

# Introduction

## Literacy, Race, and an American Ethos

If we reflect on the history of language and literacy education in the United States, we will surely find deep contradiction. Reading and writing—particularly in “proper,” middle-class English—was widely believed to foster virtue, progress, and democratic ideals, but for those who have been racially othered, the right to literacy was often spirited out of reach. The double bind for racial minorities was particularly egregious in the antebellum period, when literacy, upheld as a testament to one’s humanity, was sponsored by Christian missionaries at the same time that it was violently withheld from African Americans by slave owners. Indeed, contradiction punctuates the history of U.S. literacy as racism continued to undo the promise of literacy education. Research in the past few decades has documented patterns of racial injustice in the United States at least since the nineteenth century: school segregation based on race and language background; nativist suppression of ethnic language schools; discriminatory use of literacy and language tests to exclude minorities from voting rights, jury service, and naturalized citizenship; and educational policies and pedagogies that penalize linguistic and rhetorical differences that do not emulate

standard American English and U.S. academic writing conventions. In short, racial injury persisted in language and literacy education in at least two essential ways: one, such education was withheld and two, when acquired, sanctioned standards for linguistic performance held ethnic minority difference in low esteem.

But it is not only the *past* of racial injury that should concern educators these days. What reading and writing teachers and researchers need to understand is that racial ideologies clutch onto the *present* and abide in our cultural beliefs about language and literacy, and we have yet to fully examine how such beliefs inform the ethos that speakers and writers are asked to inhabit. Understanding the ways in which race continues to burden language and literacy education is particularly important when we recognize that struggles for racial accountability are now hampered by the belief that we live in a postracial society where race no longer matters, by the ways in which language and literacy difference have become tropes for racial discrimination, and by the fact that linguistic diversity in our schools is rising at the same time that we face mounting pressure to standardize students' language and writing practices. The imperative for us now is to examine how the past follows, clings to, and intrudes upon the *present*. In this post-1960s era, in this half-century aftermath of dramatic civil rights struggles and legislative reform, how do racial injuries return to burden language and literacy education and practices? And in what ways can we work toward a rhetoric that at once remembers legacies of racism *and* works hopefully toward racial accountability?

For a glimpse at the tenacity of these racial legacies, we might pause briefly to examine how post-1960s language ideologies are gracefully depicted in the opening pages of Chang-Rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker*. Early in the novel, Korean American Henry Park reminisces over his first flirtations with Lelia Boswell, a self-described "average white girl" whom he would eventually marry. Slipping away from a crowded party, the two share tequila and intimate talk in a park filled with a pleasant mix of Spanish and English:

"People like me are always thinking about still having an accent," I said, trying to remember the operation of the salt, the liquor, the lime.

"I can tell," she said.

I asked her how.

"You speak perfectly, of course. I mean if we were talking on the phone, I wouldn't think twice."

"You mean it's my face."

"No, it's not that," she answered. She reached over as if to touch my cheek

but rested her arm instead on the bench back, grazing my neck. “You look like someone half listening to himself. You pay attention to what you’re doing. If I had to guess, you’re not a native speaker. Say something.”

“What should I say?”

“Say my name.”

“Lelia,” I said. “Lelia.”

“See? You said *Leel-ya* so deliberately. You tried not to but you were taking in the syllables. You’re very careful.” (11)

The double-consciousness that “people like me” inhabit is a reminder of the ways that language and literacy have been used in the service of racial injury and registers the wariness that remains. Indeed, Henry’s awareness and self-scrutiny as a racialized subject is more unrelenting than Lelia could have imagined in the early days of their relationship. As a child, he sees himself through the derisive eyes of a seemingly perfect white girl and patterns his speech after hers. Later, he is the one to discipline racial others when a firm hires him to spy on “foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, and neo-Americans” considered threats to powerful clients, and he is unsettled as he betrays new immigrants through his *writing*. He writes and relinquishes to unknown, powerful clients “the tract of their [new immigrants’] lives, unauthorized biographies” (16).

Henry and Lelia’s conversation anticipates the ways the two will struggle in their marriage not only because of *his* caution with language but hers as well. Lelia is a speech therapist who explains why *she* is so careful with language: “Unfortunately, I am the standard-bearer”(11). As a therapist, she recognizes that she occupies the traditional raced and gendered position of teacher and “standard-bearer,” one that is meant to nurture and educate English-language learners toward normative ways of speaking and listening. A long history of discriminatory language education entangles their marriage until, eventually, Lelia leaves Henry, placing in his hands a list of “who he is.” Finding a stray postscript—“false speaker of language”—prompts him to reflect: “Naturally, I came to see the list as indicative of her failures as well as mine. What we shared. It was the list of our sad children” (13). Here are two people who, encumbered by a messy racial inheritance, struggle to remake the “native speaker” and its “false” partner and, in doing so, stumble toward reconciliation within themselves and with one another.

It is telling that *Native Speaker* begins with separation and then devotes the remaining pages to the search for a healing language. Even as language and literacy education has become more widely accessible over the past century, we still find traces of racial injury in the double-

consciousness of language minorities like Henry as well as in the carefulness of white and nonwhite language educators like Lelia. After all, as Deborah Brandt tells us, “rapid changes in literacy and language may not so much bring rupture from the past as they bring an accumulation of different and proliferating pasts, a piling up of literate artifacts and signifying practices that haunt the sites of literacy learning” (“Accumulating” 665). In light of these ghostly returns, it is apparent that racial injury in language and literacy education can no longer be understood solely in terms of exclusion and other blatant acts of racism. In fact, as quite a few race scholars have argued, the emphasis on injury in race discourse—particularly, as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones asserts, on injuries of exclusion—tends to foreground isolated grievances and obscure legacies of systemic racial formation. Gutiérrez-Jones further contends that we must think more critically about the *nature* of racial injury. Racial injury, I argue, takes form not only as discrete discriminatory acts but also as the accumulation of racializing acts that precede, pile up, and perform on “native” and racial minority writers and speakers alike. What language and literacy educators need now is an understanding of the ways these “proliferating pasts” have come to constitute the subject positions available to racial minority writers as well as prevalent beliefs about the literate American ideal.

*Writing against Racial Injury: The Politics of Asian American Student Rhetoric* begins by exploring the racialization of the American speaking and writing subject. More specifically, this book asks what we can learn about this ethos from the story of Asian American activism for language and literacy rights in post-1960s California. The politics of Asian American education, I believe, can shed light on the historical struggle between the hope that we place in language and literacy education and the racial legacies that have frustrated that hope. By the late 1960s, the Asian American movement had inspired in race-conscious activists fresh optimism toward education and the promise of a collective voice. Asian American activists would pursue racial justice *through* their writing and, moreover, advocate *for* language and literacy as a form of racial accountability.

This activism, however, is hardly perceptible in the public imagination since Asian Americans—racialized as model minorities (read: already assimilated and thus invisible) or as perpetual foreigners (read: outside the nation’s history)—are seldom recognized as full participants in American cultural production. But the truth is that America’s national history of folding Asian Americans into economic realms as laborers and commercial partners while estranging them from political membership has created what Lisa Lowe has called “an alternative site, a site of cultural forms that propose, enact, and embody subjects

and practices not contained by the narrative of American citizenship” (176). For this reason, considering Asian American cultural production in these alternative sites is essential to identifying the forms that racial injury now takes. By exploring Asian American activist rhetoric at the sites of language and literacy production, I seek to understand the ways past racial injury has shaped common notions about who has the authority to speak and write as an American.

This book is concerned with the formation of the literate American ethos and its rearticulation by Asian American activists who, in the post-civil rights era, contested constraints on their language and literacy rights and composed an Asian American rhetoric to reimagine the American subject on more just terms. To understand the impetus for Asian American activism for language and literacy rights, we begin by examining why language and literacy became so deeply entrenched in our sense of American selfhood. Next we look at how Asian Americans were fashioned as outsider to that ethos.

### **THE GOOD AMERICAN WRITING WELL: LITERACY AND A RACIALIZED ETHOS**

To think of literacy as a staple of life—on the order of indoor lights or clothing—is to understand how thoroughly most Americans in these times are able to take their literacy for granted. It is also to appreciate how central reading and writing can be to people’s sense of security and well-being, *even to their sense of dignity*.

—DEBORAH BRANDT, *LITERACY IN AMERICAN LIVES* 1 (EMPHASIS MINE)

The promise of language and literacy education has been fundamental to the invention of an ideal American ethos throughout U.S. history. Reading and writing was and is commonly understood to cultivate a “sense of dignity” and good character—an assumption akin to the emphasis on the “good man speaking well” in the classical rhetorical tradition. To be sure, the meaning of “good” has and will change across cultures and historical moments, but even as social conditions have altered, the belief that literacy education enriches the American self and the wider public remains steadfast. Put another way, a commonplace about literacy has persisted throughout American history: the belief that we read and write to better ourselves and, further, to better society. Literacy, then, is not simply about the coding and decoding of written linguistic systems, but it also must be understood as text-based engagement with a society that attributes to literacy the power to further our most dearly held cultural values. Yet even as literacy has been seen as a categorical public good in the formation of an American ethos, literacy was at the same time a site of racial injury.

The cultural significance of literacy, as Sylvia Scribner has explained in her seminal essay “Literacy in Three Metaphors,” can be understood through three basic metaphors: literacy as adaptation, literacy as power, and literacy as grace. Whereas “literacy-as-adaptation” attends to the practical uses of reading and writing, the emphasis on the pragmatic tends to obscure the symbolic meaning that literacy has for people across many cultures: grace and power. “Literacy-as-grace” refers to the belief that literacy fosters virtue within the individual (13–15). In the United States, from the colonial era through the nineteenth-century Sunday school movement, literacy was considered essential to salvation for Christian missionaries and everyday believers. Women were responsible for teaching their children to read the Bible, missionaries sought to teach slaves and Native Americans to read in churches and schoolhouses, and Sunday schools provided literacy education to those who could not attend town schools (Boylan; Gordon and Gordon; Monaghan). Moreover, the assumption that literacy can nurture virtue was certainly not restricted to the religious. As Scribner writes, the “notion that participation in a literate—that is, bookish—tradition enlarges and develops a person’s essential self is pervasive and still undergirds the concept of a liberal education” (13).

The belief that literacy would strengthen moral and intellectual virtue became fundamental to the new nation. It seemed that literacy education would foster virtue in the self that might, in turn, enable Americans to enrich society through political, socioeconomic, and cultural means. Within the young nation, debates over the establishment of a national language academy were spurred on by the belief in “literacy-as-power,” or the promise that literacy would foster civic engagement and social progress. Political leaders, for the most part, believed that literacy would encourage the spread of democracy, showcase scientific advances, and eventually yield a national literature. John Adams thus proposed establishing a national language academy that would emphasize English-language development, Benjamin Franklin cautioned against German-language schools, and Noah Webster created dictionaries and textbooks to promote an American English. Many early leaders, however, contended that tolerance for diverse languages would be most conducive to the growth of the nation and that adopting a single national language would be too reminiscent of monarchical rule (Heath, “Why No Official Tongue?”). At the same time, as Dennis Baron has argued, these early efforts register an emergent ideology that associated the English language in particular with national identity and progress (*English-Only Question*).

To become lettered *in English*, then, was to become an American self whose virtue was defined by morality, intellectual talent, civic en-

agement, and socioeconomic worth. The growth of common schools and then public universities in the nineteenth century reaffirmed this ideology of language and literacy. Moreover, English language and literacy became fundamental to citizenship rights as Edward Stevens Jr. so thoroughly delineates through American legal history. The hope that inspired literacy, however, was tempered by a related denial that frustrated language and literacy education for racial minorities. If literacy symbolized the path toward becoming the “good” American, then legacies of racism undoubtedly seated racial minorities in opposition to this ethos. A troubling alternation between promise and denial would sadly come to typify literacy education.

Language and literacy education for Native Americans and African Americans until the nineteenth century, for instance, was often cast in terms of spiritual edification but effectively positioned white missionaries as the bearers of grace and racial minorities as wanting in virtue. From praying towns in the colonies to government-sponsored boarding schools, white missionaries were devoted to Native American literacy education because they hoped for the religious conversion of those they considered unsaved and uncivilized. Many of the most prominent missionaries and educators—such as Puritans John Eliot and the Mayhew family, the Franciscan friars in the Catholic missions, and Lt. Richard Pratt of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School—also encouraged the *cultural* conversion of these students (Enoch; Gordon and Gordon 193–225). Cultivation of the good American often went against indigenous cultural traditions, and this is apparent in Edward Gordon and Elaine Gordon’s account of Iroquois experiences at the Boyle Indian School: “Benjamin Franklin was told by the Iroquois that students who had ‘been educated in that college . . . were absolutely good for nothing . . . for killing deer, catching beaver or surprising an enemy.’ For they had forgotten the ‘true methods’ of the Indians. Instead, Franklin tells us that the Iroquois proposed that English children be sent to them. The Iroquois, ‘would take care of their Education, bring them up . . . and make men of them’” (200). Education was about ushering Native Americans into a white mainstream notion of Christian faith and cultural identification.

Likewise, white missionaries advocated for the literacy education of slaves, and despite the protests of slave owners who feared revolt, the belief that reading is vital to one’s spiritual life was persistent enough that churches became major sponsors of African American literacy. In her history of African American literacy education in the antebellum era, Janet Duitsman Cornelius writes that many slaves from West African cultures likely already had a high regard for literacy, and their enslavement meant that writing petitions to the courts and narratives

to the public would become important in their fight for freedom. As churches continued to encourage literacy, African Americans who belonged to Baptist and Methodist congregations in particular made the most of opportunities to become leaders and promote the cultural life of fellow congregants. But by the late nineteenth century, several states made it illegal to teach slaves to read, and many evangelicals who supported the literacy education of slaves assented to the institution of slavery. In sum, language and literacy education for Native Americans and African Americans at once sought to foster moral virtue and assumed that they lacked such virtue. More broadly, literacy education meant to foster a kind of moral virtue that ushered students into racial, gendered, and class-based norms.

Later, in the twentieth century, even as opportunities for literacy education started to develop, literacy continued to be a site of racial injury. In the racial anxieties that followed the Civil War, literacy tests were unevenly administered and effectively disenfranchised many African Americans from the right to vote (Stevens; Kates). Schools for African Americans and other racial minorities suffered from poor facilities, few resources, and little funding. And by the late 1960s, dialect, language, and other cultural differences were unjustly assessed as intellectual deficiency and a social failure on the part of parents and communities, leading to the inordinate placement of African American children in special education classes (Ball and Lardner; Labov). Finally, there are the racial anxieties that percolate in contemporary conflicts over Black English and other nonstandard dialects, bilingual education, and national language policy.

Literacy education in the United States has clearly played a powerful part in the racial legacies that educators have inherited. Racial injury took the form of outright denial of education, segregated schools, poor material conditions in “colored” schools, and discriminatory standards for linguistic performance. What’s more is that each act of racial injury piled up such that racial minorities were interpellated into subject positions estranged from the good American writing well. After all, literacy has symbolized American virtues—moral, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and cognitive—that, as Catherine Prendergast has argued, became coupled with whiteness (*Literacy and Racial Justice*). By contrast, mainstream literacy education had long started with the assumption that racial minorities and working-class whites fell short of all those virtues that reading and writing symbolized. Writing as the ideal American self was difficult as nonwhite people were racialized based on moral, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and cognitive terms. As constraining as racial formation has been, it is remarkable that there have been so many notable minority speakers and writers who contest-

ed these subject positions and still turned to the power of reading, writing, and speaking to find voice, create art, and demand social justice. The past few decades have seen histories and ethnographies of literacy that document lived literacy practices and the cultural significance that reading and writing have for diverse ethnic communities.

But often missing from these critical histories of literacy education and practice are Asian Americans. The silence about Asian Americans might be explained by the unfailing construction of Asian immigrants and their American-born children as always foreign, always foil to an ideal American ethos. The question is often not whether Asian Americans can write as *good* Americans so much as whether they can write as *Americans at all*. As a result, Asian Americans—and Latino/a Americans, for that matter—tend to be missing from mainstream narratives about American culture. Even as Asian American language and literacy education and practices are often cast in shadow, it is nonetheless important to read their stories in the context of the wider history of literacy and in relation to the racial formation of other minorities. The patterns in racial injury against Asian Americans were similarly disconcerting in that Asian Americans have been constructed as being outsider to the literate American ethos based on moral, political, cultural, and cognitive grounds. While little has been written about Asian Americans in literacy studies, we can look to Asian American studies and histories of education to learn about the racial injury that Asian Americans had to endure in public schools and the impact that this must have had on Asian American language and literacy education.

## RACIAL INJURY IN ASIAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

The duty which the teachers owe to the children committed to their charge should prompt them to active efforts to save the rising generation from contamination and pollution by *a race reeking with the vices of the Orient, a race that knows neither truth, principle, modesty nor respect for our laws*. The moral and physical ruin already wrought to our youth by contact with these people is fearful.

Let us exhaust all peaceful methods to stop its spread.

—SAN FRANCISCO SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT ANDREW MOULDER IN 1886,  
QTD. IN VICTOR LOW, *THE UNIMPRESSIBLE RACE* (74, EMPHASIS MINE)

The politics of Asian American education, in many ways, mirrored the legacies of racism imposed on other racial minorities, and such discrimination is aptly captured by the 1886 statement of San Francisco school superintendent (and former California State school superintendent) Andrew Moulder's 1886 statement against admitting Chinese

children into the public schools. The denigration of the virtue of Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian immigrants and their American-born children reflected a deep nativism against the “Mongolian” race and related anxieties over American language and literacy education. What’s clear is that public education is partly responsible for the racial formation of Asian Americans, and more than a century of racial injury in the schools provided the impetus for the rising activism for language and literacy education that grew fervent in the late 1960s.

The concerted struggles over Asian American education are best understood within the context of the Asian migrations that began gathering momentum three decades prior to Moulder’s remarks. The mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century saw approximately one million Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and Indian immigrants arrive in Hawaii, California, and the Pacific Northwest. Interestingly, as Sucheng Chan points out in *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, this transnational migration was partly set in motion by the West’s imperialist interventions in the East: the Opium War led to British power within China’s ports and, as a result, damaged cottage industries and opportunities for local workers; the United States similarly induced Japan into opening up to trade in the Treaty of 1854; the Spanish-American War resulted in American acquisition of the Philippines despite Filipino struggles for independence; and British colonialism in India produced new diasporic migrations through Hong Kong and to other parts of Asia, the United States, Canada, and Australia (3–23). These incursions created declining conditions within each nation’s agricultural and trade economies, overwhelmed common people with rising land taxes, and enabled the entry of Western capitalists who worked to recruit cheap labor. By the 1850s, Chinese immigrants began to arrive in Hawaii to labor in the sugar plantations and in California to mine for gold, construct the first transcontinental railroad, gather harvests as migrant farmworkers, and become merchants. Even as Chinese workers were a coveted labor supply for plantation owners and railroad companies, their presence bred resentment among white workers who had to compete against them for work. Such resentment was exacerbated by economic recessions and the completion of the railroad, which brought Americans and European immigrants searching for work. The anti-Chinese immigration exclusion acts of 1882, 1892, 1902, and 1904 represented the cycle of labor recruitment and nativist exclusion that would mark Asian American history (Chan 54–55).

When Chinese immigration was curbed, Japanese immigration was welcomed. When Japanese laborers began to organize in Hawaii, their immigration was restricted by the Gentleman’s Agreement in 1907 and an immigration exclusion act in 1924; then Filipino laborers were re-

cruited. Korean and Indian immigrants also entered in smaller numbers but were similarly resented and classed as part of the yellow peril. Chan observes that, even as each ethnic group entered at different stages in U.S. economic development, what they shared contributed to their racialization as a single group: “Asian international migration was part of a larger, global phenomenon: the movement of workers, capital, and technology across national boundaries to enable entrepreneurs to exploit natural resources in more and more parts of the world” (4). Asian Americans, who were racialized in terms of economic threat, subsequently faced economic and political discrimination in the foreign miner’s tax, immigration exclusion acts, and alien land acts.

Such anti-Asian discrimination—at times reinforced with violence—constitutes, in Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s terms, a series of “racial projects.” Race is “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies,” but race is slippery as it continues to be rearticulated through “a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (Omi and Winant 55–56). According to Chan, racial projects even preceded early Chinese immigration in reports penned by diplomats, missionaries, and merchants whose depictions were inflected by their intolerance of Chinese cultural and economic life (45).

Nativism directed at Asian immigrants on the West Coast and Hawaii was moreover part of the public fever over white identity and American citizenship that followed the Civil War. In *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Ian Haney López argues that the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which granted birthright citizenship regardless of race, invigorated racism against Asian and Native American persons and new debates over naturalized citizenship. The result: racial projects that took form as fifty-two “racial prerequisite cases” from the 1878 case *In re Ah Yup* through 1952. *In re Ah Yup* is telling, Haney López writes, because it reveals the explicit construction of white and nonwhite identity. In 1878, Circuit Judge Sawyer denied Ah Yup, a Chinese man, the right to U.S. citizenship, reasoning that a Chinese person is not white and therefore could not acquire citizenship. Judge Sawyer employed three lines of argument varyingly invoked in subsequent racial prerequisite cases: “Congressional intent,” scientific classification (ethnologists classified Asians as one of five races, different from whites), and common sense (the popular belief that a Chinese person is not white) (Haney López 54).

Later, when scientific evidence contradicted late nineteenth and early twentieth-century common sense—when, for instance, anthropologists claimed that those from India have “Caucasian” heritage—

the courts rejected science and upheld popular belief. Most revealing is Haney López's point that we continue to take race for granted even now; from our vantage point, the court's elaborate reading is "absurd" since we all "know" that a Chinese person is not white: "Accepting the non-Whiteness of Chinese as commonplace truth, we are perplexed and amused by Judge Sawyer's arduous efforts to justify, or rather assert, that same conclusion. The lengthy categorical debates in the prerequisite cases seem ridiculous only because we have fully accepted the categories these cases established. . . . The truly curious, then, is not the typological sophistry of the courts, but our own certainty regarding the obvious validity of the recently fabricated" (55). That is, we bristle at this 1878 case not just because of its overt racism but *also* because we accept racial categories as common sense even now. Common sense hides its own construction. *In re Ah Yup* withheld naturalized citizenship from Chinese immigrants in 1878, *Takao Ozawa v. United States* likewise affected Japanese immigrants in 1922, and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* followed for Indian immigrants in 1923. This was the racial climate that informed Asian American education.

The schools, particularly in communities with significant "Mongolian" presence, were certainly not innocent of racial reasoning that defined the Asian American subject. Because the earliest Chinese immigrants were primarily working-age men, there were few families and thus initially little pressure for Asian American enrollment in the public schools. In fact, the anti-Chinese immigration exclusion acts prompted those who settled in the United States to turn their attention to domestic rights. As Eileen Tamura argues, we currently have very little scholarship on the history of Asian American education ("Asian Americans"), but at least two important studies give us a sense of early Asian American activism for public education in California: Victor Low's *The Unimpressible Race: A Century of Educational Struggle by the Chinese in San Francisco* and Charles Wollenberg's *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855–1975*. An 1855 California school law determined that funds for public education would be distributed based on the number of white children in the state. As early as the 1860s, Chinese immigrants petitioned San Francisco officials for a school where immigrants could learn English, and one school in the city endured openings and closings amid much contention between 1859 and 1871. Only private tutoring, church-based schools, and Chinese language schools were otherwise available to these immigrants until 1885, despite the fact that they paid taxes (Low 13–37).

In 1885, however, Chinese Americans in California did achieve public education. Nine years earlier, *Ward v. Flood* required the state to enroll African American children into the public schools or create

segregated schools, particularly in light of the fact that racial minorities were denied access to schools for which they were taxed. The case thus upheld the right of racial minorities to public schooling and strengthened the Chinese American litigation to come. In San Francisco the parents of Mamie Tape, a Chinese American born in the United States, brought suit against Principal Jennie Hurley who had denied Tape admission to Spring Valley School. *Tape v. Hurley* did uphold Tape's right to an education, but in a hurried effort to circumvent the integration of Chinese Americans into white public schools, Superintendent Moulder pushed the legislature to fund what became the Chinese School, later rebuilt as the Oriental School in 1906 (Low 60–70, 92–93; Wollenberg 39–41). While there was pressure for the Japanese to also attend the Oriental School, President Roosevelt needed to intervene as an increasingly powerful Japan protested the discrimination. The Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 halted segregation of Japanese American children, and, in turn, Japan agreed to curb further emigration of laborers to the United States (Wollenberg 54–68).

In the midst of these broad conflicts over racial exclusion and public education, Asian Americans were unwavering in their commitment to language rights and literacy education, seeking to participate in English-speaking business endeavors, support their children's and their own education, preserve ethnic heritage, and bring about social justice. Those early church-based classes in San Francisco, for instance, responded to Chinese immigrants' desire to learn English until *Tape v. Hurley* compelled the school districts to provide public schools for them. The desire for English-language learning, however, was undercut in the territory of Hawaii, where language difference was used to justify separate English Standard schools that effectively segregated white middle-class children from racialized plantation workers' children between 1924 and 1948 (Tamura "The English-Only Effort"; Young "Standard English and Student Bodies").

Racial injury even intruded on the ethnic language schools that Chinese and Japanese immigrants built for their children. Early Chinese immigrants created Chinese language schools that would prepare their children for rigorous academic exams in China because they had been excluded from American schools. Japanese immigrants similarly educated their children in Japanese language schools by drawing on textbooks that taught about Japan's history and culture. By 1920, as the Americanization movement took hold after World War I, a coalition of Japanese language educators decided that the curriculum should encourage the *Nisei* to learn about Japanese heritage and *also* prepare them for life in America. Still, ethnic language schools in California and Hawaii faced mounting accusations of disloyalty to the United

States with perhaps the most vocal opposition in California coming from *Sacramento Bee* newspaper owner V. S. McClatchy (Morimoto 17–31, 55–79). In Hawaii the territorial attorney general Harry Irwin proposed eradicating the schools altogether, but restrictions on teacher certification and curricula were eventually ruled illegal by *Farrington v. Tokushige* (Hawkins). While the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II closed many of these schools, Japanese language schools thrived at the Tule Lake camp, where the “no-no boys” (who refused to sign American loyalty contracts) were largely sent, and then experienced resurgence after the war (Morimoto 117–40).

These histories capture the ways that Asian Americans were denied self-actualization as the good American writing well: those who pursued English language and literacy education had to contend with racial discrimination that prevented them from attending mainstream public schools and limited the resources apportioned to segregated schools, and those who hoped to preserve their family languages were treated with suspicion. Even early arguments for Asian American education hinged on the assumption that Asian Americans were inherently different—namely, deprived and disloyal—and consequently needed an education that would deter them from criminal delinquency. The de jure segregation of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gradually receded as Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and others of Asian ancestry began trickling into mainstream public schools, and the last racial restriction on naturalized citizenship was lifted in 1952.

At the same time, common-sense notions of race persisted in the more subtle guise of the “model minority,” and the achievements of Japanese American students were received warily. In the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, educational researchers drew on intelligence tests to compare white and Japanese American children and found that Japanese Americans scored approximately one grade level lower on the tests but maintained comparable or even higher grades in school (Yoo). While researchers wondered whether language difference might account for the difference in test performance, the discrepancy between test scores and grades was explained by a reaffirmation of standardized tests’ objectivity and teacher bias. Furthermore, there emerged an early representation of the model minority as one who works hard but whose native intelligence does not match that of European Americans. The myth of the model minority became firmly entrenched with the publication of William Petersen’s 1966 article “Success Story, Japanese American Style” in the *New York Times Magazine* and soon came to signify not just Japanese Americans but more generally the new waves of Asian immigrants who arrived as a result of the 1965 liberalization of immigration policy and the diasporas born of war in Southeast Asia.

Together, the newest immigrants and American-born people of Asian ancestry inherited the promise and denial of language rights and literacy education.

## **WRITING AGAINST RACIAL INJURY IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA AND BEYOND**

For Asian Americans the late 1960s and early 1970s marked a clear turning point in this history of racial formation. Here was a moment when activists from diverse Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic backgrounds organized to interrogate and contend with a history of shared racial othering in the United States. The Asian American movement fostered collective scrutiny of the historical construction of Asian Americans as irredeemable foreigners—whether Mongolian, Oriental, or simply “yellow”—and activists laid claim to a newly politicized Asian American identity (Wei). Such activism was perhaps most apparent in the late 1960s at San Francisco State University, when Asian American student organizations came together with African American, Latino/a, and Native American groups in the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) strikes and agitated for “self-determination” over their college education. These strikes escalated into a militant stand-off against university presidents, the Board of Trustees, and a governor who saw police force as the antidote to student disruptions.

The TWLF strikes did, in fact, shut down the university and garnered uneasy concessions (including a school of ethnic studies), becoming just one flashpoint to be read in relation to sister protests against institutional racism on university campuses across the country. But as William Wei documents in his invaluable history of the Asian American movement, this growing critical consciousness prompted activism not only on college campuses but also beyond—for example, at the site of ethnic neighborhoods in urban spaces (e.g., Chinatowns) struggling with injustices related to race, labor, and gender. Not surprisingly then, as the racial landscape in America shifted dramatically in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the moment was ripe for Asian American advocacy for language and literacy rights. In the coming years, Asian American activists began advocating for language and literacy and testified to a rising race consciousness through their writing: mission statements and leaflets for student organizations, protest speeches, letters to school administrators and politicians, alternative literary and news publications, and more. Educators and students alike were called upon to nurture home languages, create new forums for writers, and reinvent a public rhetoric that would work toward racial justice.

The educational history of Asian Americans in the United States brings into sharp relief the ways that racial ideologies have shaped our nation's long-standing commitment to language and literacy. Indeed, as Catherine Prendergast explains so lucidly: "If literacy has become the site of struggle for racial justice since the civil rights movement, it is because it has been for so many years the site of racial injustice in America" (*Literacy and Racial Justice* 2). What emerged in the Asian American movement was a recurrent theme in U.S. history: conflicts over language and literacy often masked wider racial tensions. Asian American activism for language and literacy was essentially a struggle to rewrite an educational system long troubled by racial injury and to redefine who can speak and write as an American. As the race-conscious protests of the movement swelled and then settled, Asian Americans faced two pressing imperatives: to reexamine what racial injury meant in present-day language and literacy education and practice, and to adapt their emerging collective rhetoric to changing discourses about race and racial accountability. It is here that my inquiry begins.

This inquiry is informed not only by my position as an educator and researcher interested in literacy studies, ethnographies of communication, linguistic diversity, and ethnic minority rhetorics but also by my background as a second-generation Vietnamese American whose family immigrated to the United States—more specifically, to California—in 1975. For my part, I was introduced to the Asian American movement, the origins of ethnic studies programs, and the idea of race consciousness during my first semester at Berkeley in the early 1990s. My response: uncertainty. On the one hand, I took pride in the Asian American and related race-conscious movements and wanted in earnest to be part of this heritage that belongs to racial minorities in particular and to America in its entirety. On the other hand, I was not sure that I saw myself reflected in this history, partly because I wasn't certain how Southeast Asian refugees fit into this narrative and partly for another reason: the dominant discourse about Asian Americans at the time positioned us as a privileged model minority threatening the white student body on University of California campuses. I didn't feel privileged; I was trying to navigate (and finance) my college education without being privy to the rules of academic life. At the time, I wasn't prepared to reconcile these contradictory racial ideologies.

Close to ten years later, I began to think about the Asian American movement again—this time, as a researcher focused on literacy, language, and ethnic minority rhetorics. Revisiting Wei's historical account of the Asian American movement, I was struck by the role that reading groups, grassroots publications, and other forms of literacy figured into activism at the time. I hoped to study the literacy practices

within activist Asian American student organizations and, in doing so, to join scholars who share a curiosity about and engage in ethnographic inquiry into everyday discourse practices of “nonmainstream” communities, to borrow Beverly Moss’s phrase (for example, Cushman; Farr; Guerra; Moss *Literacy across Communities* and *Community Text Arises*; Prendergast *Literacy and Racial Justice*; and to an extent, Heath’s *Ways with Words*, too). Literacy scholars and sociolinguists who adopt an ethnographic approach seek a thick description of reading, writing, and speaking practices within and across communities. The point of ethnographies of communication, as Dell Hymes’s canonical work in sociolinguistics suggests, is to understand the communicative practices within particular communities and, in doing so, generate a map of linguistic practices that emerge not from abstract rules but instead percolate from the ground up in the context of people’s everyday lives. Furthermore, such ethnographies may have implications for teaching: “Assumptions are made in educational institutions about the literacy needs of individual students which seem not to be borne out by the students’ day-to-day lives,” John Swwed contends. “And it is this relationship between school and the outside world that I think must be observed, studied, and highlighted” (Swwed 427).

In light of Asian American and other racial minority student activist calls for “self-determination” over their college education in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it would follow that we ought to critically listen to such activists and identify the rhetorical exigencies “borne out by [their] day-to-day lives.” This book argues that we do, in fact, have much to learn from racial minority student activists who have created alternative sites for reading, writing, and speaking: how their speaking and writing positions are informed by racial histories; why and how they speak and write; what conversations call on them to give voice to their concerns and rearticulate their subject positions. As educators, we can then begin to reflect on how these practices might inform our theories, definitions, and curricula about writing and rhetoric.

For these reasons, in 2002, I began my research inquiry with an ethnographic case study of the discourse practices in the Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC), a grassroots college student organization established in 1993. VAC provided a rich research site because of the founding students’ mission to incite political awareness and community action. Writing and speech were core to how VAC students invented, extended, and reinvented community—whether in their weekly meetings, mentorship program for local high school students, rallies for political awareness, or relationships with other university and community organizations. In a sense, VAC students faced rhetorical exigencies and employed strategies that echoed activists in the Asian American

movement two decades earlier: students sought to understand Asian American subject positions and, through writing and speech, formed community in order to contest and rearticulate what it means to be Asian American. In fact, VAC leaders explicitly recalled their inheritance from the Asian American movement and expressed a desire to emulate earlier activists.

But I also witnessed the kind of uncertainties that, as an undergraduate, I could not name when enrolled in an introductory ethnic studies course. The racial landscape on college campuses and beyond had changed dramatically since the late 1960s. That is, the Asian American movement can be read in the context of what Howard Winant, in *The New Politics of Race*, has described as a post-World War II “global shift” in understandings about race: “Starting after World War II and culminating in the 1960s, there was a global shift, a ‘break,’ in the worldwide racial system that had endured for centuries. The shift occurred because many challenges to the old forms of racial hierarchy converged after the war: anticolonialism, antiapartheid, worldwide revulsion at fascism, the U.S. civil rights movement, and U.S.-USSR competition in the world’s South all called white supremacy into question to an extent unparalleled in modern history. These events and conflicts linked antiracism to democratic political development more strongly than ever before” (xii). Yet by 1970, Winant argues (as he and Michael Omi also argued in their seminal *Racial Formation in the United States*), the response to such activism was marked by “incorporation and containment of the antiracist challenge” (xii). As much as Asian American students in the early 2000s were standing on the shoulders of earlier movement activists, they found themselves in unfamiliar territory, seeking to understand race and contesting racial injury in a culture of postracial discourse. Racial injury lingered by delimiting the subject positions of Asian American speakers and writers; furthermore, student activists had to contend with new demands engendered by a post-civil rights era belief that we somehow had moved beyond race.

As I sought a fuller understanding of VAC student activist discourse practices—interpellations of Asian Americans and writing and speech that affirmed, contested, and/or revised these subject positions—I redefined my research project, juxtaposing my ethnographic perspective with a historical one informed by critical race theory. Put another way, I am still committed to understanding and *recognizing* the discourse practices that govern Asian American student activist communities, but it is only by stripping back layer-by-layer the processes of racial formation that inform Asian American subject positions that we can interrogate why and how Asian Americans are positioned as racial others. With this introductory chapter, I sought to illustrate that American

speaking and writing positions have been and continue to be inflected with race and that Asian Americans (and of course, other racial minorities as well as new immigrants) often find themselves confronting this inheritance.

In *Writing against Racial Injury*, I explore Asian American activism for language and literacy in post-1960s California to understand what constituted racial injury and how an emergent Asian American rhetoric attempted to redress such injuries. Drawing on literacy studies, ethnic minority rhetorical scholarship, Asian American studies, and critical race theory, the two parts of this book juxtapose Asian American advocacy for language and literacy rights in the early 1970s and the more hidden and nuanced negotiations of campus racial politics in the early 2000s—two historical counterpoints that more broadly elucidate shifts in race discourse in the post-civil rights era. By examining the shifting politics of Asian American activist rhetorics, my hope is that this study begins to speak into the deep gulf that has long divided histories of language and literacy and histories of Asian Americans in the United States. After all, as LuMing Mao and Morris Young tell us in *Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric*, scholars in language, literacy, and rhetorical studies “have seen little work that focuses directly on how Asian Americans use the symbolic resources of language in social, cultural, and political arenas to disrupt and transform the dominant European American discourse and its representations of Asians and Asian Americans” (2). These discursive practices are often what Young has called “minor re/visions,” whereby the “minor” works to rewrite mainstream American narratives that have cast ethnic minority practices in shadow (*Minor Re/Visions*). Like Young and the contributors to *Representations*, I hope to build on our understandings of Asian American discourse that reconsiders language and literacy in light of American legacies of racism.

Based on historiography and ethnography, this research project considers Asian American activists who struggled to preserve their linguistic heritage, to authorize their writing, and to fashion an Asian American rhetoric that could respond to contemporary racial politics. To begin, I pose the following questions about the complicated relationship that Asian Americans have with language and literacy education and practice:

In what ways are Asian American speaking and writing subjects already racialized?

Why did language and literacy continue to be contested sites in Asian American movements for racial justice?

How had Asian American student activists engaged in writing and discourse in order to contest and revise their subject positions?

What happened when these revised subject positions interrupted postracial or color-blind discourses?

And finally, how might Asian American activist rhetoric present educators with new and hopeful ways of writing and talking about race in American schools and universities?

Each chapter considers racial injury at the site of language and literacy production. To throw light on the shifts between these two historical counterpoints of the early 1970s and the early 2000s, I have organized the book into two parts: part 1 focuses on Asian American activist rhetoric in the early 1970s, and part 2 looks at the early 2000s.

Part 1 turns first to the 1970s, when activists were harnessing the movement's emerging race consciousness and argued for "self-determination" over their language and literacy education and production. In 1970 the Office for Civil Rights saw fit to name "language minorities" as a group whose civil rights needed to be guarded—a naming act that called attention to the ways language issues had become tropes for racial discrimination. Activism for not only language but also writing was particularly fierce in California, where there were relatively more Asian Americans in public schools and universities. Chapter 1, "Language and Racial Injury in *Lau v. Nichols*," examines the ways that language difference was used to reinscribe racialized subject positions. For several years preceding the 1974 case, Chinese American parents in San Francisco had called on the public schools to provide English language education or, better yet, bilingual education to their non-English-speaking children. When these appeals were denied and when their children's language difference was characterized as deficiency, the parents brought a class action suit on behalf of approximately three thousand Chinese American students against the San Francisco Unified School District, and the case was eventually decided by the Supreme Court. My analysis of *Lau v. Nichols* traces how language difference became the pretext for racial discrimination, arguing that the subsequent unraveling of language rights indicates that the blunt instrument of courts neither exposed racialized understandings of language nor remedied the subtle workings of racial formation. At the same time that Chinese American activists were struggling for self-determination over their children's language education, Asian American activists in universities were demanding self-determination over their writing and writing education.

Chapter 2, "*Gidra* and the Extracurriculum of Asian American Publications," explores the ways activists claimed self-determination

by creating alternative forums for public writing. In the aftermath of volatile Third World Liberation Front and other ethnic studies strikes on college campuses in California and across the nation, Asian American and other racial minority student activists continued in their struggles by establishing student organizations and creating alternative news and literary publications. Self-sponsored writing grew out of new Asian American student organizations, and this chapter gives special attention to the student-initiated publication *Gidra*, which would eventually become the ur-text for Asian American student activists. The editors and writers of *Gidra* hoped to create a forum for democratic dialogue, and their writing encouraged them to grapple with their invented ethos as politicized Asian Americans; interestingly, these efforts coincided historically with composition studies' growing concern over nonmainstream students and writing's social function. The chapter explores the ways these alternative student publications register conflict over how to reinvent an Asian American ethos based on an ideology of self-determination, on the one hand, and in response to legacies of racism, on the other. While activism for *Lau v. Nichols* and the publication of *Gidra* addressed different groups and aspects of language and literacy education, both recognized that language and literacy continued to be sites of racial conflict and both had the common goal of self-determination, or the right to direct one's own education. Such activism reflected concerns about racial injury and consequently led to calls for language and literacy rights, whether the right to bilingual education or political voice.

In the next decades, as a *rights* rhetoric came to govern race talk within American education, there were new debates over what constituted racial injury and whose rights should be protected. College campuses saw ethnic studies departments, cross-cultural student organizations, and diversity initiatives more firmly rooted in students' academic and extracurricular lives. At the same time, these commitments to racial awareness also saw intense backlash in light of claims that white students are victims of reverse discrimination and a mounting frustration with multicultural education and political correctness. Many have come to believe that we now live in a postracial state and can return to liberal ideals of colorblind equality. Whereas the 1970s saw Asian American activists critiquing racial injuries that excluded or otherwise constrained their language rights and literacy practices, a younger generation of Asian American activists in the early 2000s found themselves grappling with what Asian American studies scholar Dana Takagi has called the "retreat from race" on college campuses. These activists questioned the ways movement rhetoric might or might not help them figure out how to fight for racial accountability in the present.

Part 2 examines the ways Asian American students drew from their movement inheritance to rearticulate their subject positions and contend with campus racial politics. In particular, these three chapters draw from an ethnographic case study of the Vietnamese American Coalition (VAC), a political student organization in a California university. Based on participant observation during spring 2002, interviews with the twelve most active VAC members and one of the organization's founders, and archived newsletters, this section explores VAC students' political rhetoric and their engagement with campus race talk. Chapter 3, "Campus Racial Politics and a 'Rhetoric of Injury,'" considers the discourses that mediate college students' understandings of race by examining a conflict between "cross-cultural" student organizations and student government leaders who were largely identified as white fraternity and sorority members. The chapter examines the ways the trope of injury mediates racial politics and thereby locks students into perpetrator and victim roles. Underpinning the rhetoric of injury is an ideology of liberal individualism that overshadows social responsibility. Student activists, then, would require alternative rhetorical strategies that recognize our inheritance of racial legacies and work toward reconciliation and an ethic of responsibility.

The next two chapters identify alternative strategies that VAC students used to dismantle reified ideas about race and to redefine an American ethos. Chapter 4, "Asian American Rhetorical Memory, a 'Memory That Is Only Sometimes Our Own,'" explores the rhetorically savvy ways in which cultural memory is used to challenge whose memories are authorized, what gets remembered, and why. I focus here on a VAC student's rhetorical memory as he narrates his protest against Senator John McCain's reference to North Vietnamese "gooks" in the 2000 presidential primaries. In the student's recollections, he works toward what ancient rhetoricians called *copia* and thereby articulates a textured and nuanced notion of Asian American identity.

Chapter 5, "I WANT A THICKER ACCENT": Revisionary Public Texts," turns to student performances that playfully resignify race and racial accountability. The chapter centers on public texts that reperform Asian American identity: a nonprofit's proposed Vietnamese American studies curriculum, meant to supplement humanities and social science content in the middle schools; a "Culture Night" performance, which one VAC student scripted; and several VAC pieces, including textual art like "I WANT A THICKER ACCENT" and the performance "Speak American Damn It!" Read alongside earlier scholarship in literacy, rhetoric, and composition about ways in which racial minority people "flip the script" (Gilyard *Voices of the Self*; see also Mao; Powell; Schroeder, Fox, and Bizzell; and Villanueva, for exam-

ple), we see how these performances are instructive to how language and literacy educators might understand the role of discourse in racial formation. Thus, we might arm students with rhetorical strategies that challenge racialized subject positions.

Together, these chapters depict a troubling yet hopeful account of the ways that language and literacy education have alternately racialized Asian Americans while enabling us to rearticulate what it means to speak and write as politicized Asian Americans. It is only through thick description of Asian American activism in the past and present that we can start to appreciate the cultural meaning that language, literacy, and rhetoric have had in their fight for racial justice. Activism for language and literacy rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a response to the contradiction between the promise and denial of language and literacy in American history. In their movement for racial justice, Asian Americans worked tenaciously to remedy their exclusion from language and literacy education and production. Close to fifty years later, their legacy remained, but understandings of race and racial accountability were diluted into a rhetoric of injury that tended to emphasize individual rights over social responsibility. By reading closely Asian American activists' powerful and playful rhetoric, however, we are called upon to critically remember our nation's racial legacies and to accordingly reimagine not only an Asian American ethos but also an American one. *Writing against Racial Injury*, I hope, will provide insight to language and literacy educators, historians of education, and Asian American studies scholars who are committed to understanding the ways racial injury shapes our idea of the good American writing well. Asian American activism for language and literacy gives us a glimpse into the ample and diverse ways literacy figured into Asian American cultural production; it also prompts us to rethink the concept of literacy itself and the ways literacy and language are always already inflected with our nation's racial inheritance.