Suyemoto, 2009). Benham’s (2006) focus on Pacific Islander education resulted in no mention of the MMM, perhaps because the MMM does not historically include Pacific Islanders. Indeed, the reports by APALC and AAJC (2011) and Jung (2012) articulated conscious decisions to focus their analyses on Asian Americans and asserted the need to focus separate attention on Pacific Islanders, who are confronted with distinct forms of racialization and racism. APALC and AAJC explained that their decision was made to honor “the spirit of the [1997 Office of Management and Budget Statistical Policy Directive 15] and [recognize] the importance of data that capture the unique needs and concerns of Pacific Islander communities” (p. 3). These publications represent efforts to advance research-based understandings of AAPIs uncomplicated by a discussion about the MMM.

Similarly, some research on college choice (Poon & Byrd, 2013), college student experiences and perspectives (Chang, 2000; Inkelas, 2013b; Park, 2009; Pizzolato, 2010; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Wang, 2012; Poon, 2013), and faculty experiences (Loo & Ho, 2006) also made no mention of the MMM despite focusing on Asian Americans in higher education. They did not rely on the ubiquitous counter-MMM argument to justify their studies. Instead, they each offered contributions to various areas of scholarship by drawing attention to Asian American experiences that contradicted previous research.

For example, in the area of student development and self-authorship, some studies suggested that the dominant White-Asian dichotomous framework of understanding Asian American students and families was too simplistic and did not take into account diversity among Asian American experiences (Pizzolato et al., 2012). This research questioned the individualistic assumptions of self-authorship and its appropriateness for use with Asian American students and advanced the concept of cultural selfways for Asian American students in relation to epistemological development (Pizzolato, 2010; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Chaudhari, 2013).

Other research provided insightful examinations of Asian American perspectives and experiences with race and racism in higher education. For instance, Inkelas (2003b) revealed that campus climate matters in influencing Asian American attitudes toward affirmative action. Loo and Ho (2006) illuminated how the intersectionality of racism and sexism contributed to the denial of tenure of two Asian American faculty members. The presentation of subjects' perspectives and focus on hegemonic systems of domination prevented the reinforcement of the MMM and deficit thinking.

Scholarship on the founding, presence, advancement, struggles, and contradictions of AAS represented a third group of research that did not include a central discussion about how the MMM mischaracterizes AAPIs. On the whole, we found that this body of research was concerned with the academic field's pedagogical approaches and connections to student development goals (Alvarez & Liu, 2002; Osajima, 1998), its expansion to include emerging populations such as South Asian Americans (Dave, Dhingra, Maira, & Mazumdar, 2000) and Arab Americans (Maira & Shihade, 2006), its development in colleges and universities in the Midwest United States (E. Lee, 2009; J. Lee, 2009), institutional challenges to the field's sustainability (Chang, 1999), and tensions within the field to fulfill its historical community-engaged, counterhegemonic mission within the academy (Chan, 2000). This group of literature engaged in theoretical frameworks other than the MMM concept to explore the status of AAS as an academic field. For example, Dave et al. (2000) troubled paradigms of marginality, community studies, transnationalism, and postcoloniality in their consideration of South Asian Americans within AAS. These theoretical frameworks, though common in fields like ethnic studies and cultural studies, are rarely used in higher education scholarship. However, given the advancement of neoliberalism in higher education (Giroux, 2015), researchers might consider critical frameworks, like those used in ethnic studies, in higher education research.

Authors in this group chose to not mention the MMM in the framing of their studies. Literature on the field of AAS specifically engaged in scholarly frameworks that are rarely used in higher education studies, thereby providing implications of future scholarship potential. All these reviewed texts justified the significance of their studies without explicitly naming the MMM. Instead, they drew from a range of scholarly theories. In some cases, these frameworks led to study interpretations that innocuously identified how Asian American experiences in higher education differed from others. In Espenshade and Chung (2005), the interpretations of the study led to an advancement of racial wedge politics, as they did not seem to consider the racially charged nature of the claim they presented. Generally, studies that were not framed with the MMM included, or exclusively focused on, the experiences and perspectives of AAPIs in higher education. Many

produced innovative findings and implications for both AAPIs and the field of higher education research.

*Interrogating Whiteness: Critical Presentations of the Myth*

Slightly more than 10% of the authors in the reviewed literature used a critical definition of the MMM. These critical presentations of the myth deconstructed ways that AAPI communities were subjugated to racial oppression on their college campuses, how systemic Whiteness was maintained, and AAPI communities were used in racial wedge politics. Although some authors only addressed one aspect of the MMM (e.g., invisibility and silencing of AAPI experiences), each publication critically acknowledged how the MMM served to discipline other people of color and maintain White supremacy.

In exploring contexts, public discourses, and policies in higher education, some publications identified the historicity of race and racism in higher education and its effects on the modern university regarding AANAPISI and affirmative action policies (Buenavista et al., 2009; CARE, 2008; Chang, 2000; Engberg & Hurtado, 2011; Jung, 2012; S. J. Lee & Kumashiro, 2005; S. S. Lee, 2006; Park, 2013). For example, S. S. Lee (2006) argued that the MMM “serves as a particularly powerful rhetorical strategy for diverting resources away from race-conscious programs for African Americans and other minorities, and from de-legitimizing policies such as affirmative action” (p. 4). By examining higher education through a critical lens, S. J. Lee and Kumashiro (2005) highlighted the political implications of the MMM to counteract the civil rights advocacy, noting that “the stereotype has been used as a political weapon against other marginalized groups of color . . . in order to silence charges of racial inequality” (p. xii).

Furthering this body of literature, Park and Teranishi (2008) argued that the establishment of AANAPISI countered the MMM through a community-based racial repositioning of AAPIs. This contrasted with other AANAPISI scholarship reviewed that did not use a critical definition. By resisting the opportunity to counter the MMM as a simplistic success narrative by presenting evidence of AAPI educational deficits, they argued that the creation of AANAPISI opens possibilities for advancing racial justice and solidarity by explicitly aligning AAPI interests with other communities of color in minority serving institution legislation.

Chung Allred’s (2007) exploration of the racialization and positioning of Asian Americans, as a racial mascot, in relation to other racial groups exhibited two key components in presenting a critical definition of MMM. It was one of the only texts in the college admissions literature to critically depict the destructive duality of the MMM on Asian Americans and the polarizing effect it has on degrading other minority groups, specifically African Americans. At the same time, Chung Allred (2007) contended that some disadvantaged AAPI populations, especially Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans, could benefit from affirmative action, and other more privileged Asian Americans could benefit in “distinct and discrete ways” (p. 58) from the end of affirmative action in admission practices. The author, therefore, cited a framework of educational deficits among Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans to argue against perceptions of universal high achievement among AAPIs and how some can benefit from affirmative action policies. Even though Chung Allred (2007) presented a critical definition of the MMM, the

text simultaneously drew from a deficit lens to argue for the inclusion of some AAPIs in affirmative action programs. Therefore, scholarship using critical frameworks did not always avoid deficit thinking.

A few authors presented critical definitions of the MMM when exploring the experiences of students. Inkelas (2003a) presented a critical framework of the MMM in a study on Asian American student perceptions of affirmative action. Applying a critical framework, the study found a troubling internalization of the model minority narrative among some Asian Americans who viewed other students of color as inferior, yet simultaneously felt threatened by a campus culture of Whiteness. Similarly, Choi (2010) presented a critical conceptualization of the MMM in a study that highlighted the tendency of Asian American college students to adopt an uncritical and ahistorical understanding of the myth. The Asian American students in the study depicted the MMM as an all-encompassing negative racial stereotype of Asian Americans that portrayed the population as particularly socially awkward and nerdy. The study suggested that the MMM has come to take on new dimensions of meaning far from its sociohistorical conception, thereby obscuring a more critical and insightful public understanding of the MMM, racial stratification, and race relations. The lack of critical awareness about the MMM's insidious objectives among college students indicates the need for education about the racially divisive device.

Some publications presented a critical definition of the MMM and chose to focus on one aspect of the MMM in combatting the deleterious effects of the stereotype. Buenavista (2013) deconstructed the MMM as an assumption of high achievement among Asian Americans used to denigrate other people of color and reify a system of White dominance. Buenavista (2013) also criticized how the MMM pits Asian Americans against other people of color in the discourse on undocumented immigrants in education. The application of critical definition of the MMM highlighted the dual effects of the myth. In their examination of graduate student experiences, Poon and Hune (2009) also presented a critical definition of the MMM. By offering nuanced portrayals of diverse AAPI graduate student experiences with racism in the academy, they demonstrated how the MMM silenced AAPIs in the process of maintaining systemic Whiteness. These authors offered incisive, critical analyses of the MMM, bringing attention to the diverse and unique racialized experiences of AAPI students.

Only a fraction of the literature reviewed applied the critical definition of the MMM. The lack of scholarship overall that employs a critical presentation of the MMM is concerning. Scholarship that used critical perspectives of the MMM explored organizational, contextual, legal, and political aspects of race and higher education. Unfortunately, few publications focusing on AAPI students, faculty, or staff presented critical interpretations of the MMM and its broader racist implications. This collection of literature highlighted critical and asset-based perspectives in the study of AAPIs in higher education. Of notable importance, some articulated ways in which AAPIs can advance their interests and combat systemic Whiteness and racism while in solidarity with other people of color.

## Discussion

A central focus of research on AAPIs in higher education has been to counter the MMM. Defining and critiquing the MMM in a variety of ways, much of the

scholarship still used a counter-MMM framework in approaching research on this population and did not create a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of AAPIs. Some texts made no mention of the stereotype, and others embarked on critical race explorations of the MMM. Through this critical review, we identified four interconnected limitations of the counter-MMM project.

First, research seeking to counter the MMM often defined and deployed the MMM without a grounding in critical perspectives on race and racism. Simply defining the MMM as a stereotype about Asian Americans without recognizing its insidious implications for disciplining and shaming other people of color deflects attention away from how the myth is integral to a project of maintaining White supremacy. The majority of the reviewed texts neglected to address these complex racial dimensions of the stereotypical image and discursive device. Willis (1977) argued that “we must ask in what form, for whom, in which direction, and through what circles of unintention, with what reproductive consequences for the social system in general, particular advances are made” (p. 179). Researchers must continue to engage in critical reflection to determine if the purposes of their invocation of the MMM, and intentions to counter it, will move the AAPI narrative in the public discourse in a radically humanizing way. There must be intentionality, solidarity, and resistance to a compulsory use of the MMM that is conscious of the ways the MMM is integral to the oppression of other people of color and maintenance of White supremacy.

Second, many of the texts that engaged in a counter-MMM project largely contributed toward the reproduction and reinforcement of deficit thinking. Interestingly, research on other populations of color have begun to counter deficit thinking by exploring contexts for high achievement, particularly among African Americans (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2010; Harper, 2010). On the other hand, efforts to counter the MMM have highlighted educational deficits among segments of the AAPI population in higher education to disprove “the image of success [that] serves to exclude Asian Americans from social and educational programs” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416). The persistent call for ethnically disaggregated data on AAPIs in the literature is an example of how many studies seeking to counter the MMM have inadvertently reinforced the deficit framework. To prove that AAPIs are worthy of institutional attention and support as a racial minority group, some have presented ethnically disaggregated data to argue that segments of AAPI populations experience high educational failure rates and “at risk” status similar to, or worse than, those of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans (CARE, 2013a; Hune, 2002; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Museus & Truong, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Suzuki, 2002; Yeh, 2002).

More specifically, low educational attainment among Southeast Asian Americans, Pilipino Americans, and NHPIs are often highlighted to counter the stereotype and aggregate statistics of high achievement among the AAPI population and to argue that some AAPIs fit the framework of deficiencies that justify institutional support. A critical flaw in this argument, however, is that it essentializes AAPI ethnic groups based on educational achievement, bifurcating AAPIs into presumed low-achieving ethnic groups (e.g., Southeast Asian Americans, Pilipino Americans, NHPIs) and high-achieving ethnic groups (e.g., East Asian Americans, South Asian Americans). Such simplistic assumptions overlook the

dynamism and fluidity of diverse lived experiences. Thus, although it is important to conduct analyses on AAPIs using accurate and ethnically disaggregated data, there are limitations of the data disaggregation movement in advancing a more humanized scholarship of AAPIs in higher education.

Third, merely negating, contesting, and complicating the hegemonic MMM framing of Asian Americans in higher education often unintentionally reinforced this oppressive framing and other hegemonic frames (see Lakoff, 2004). We found many texts presenting uncritical and ahistorical definitions of the MMM as a stereotype of high academic success among Asian Americans. In an effort to counter this framing of Asian Americans in higher education, many texts negated the MMM by presenting counterevidence such as statistics on educational failure and experiences with barriers to success. The approach of refuting the MMM framing accepted the hegemonic deficit thinking model's racist ideological framing of race and education as the starting point for the counter-MMM project (Nopper, 2014). Thus, efforts to counter the MMM remained circumscribed by the dominant MMM framework.

A project of reframing research on AAPIs would involve drawing from a clear set of different values and perspectives (Kumashiro, 2008). The "basic principle of framing, for when you are arguing against the other side: Do not use their language. Their language picks out a frame—and it won't be the frame you want" (Lakoff, 2004, p. 3). The counter-MMM project has been largely concerned with presenting evidence-based proof of how AAPIs are not all high achieving in education, thus working from a reactionary stance that draws from and responds to the MMM thesis. However, the MMM is not merely a simple racial stereotype about high educational achievement among AAPIs. As such, exhibitions of disaggregated data demonstrating educational struggles among AAPIs are not sufficient for uprooting the MMM. Arguments equipped with empirical demographic evidence that AAPIs are not a universally high achievers inevitably fail at challenging the MMM because they only partially identify and address hegemonic racist ideology.

Finally, research that was aligned with the counter-MMM scholarly project was found to be intrinsically tied to efforts that centralize the MMM as the primary point of concern. Such studies ultimately sought to argue who AAPIs in higher education are not. For example, rather than simply presenting research on AAPI experiences with college access systems that reproduce racially unequal outcomes as a legitimate project, scholarship that was circuitously or directly engaged in a counter-MMM project would justify the study by using it to complicate or deconstruct the dominant MMM narrative. Therefore, the counter-MMM project limited the presentation of unapologetically accurate depictions of AAPI populations in higher education. It restricted scholarship from embracing the population's human complexities and diversity, and from producing more in-depth research on AAPI experiences and perspectives on race and racism in higher education.

### *Implications for Future Research*

The reframing of research on AAPIs in higher education cannot start with an agenda of disproving the model minority thesis, as it centers the hegemonic narrative of the MMM. The project of fundamentally reframing scholarship on

AAPIs in higher education must involve the transformation of “common sense” (Kumashiro, 2008) on AAPIs. Efforts to more accurately represent the lived experiences of these diverse populations must be rooted in values of humanism and equity (Gutierrez, 2006). Conducting research through a CRT lens that privileges the voices and perspectives of AAPIs in higher education is one approach to transforming the dominant racial framing of this diverse population. By grounding research in the lived experiences of AAPIs with race and racism in education, scholars can trouble dominant narratives that maintain White dominance.

Diversity among AAPI populations complicates hegemonic, deficit-oriented measures of racial inequalities in higher education. Institutionally sanctioned, standardized test scores and educational attainment data often suggest that AAPIs have achieved a high level of well-being in education, on average. However, other evaluations of holistic educational experiences reveal troubling realities among AAPIs, as highlighted in some of the reviewed literature. Therefore, standardized means of identifying racial disparities in higher education are highly limited in understanding the range of human experiences and realities among diverse AAPI populations.

To address this problem, we offer two specific suggestions to advance the project of fundamentally reframing scholarship on AAPIs in higher education to be grounded in the lived experiences of AAPIs. First, we call on scholars in this area to be more intentional in their use of panethnic terms and labels. This literature review has made it abundantly clear that the great majority of research in this area cannot be accurately categorized as concerning both Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. NHPI populations were largely missing in this body of scholarship, even when authors used terms like *Asian Pacific American*, *Asian Pacific Islander*, or *AAPI*. In conducting our review of the literature, we included three published literature reviews on AAPIs in education. Whereas Ngo and Lee’s (2007) and Ng et al.’s (2007) reviews of research on Asian Americans included significant discussions of the MMM, Benham’s (2006) assessment of literature on Pacific Islanders and education did not make mention of the stereotype. This distinction suggests that for Pacific Islanders, the MMM bears little relevance. Although many scholars in this field have lamented the limited amount of research on Asian Americans, the lack of research on Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in higher education is appalling. Unfortunately, the AAPI panethnic label has not led to increased research that is directly relevant to Pacific Islanders in higher education.

Second, we encourage future studies on how the unique racial experiences of AAPIs related to higher education offer a different and important, yet often obscured, dimension of research knowledge and critical perspectives on race and racism in higher education. We call on researchers to be innovative in grounding their conceptual frames and methods in the perspectives of AAPIs, and to let go of the central focus on countering, and thus centering, the MMM. Scholarly publications on the history, presence, proliferation, and struggles for institutional sustainability of Asian American studies in higher education provide potential models for how researching Asian Americans in higher education need not cite the MMM nor explicitly engage in a counter-MMM project to offer critical perspectives on race, racism, and higher education. The MMM and counter-MMM project are

neither central nor included in the scholarly discourse regarding AAS programs, which allows for a greater focus to be had on the lived experiences, perspectives, and interests of Asian Americans within post-secondary curricula.

The discipline of AAS itself is an important example of higher education scholarship that grounds its scholarly endeavors around the experiences and voices of Asian Americans to contribute critical deconstructions of systemic White dominance. Park (2013) also offered another example of scholarship that critically advances scholarship on Asian Americans in higher education without explaining its scholarly significance within a counter-MMM framework. Through an ethnographic study of campus race relations, Park (2013) was able to offer a contribution toward research on race in higher education by asking how Asian Americans fit into a racial reconciliation project on a campus where they represent a racial plurality on a historically White campus. This and other studies demonstrate that choosing to study AAPIs in higher education need not involve a focus on countering the MMM to justify research significance.

### *Conclusion*

It is important to note that we do not argue that research interrogating the MMM is unnecessary. We appreciate all the ways past and present studies have countered, demystified, challenged, and contested the MMM framing of AAPIs in higher education. Nonetheless, we are also ready for new research to emerge that is not obligated to give a nod to the myth simply because it has become common in this field. There remain significant gaps in the body of knowledge on AAPIs in higher education that must be addressed and many theoretical frameworks and models through which to understand their diverse experiences. In addition to contributing toward knowledge on AAPIs, research on AAPIs in higher education can also advance scholarship on race and racism in higher education. We encourage future studies on AAPIs in higher education to enhance critical understandings of how systemic Whiteness operates in higher education through the perspectives and experiences of these diverse populations.

Rather than engage in a counter-MMM project that can fall into the trap of reinforcing hegemonic ideology, we call for increased research on AAPIs in higher education that fundamentally reframes the way this population and their experiences are conceptualized. For more than 30 years, the dominant narrative in AAPI higher education research has focused on demonstrating how AAPIs are not a model minority—a task of arguing who AAPIs are not. We challenge the next era of scholarship on Asian American and Pacific Islanders in higher education to confidently illustrate who these diverse peoples and communities are and what they experience, and to present research as connected to the MMM if it is relevant and meets the key criteria of the critical race definition of the MMM as a discursive tool that maintains White dominance. To reject the MMM and the broader agenda of White dominance, new research must fundamentally reframe how research on AAPIs in higher education is justified and presented. Scholarship in this area must set a new agenda for research on AAPIs that is both humanizing and in alignment with the project of critical deconstructions of dominant racist ideologies in higher education.

## Notes

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