Chinese Americans in Multiracial Chicago: A Story of Overlapping Racializations

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is well known among anthropologists that “race” as a scientific concept denoting human biological variation is no longer valid, but that race as a social construct and a shaping force still has profound material repercussions in peoples’ daily lives. In 2004, two notable events occurred in Chicago that attested to the persistent significance of race in regulating minority lives in the city. In February 2004, a Caucasian firefighter in the West Side was discovered using racial slurs against African Americans over his transmission radio. This caused a huge uproar in the media, and many people pointed fingers at the racist firefighter who was labeled a “bad seed” by a local politician. The head of the Chicago Fire Department later resigned under pressure, and Mayor Richard Daley appointed an African American to fill the newly vacant office. While the media was still arguing over whether the appointment of an African American fire chief would help fight the old racist network in the Chicago Fire Department, another racial

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1. See, e.g., Faye V. Harrison, The Persistent Power of “Race” in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism, 24 ANN. REV. ANTHRO. 47, 47-50 (1995); see also Michael Omi & Howard Winant, On the Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race, in RACE, IDENTITY, AND REPRESENTATION IN EDUCATION 3-10 (Cameron McCarthy & Warren Crichlow eds., 1993).


3. Interview with a staff member, Chicago Park District, in Chi., Ill. (June 25, 2004).

dispute was being staged with Asian Americans in the spotlight. In May 2004, the City of Chicago decided to exclude Asian Americans from its affirmative action program for contracting in the construction industry. Despite protests from both the Asian American community and scholars in Asian American studies, there was little response from the mainstream white society; the model minority myth was so deeply entrenched in the American mind that few people believed Asian Americans still face discrimination today.

The American public’s contrastive reactions to the two events—the ostentatious outrage with the firefighter and the prevailing silence over affirmative action for Asian American contractors—illustrate well the limitation of popular understandings of racism. Despite the prevailing U.S. racial ideology of multiculturalism and diversity, the American public’s understanding of racial differences is still articulated and structured in primarily Black and white terms. While individual use of abusive language against African Americans is vehemently denounced as racist behavior, less visible is institutionalized racism inherent in the American political and social systems, which renders Asian Americans, African Americans, and other minority groups in disadvantaged positions. Far from being two isolated incidents, the controversies over the firefighter and affirmative action program together highlight the tension between a dominant Black and white racial paradigm and the multiracial realities of large U.S. cities. The question we must address then is: How are Asian Americans positioned in a rapidly changing U.S. society that is turning multiracial demographically while remaining persistently Black and white politically?

This article attempts to partially answer the above question by examining the racialized experience of working-class Chinese Americans.

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8. For some interesting earlier works that help inform this question, see TOMÁS ALMAGUER, RACIAL FAULT LINES: THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN CALIFORNIA (1994) (using California as a case study to show how various minority groups were racialized in different ways that transcended the Black/white paradigm during the last half of the 19th century) and EVELYN NAKANO GLENN, UNEQUAL FREEDOM: HOW RACE AND GENDER SHAPED AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP AND LABOR (2002) (comparing race relations in three different regions of the United States between 1870 and 1930, and providing a comparative framework that goes beyond the Black and white paradigm by powerfully demonstrating the regional variation of American race relations during the same historical period).
9. With the understanding that Chinese American identity is always contested on different levels, I am using “Chinese” and “Chinese Americans” interchangeably in this article because in the neighborhood that I study, both Chinese immigrants and American-born Chinese face similar situations of racialization. See, e.g., TIMOTHY FONG, THE FIRST SUBURBAN CHINATOWN: THE REMAKING OF MONTEREY PARK, CALIFORNIA (1994); JOHN HORTON, THE POLITICS OF DIVERSITY: IMMIGRATION,
in relation to poor African Americans and Latinos in the emerging multiracial working-class immigrant neighborhood of Bridgeport, a community in the southwest part of Chicago. Drawing on Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s idea of “racialization” and Earl Lewis’s theory of “overlapping diasporas,” I propose viewing the working-class Chinese American experience through a framework of “overlapping racializations” — namely, appreciating that the racialization of working-class Chinese Americans in Bridgeport is intercepted by both the sedimented history of white racial violence against Blacks and the stigmatization of poor Latino immigrants as the problem minority. The idea of “overlapping” entails that there are multiple levels of complexity in interracial relations, which may involve both confrontation and collaboration. It is also attentive to ways through which class differentiation within the Chinese American community mediates people’s understanding of racial differences. This concept complicates traditional ways of studying U.S. race relations in three important ways: first, it examines not only the racialized experience of Chinese Americans, but the mode through which they are racialized; second, it proposes to study different minorities’ experiences not as isolated but as interrelated; third, it goes beyond the Black/white dichotomy by interrogating the current reconfiguration of whiteness against racialized immigrant “others” in the name of multiculturalism and diversity.

RESISTANCE, AND CHANGE IN MONTEREY PARK, CALIFORNIA (1994) (examining the subtle divisions and differences between Chinese and Chinese Americans). It must also be noted that the distinction between American-born Chinese and China-born Chinese captures only a glimpse of the heterogeneity among the larger Chinese Americans community. Distinctions also can be drawn between Mandarin speakers and Cantonese speakers; between Taiwanese, Mainlanders and people from Hong Kong; between Fujianese and Cantonese; etc. Furthermore, there is also a small population of diasporic Chinese from Southeast Asian countries.

10. Omi and Winant define racialization in the following manner: “We employ the term racialization to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one.” MICHAEL OMI & HOWARD WINANT, RACIAL FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES: FROM THE 1960S TO THE 1980S (1986).


12. In his study of African Americans and Latinos in Houston, Nestor Rodriguez observed varied modes of intergroup relations between the African American and Latino community, and an absence of polarization between Asians and the other two groups. See Nestor Rodriguez, U.S. Immigration and Changing Relations between African Americans and Latinos, in THE HANDBOOK OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION: THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE 423, 423-27 (Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz & Josh DeWind eds., 1999). The work of Jennifer Lee also draws attention to forms of intergroup relations other than that of conflict—civility and cooperation between Korean Americans and African Americans. See generally JENNIFER LEE, CIVILITY IN THE CITY: BLACKS, JEWS, AND KOREANS IN URBAN AMERICA (2002) (studying merchant-customer relationships among Blacks, Jews, and Koreans in Black neighborhoods across the country in order to examine the state of the larger race and ethnic relations among these three groups).
My analysis is organized as follows: Part II explains my research methodology. Part III discusses the recent expansion of Chinese American settlement in Chicago beyond Chinatown to Bridgeport, and the transformation of Bridgeport into a multiracial community. Part IV explores how class differentiation among Chinese Americans contributes to their different racialization experiences. Part V utilizes Bonnie Urciuoli’s distinction between the concepts of racialization and ethnicization to discuss how the current experiences of working-class Chinese Americans articulates with the historical Black/white racial structure in Bridgeport. Part VI examines the shared experience between working-class Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans. Finally, in Part VII, I propose a framework of “overlapping racializations” in order to theorize and situate the racialized experience of Bridgeport’s working-class Chinese American community in relation to African Americans and Latinos.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research evaluated in this article is based on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Chicago’s Chinatown and Bridgeport communities from May to August 2003, June to August 2004, and for all of 2005. During my year-long stint in 2005, I lived with a working-class Chinese immigrant family in Bridgeport and participated actively in the neighborhood life. In addition, I volunteered in the citizenship program of a Chinese American social service agency in Chinatown for eight months. Altogether I conducted over one hundred open-ended interviews with people from different racial and class backgrounds. Each interview was coded and dated, and every interviewee was assigned a pseudonym in order to protect his or her privacy.

When conducting interviews with community members, I made a point of asking people whether they wanted to be audio-taped. Generally speaking, my Caucasian participants were more willing to be recorded than their Chinese counterparts. After accumulating eight taped interviews, five of them with non-Chinese Americans, I decided to switch to note taking and informal interviews because they proved to be less intimidating for the socially vulnerable Chinese immigrant population. As soon as possible after finishing each session, and usually within twenty-four hours, I reconstructed the interviews on my computer based on my memory and written notes. While it was impossible to reconstruct the interviews verbatim, I am confident that I have preserved the main ideas and flavor of

13. Among these, twenty were with Caucasians, five with African Americans, and seven with Latinos.
14. Some Chinese informants became very nervous when I tried to audio-tape them. I also observed that people were more selective about what they said when their interviews were audio-taped.
each one. My choice of interview participants was largely context-based and event-based. By this I mean that I looked for specific occasions, social events, or topics in dispute within the community that functioned as "frames"\(^15\) in which dialogue and other forms of social interactions took place among social actors from various racial and class backgrounds. I also followed the suggestions of my former interviewees in order to find new participants. Besides participant observation and open-ended interviews, I also conducted archival research at the University of Chicago and Chicago Historical Society on the history of Chinese Americans in the city. I also obtained data on hate crimes against Asian Americans (including Chinese Americans) from the Chicago Commission on Human Relations and the Chicago Police Department.

To help readers better understand the article, I would now like to introduce my background as a researcher. As a young woman born in China conducting research on Chinese Americans in the United States, I struggled with the dilemma of being both an insider and outsider for the Chinese American community in Bridgeport.\(^16\) My educational background as a doctoral student in a flagship Midwestern university maintained the distance between me and my working-class research subjects. On the other hand, my bilingual skills in Chinese and English made me a ready resource for community members, as I was often asked to translate phone bills and letters or help fill out various forms. In the process, I was able to visit some immigrants’ homes and develop close friendships with them.

On several occasions while I was walking around in Bridgeport, I was mistaken as a Chinese immigrant woman who did not speak English. White and Latino youths yelled racial slurs at me and threatened to beat me up. Sharing these racialized experiences with my research subjects helped break down the barriers between us, and at times I was even considered a member of the community because of our similar experiences. Furthermore, my interviews with non-Chinese Americans were undoubtedly mediated by my perceived identity as a Chinese woman, a point on which I will reflect more when discussing my interview with a long-time white resident of Bridgeport.

III. A NEIGHBORHOOD IN TRANSFORMATION

In this part, I discuss the changing racial landscape in Bridgeport

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where the racialization of working-class Chinese immigrants gets played out. I also provide useful background information that can be used to contextualize my interview data and the overall argument of the article. Bridgeport was, until recently, a white working-class neighborhood known for its history of resistance against housing desegregation and substantial anti-Black racial violence. The neighborhood has been home to different waves of European immigrants: Irish, Germans, Lithuanians, Czechoslovaksians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Italians. Politically, it remains an Irish stronghold: five of Chicago’s mayors have hailed from Bridgeport, including the current mayor—Richard Daley.

Starting from the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the influx of immigrants from Asia and Latin America transformed Bridgeport into a multiracial community. Today, its population is roughly 26% Asian American, 30% Latino, and 41% white. While Latinos and Asian Americans constitute the two largest minority groups in Bridgeport, the political identity of the neighborhood remains strongly white. Additionally, while African Americans constitute only 1.05% of Bridgeport’s current population, they nonetheless continue to play an important role in the neighborhood’s racial imagination. For example, in 1997 a 13-year-old African American youth named Lenard Clark was beaten into a coma by two white youths while biking in a park in Bridgeport. The two offenders later bragged to their friends that they had kept Bridgeport white. In another example, on June 25, 2000, an African American male was parked at a gas station in Bridgeport when four youths came over to his truck. The victim got out of the truck to see what was wrong. One of the youths said: “Hey Nigger, you are in the wrong neighborhood. We’ll kill you.” The victim then got back into his truck and started to drive away while the offenders threw bricks and bottles in his direction. A police sergeant happened to drive by and arrested the offenders.

The rapid expansion of the Chinese population in Bridgeport, mainly working-class immigrants from Hong Kong and Canton, began around the 1980s and 90s when several Chinese American developers began building

17. See, e.g., CHICAGO COMMISSION ON RACE RELATIONS, THE NEGRO IN CHICAGO (1922) (analyzing the 1919 race riots); CHICAGO COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS, REPORT ON 3309 SOUTH LOWE AVENUE (1964) (discussing Chicago residents’ resistance to housing desegregation).
19. The majority of Asian Americans in Bridgeport are Chinese.
20. NIPC DATA, supra note 18.
21. See Flynn McRoberts & James Hill, Amid Anger, Quiet Efforts to End Racism; A City Commission’s Reactions to the Beating of Lenard Clark May Be the Boldest and Most Lasting, CHI. TRIB., Nov. 10, 1997, Metro, at 1; Jerry Thomas & Gary Marx, Bishop Vows to Fight Racism in His Schools, CHI. TRIB., Mar. 25, 1997, at 1.
22. CHICAGO COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS.
townhouses heavily marketed towards the Chinese.\textsuperscript{23} Today, Bridgeport’s Chinese population has exceeded that of Chinatown.\textsuperscript{24} Many Chinese are willing to pay a higher price to buy a house in Bridgeport because of its proximity to Chinatown. The pattern of Chinese expansion goes like this: if one Chinese family bought a house in Bridgeport, another Chinese will knock on the door of this first family’s white neighbors and ask if they would like to sell. If the white owner refuses, then the Chinese bidder will raise the price little by little until the person eventually agrees.\textsuperscript{25} In this way, the Chinese have taken over much of the neighborhood, block by block.

While the arrival of Chinese immigrants revitalized Bridgeport’s residential real estate market, tension between Chinese Americans and more established residents, mainly whites (including Hispanics who self-identify as white), also increased. On November 3, 1999, two Asian American male teens were walking along a Bridgeport street when they were assaulted by three white male teens. The white youths shouted racial epithets and struck the faces and bodies of the Asian youths.\textsuperscript{26} In 2000, a Chinese restaurant on Halsted Street was set on fire. Believing the crime was racially motivated, the owner eventually moved out of Bridgeport to the suburbs.\textsuperscript{27} These are just two recorded hate crimes. According to many Chinese residents in Bridgeport, numerous unreported cases of interracial harassment occur on a daily basis. Steve, a 20-year-old Chinese American college student who grew up in Bridgeport explained to me: “Harassment? It happens so often that it has become normal. I’ve gotten used to it.”\textsuperscript{28}

IV. CLASS DIFFERENTIATION AMONG CHINESE AMERICANS

In this section of my article I will present my interview with a middle-

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  \item 24. According to Census 2000, the Chinese population in Bridgeport is 8,273, while that in Armour Square (where Chinatown is located) is 7,148. NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS PLANNING COMMISSION, SUMMARY OF GENERAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS FOR THE CITY OF CHICAGO AND ITS 77 COMMUNITY AREAS, http://www.nipc.org/est/DP_1234_CA_2000.xls (last visited Apr. 13, 2006).
  \item 25. This observation is based on extensive interviews with both white and Chinese informants in Bridgeport.
  \item 26. \textit{See CHI. COMM’N ON HUMAN RELATIONS, 1999 CITY OF CHICAGO COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS HATE CRIME REPORT 13} (1999). The racial classifications in this hate crime report stop at the larger Asian American level and do not disaggregate data in order to identify specific Asian American subgroups. As it turns out, the two Asian American teenagers attacked in this specific incident were Chinese immigrant youths who attended a local Chicago public school. Throughout my research I interviewed their teachers, local community leaders, and social workers who helped bring their offenders into court.
  \item 28. Interview with Steve, in Urbana-Champaign, III. (Nov. 1, 2003).
\end{itemize}
class Chinese American realtor to illustrate how class differentiation among Chinese Americans mediates their differential racialization experiences. As has been noted by many scholars in American studies, racial formation in the United States is oftentimes a class formation as well. Because of the deeply entrenched stereotype of the "model minority," there have been relatively few studies on the heterogeneity among Asian Americans. Nevertheless, some scholars in Asian American studies have noted that class mobility and new immigration among Asian Americans have eroded the cross-racial coalitions of the civil rights era and created new strategic alliances between whites and a segment of Asian Americans. In this context, understanding class differentiation among Chinese Americans not only serves to complicate the overlapping racializations among Chinese Americans, African Americans and Latinos, but also offers a productive window through which to examine the re-

29. My distinction between working-class and middle-class Chinese Americans is a relative one. By middle class, I mean those Chinese Americans who are mainly in the professional and managerial occupations. These individuals usually have college or higher educational background, and can typically navigate between the white American society and the Chinese immigrant community for their own economic, social, or personal benefit. By working-class, I mean those Chinese immigrants who are working within the lowest tier of the American economy in, for example, the food service industry, garment industry, hotels, airports, etc. These individuals tend to have limited financial resources and cultural capital to challenge their racialized status in the United States.

30. See generally DAVID R. ROEDIGER, THE WAGES OF WHITENESS: RACE AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS (1991) (discussing how race as a social construct is frequently defined through class conflict and notions of class difference); see also JOHN HARTIGAN, JR., RACIAL SITUATIONS: CLASS PREDICAMENTS OF WHITENESS IN DETROIT (1999) (arguing that class shapes the significance of white racial identity and whiteness through an ethnographic study of three predominately white neighborhoods in Detroit); EARL LEWIS, IN THEIR OWN INTERESTS: RACE, CLASS, AND POWER IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY NORFOLK, VIRGINIA (1991) (taking a historical look at the way that African Americans positioned and defined themselves in Norfolk, Virginia based on shifts in social relations and the conditions at work and home).

31. This term was first used by William Petersen in 1966 in an article in which the author praised Japanese Americans as a model minority in opposition to Blacks because of their hardworking cultural values. William Petersen, Success Story, Japanese-American Style, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 9, 1966, Magazine, at 180. For a critique of the model minority myth, see STACEY J. LEE, UNRAVELING THE "MODEL MINORITY" STEREOTYPE: LISTENING TO ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH (1996) (de-constructing the stereotype by presenting information gathered from interviews and reviewing a wide body of academic literature).


33. See, e.g., Yen Espiritu & Paul Ong, Class Constraints on Racial Solidarity Among Asian Americans, in THE NEW ASIAN IMMIGRATION IN LOS ANGELES AND GLOBAL RESTRUCTURING 295 (Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, & Lucie Cheng eds., 1994) (explaining how class differences have divided the Asian American community and inhibited the development of a unified identity); Susan Koshy, Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness, 28 BOUNDARY 2 153 (2001) (arguing that Asian Americans helped produce and were produced by whiteness frameworks, and criticizing the theoretical simplicity of the Black-white model of race relations).
configuration of whiteness and the contemporary transformation of U.S. multicultural politics.

Albert is the boss of one of the most successful Chinese real estate businesses in Bridgeport. He has a master’s degree in engineering and started his own business in Bridgeport in 1988. Explaining why his family lives in the suburbs, Albert says: “I want a better environment for my children. In the suburbs, I feel more relaxed, more laid back. City life is more stressful, with so many people in such a crowded space.” On his personal website, Albert expresses his love for golf in the following manner: “[P]laying golf is a good way to have a better quality of life in a healthy environment.” Albert obviously views himself as living a privileged life that is far beyond the reach of working-class immigrants in Bridgeport. He takes pride in the fact that Chinese Americans are considered the model minority by many white Americans. Along these lines, he notes: “I don’t see anything wrong with that; it’s a good thing for us. I have achieved my American dream. I am more American than my American friends. I play golf.”

Albert represents a small group of middle-class Chinese Americans who live in the suburbs but function as community leaders in areas outside of their residential neighborhoods, such as Bridgeport and Chinatown. Mostly educated in the United States, these middle-class Chinese Americans virtually serve as cultural brokers between working-class immigrants and mainstream white society. Unlike working-class Chinese Americans who are confined to the racialized space of inner-city Chicago, this group of middle-class Chinese Americans has the social mobility to travel between the city and the suburbs, and they have relatively few chances to experience interracial encounters either on the streets or through the public transportation system. I once scheduled an interview with a middle-class Chinese American community leader, Robert, on the phone. When I asked him how to get to his business in Pilsen by bus, he answered, “I don’t know. I never take the bus.”

This middle-class segregation from working-class daily life in the city not only points to class differentiations among Chinese Americans, but also fosters a different understanding of white racism on the part of middle-class Chinese Americans. Commenting on the harassment of Chinese immigrants in Bridgeport, Albert notes:

Well, the Chinese can’t blame someone else for it. If they behave well, they would be treated well. Those people you mentioned, they don’t behave themselves. A lot of Chinese, they are not educated. They are looked down upon here. They talk loud, they are impolite. When people say “hi” they don’t know how to respond. If you do everything right and

34. Telephone conversation, in Chi., Ill. (July 9, 2003).
people still harass you, that’s racism. If you are a bad person...

“What do you mean a ‘bad person’?” I asked.

Someone who behaves differently. You know, it’s their [white people’s] place. You are immigrants. They prefer people from the same ethnic group. If you are O.K., you are nice, they won’t bother you. I don’t see any America-born Chinese having problems. It is mainly those non-English speakers. It’s a cultural thing. If you speak English, at least you can communicate with them. They treat everybody the same.35

Here Albert blames working-class Chinese Americans for the racism they encounter in Bridgeport by constructing them as culturally deficient and morally inadequate. By framing racial discrimination against new immigrants in cultural terms, Albert is echoing the prevailing American rhetorical practice of using culture as a code word for race.36 Furthermore, by claiming that white people treat everybody the same way, he is explicitly endorsing the colorblind American racial ideology and casting out working-class Chinese Americans as un-American or deviant from the American norm. In this way, Albert’s denigration of working-class Chinese Americans also resonates with the historical white construction of Chinese Americans as the inassimilable foreigners.

It must be noted that Albert’s real estate business in Bridgeport markets heavily towards new Chinese immigrants, and it is precisely these working-class Chinese immigrants, whom he considers un-American, that have been filling his pockets with their hard-earned money and sustaining his middle-class taste in golf. When I mentioned to my Cantonese landlady Aunt Lu my interview with Albert, she said indignantly, “It is exactly his company that keeps raising the housing price [sic] in Bridgeport, and that’s why buying a house is so expensive today. They have monopolized the Chinese market. It is the location that matters. They know Chinese like to live close to Chinatown.”37

Echoing this emphasis on location, many working-class Chinese Americans interpret class differences as difference between the city and the suburbs. Challenging a suburban middle-class colorblind racial ideology, one working-class Chinese American youth, David, took great pride in the diverse environment of the city. He explained: “Suburban people are more likely to prejudice against Blacks because there are almost no Blacks in their places. There are more ethnic diversities in the city. I grow up in the city and I have Blacks as classmates and I know them.”38 In response to


36. See, e.g., Kamala Visweswaran, Race and the Culture of Anthropology, 100 AM. ANTHRO. 70 (1998) (criticizing Franz Boas’s notion of race as purely based on biology by pointing out the danger of a current trend in U.S. society to replace race with culture).


38. Interview with David, in Urbana-Champaign, Ill. (Dec. 12, 2003).
Albert's negative depiction of working-class Chinese Americans as clinging to an essentialized notion of Chinese culture, David pointed out that it was precisely the segregated environment in the suburbs that bred a middle-class trend to learn and embody Chinese culture:

All my suburban friends go to Chinese school to learn how to write Chinese. Their parents make them go. Because in the suburb, there is so few Chinese thing and their parents want them to learn more about Chinese culture. Here I am in Chinatown and there are Chinese all around so nobody bothers with us learning Chinese or going to Chinese school. So it is the suburban kids who know more about Chinese culture.

David's testimony suggests that the family-oriented model minority kid is largely a middle-class image carefully cultivated in the segregated environment of the suburbs. By distancing himself from that image, David is also distancing himself from a middle-class racial ideology that is often dressed up in essentialist cultural terms.

The next time I saw Albert was on the front cover of a Chinese language newspaper. As one of the major organizers and sponsors of the 2005 Autumn Moon Festival in Chinatown, he posed on a stage with other Chinese American community leaders and distinguished guests (non-Chinese)—few of whom actually resided in Bridgeport, but led the ethnic community from a distance. Dressed in traditional Chinese costumes, he and the other leaders smiled into the camera. This incident represents a perfect moment of Chinese culture and ethnicity on display for public consumption. I find Mary Waters' exploration of the strategic appropriation of West Indian culture by West Indian immigrants in New York City quite useful here. Mary Waters notes that the cultural traits valued by West Indians—hard work and diligence—are selective constructions by Black immigrants in their hopes to confirm their own stereotypes and self-images. In a similar vein, middle-class Chinese Americans' identification with the model minority stereotype incorporates a selective construction of Chinese cultural values. This middle-class prerogative caters specifically to the multicultural taste of white American society.

V. RACIALIZING, ETHNICIZING AND THE ALLURE OF MULTICULTURALISM

In this part, I will examine, using both archival and interview data, how the racialization of working-class Chinese Americans articulates with both the historical Black/white racial structure in Bridgeport and the changing U.S. racial ideology of multiculturalism. Drawing on anthropologist Bonnie Urciuoli's distinction between racializing and

39. Id.
I argue that working-class Chinese Americans are both racialized and ethnicized in Bridgeport. The ethnicization of Chinese Americans as the model minority not only facilitates the further racialization of African Americans and Latinos, but also promotes strategic alliances between whites and a segment of the Chinese American community.

In Bridgeport there is a continuation between the racialization of Blacks in the past and the racializations of Chinese and Latinos in the present. This is manifested in the passing on of racist attitudes from early European immigrants to their children. A Jewish social activist explained to me the connection between the neighborhood's racist history against Blacks and its present anti-immigrant sentiment:

In 1919, when Blacks were working in the Union Stockyard, they got attacked when they crossed the tunnel to work on this side. You read Sinclair's *The Jungle*? There are the grandchildren of those who originally fought against Blacks. You hear talk of nigger and chink at home and nobody scolds you for doing that. They cannot say it in public but nobody can stop them from saying it at home. They have ten nasty words for Arabs. They have twenty words for Mexicans. Racism is still very deep here.

The above quote powerfully evidences the carrying over of historical racism against Blacks to the present as well as this racism's new variations with the transformation of Bridgeport into a multiracial community. While physical attacks against African Americans still exist in Bridgeport, many whites are seeking more strategic ways to vent their anti-immigrant sentiment by manipulating grey areas between the legal and illegal. For example, in today's Bridgeport, hate crimes against Chinese Americans are usually committed by white youths. Since the burden of proof for a hate crime falls upon the victim, it is particularly hard to determine whether a reported incident is the result of youth conflict or racial conflict. According to the 2004 Chicago Police Department Annual Report, of all the hate crimes investigated in 2004, 45.1% were deemed bona fide, 32% undetermined, and 23% were classified as unfounded.

Although hate crimes against Chinese Americans are not as violent as those against African Americans—interracial harassment against Chinese Americans, *Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class* 15-18 (1996).


Interview with Jewish social activist, in Chi., Ill. (June 30, 2004).

Interview with a police officer, Chicago Police Department, in Chi., Ill. (July 15, 2004).

Americans usually takes the form of verbal assaults, threat of physical attack, or damaging of property— in many cases the two groups are clearly racialized side by side in Bridgeport as people of color. In 1998, an 18-year-old Chinese American youth was attacked by a group of local white youths. They beat him up while exclaiming such things as: “You’ve ratted out. I’ll beat you like a fucking nigger. I hate nigger and Chinaman [sic].” Somehow they believed the Chinese American victim was a witness of the 1997 Lenard Clark incident discussed earlier, and they threatened him not to tell the police. This case serves as a good example of how Chinese Americans are similarly implicated with African Americans in a racist structure of white domination. The fact that the Chinese American victim attributed his assault by whites to his witnessing of the Lenard Clark incident is not accidental. Several youths I interviewed told me that they knew the two Italian teenagers who beat Lenard Clark. What is so fascinating about the case, however, is how the beating of a Chinese American youth was framed in relation to the beating of an African American youth: the two victims were suspected of being allies because they were both people of color. In 2002, in another, more recent example, a Chinese high school student was walking near the border of Bridgeport and Chinatown when a car drove by with three white teens in it. They asked the student, “Hey, are you a nigger?” Before he could respond, they jumped out of the car, and one of them punched him in the eye.

Although constituting only two examples, the above two incidents still support the contention that, in today’s Bridgeport, working-class Chinese Americans are popularly categorized as either Black or close to the Black pole of the Black/white racial dichotomy.

In fact, this overlap of Chinese American and African American experiences is not a new phenomenon. According to historian Najia Aarim-Heriot, there was “the Negroization” of the Chinese in California by the U.S. media and society at large as early as the Chinese exclusion years in the late nineteenth century. The significance of the Bridgeport example lies in two aspects. On the one hand, it testifies to the persistence of the Black/white binary and the die-hard nature of anti-Black racism in the United States. On the other hand, since the community is caught up in a transformational period where the tension between a historical Black/white racial framework and the multiracial reality is being played out in its daily

46. Field Notes from Chicago’s Alternative Policing Strategy Meetings in Beats 923 and 924 (on file with author).
47. Interview with Chicago police officer involved with hate crimes, in Chi., Ill. (July 15, 2004) (Case on file in Chicago Police Department).
48. Id.
life, there are, in today's Bridgeport, both the residual elements of old racist networks, ideologies and practices, and the re-articulation of these elements in new forms.  

I now present my interview with a long-time white resident in Bridgeport, named Jane, to illustrate how a strange combination of the racializing and ethnicizing of working-class Chinese Americans has been deployed in the name of multiculturalism and diversity in the daily making of race. There are several reasons why Jane's story can be said to fairly represent the general white attitude in Bridgeport. As a sixty-year-old third-generation Lithuanian, Jane has lived in Bridgeport all her life. She has a very lively personality and has shown great enthusiasm in local community affairs. Also, when I asked the branch head of a local Chicago public library if he knew anyone that was familiar with Bridgeport's history, he immediately recommended Jane.

Jane was flattered to be interviewed by a doctoral student interested in the history of Bridgeport and had no objection to being taped during her interview. Seated in her favorite coffee shop, Jane started our conversation by emphasizing her multicultural background. She noted, "I'm American but my ethnic culture, well, I'm multicultural. I know more about Lithuanian culture." She continued by telling me about her father: "He had two religions: the Jewish one and the German Lutheran one. In order to marry my mom, who was born a Catholic in Bridgeport, he converted to Catholic belief. He was the truly multicultural one, moving from one religion to another when life demanded him to do so." Following her multicultural mood, I asked Jane about her opinion of Chinese Americans in Bridgeport. She responded: "The Chinese are mysterious. I know nothing about them. My interactions with Chinese are almost zero." After this formal disclaimer, however, she started talking about the recent changes in Bridgeport and why white people prefer selling to Chinese: "At least they are not Black. If Mexicans or Blacks came to buy a house, we would think they either steal or rob to get the money."  

I asked Jane where she thought the Chinese got their money. She answered with a dramatic hand gesture: 

"Rumors, rumors, rumors! People have rumors that the Chinese have a mafia lending group specially. They are loaded. In an area like where I

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50. See OMI & WINANT, supra note 10, at 93, 173; see also GLENN, supra note 8, at 15-16. Omi and Winant have remarked that re-articulation is ordinarily the work of "intellectuals." I extend their broad definition of intellectual to include my interviewee Jane, whose long-time residence in Bridgeport, active participation in the neighborhood life, and outspoken personality make her an ideal resource for the re-articulation of changing racial ideologies in Bridgeport. Glenn defines rearticulation as "the investment of already present ideas and knowledge with new meanings."

51. Interview with Jane, in Chi., Ill. (June 10, 2004). This interview was taped and transcribed by the author with minor correction of grammatical mistakes.

52. Id. (emphasis added).
live particularly, it's all Polish, and all of a sudden, you close your eyes you get up in the morning, Oh, my God, there is a Chinese family next door! Close your eyes and wake up another morning and there is another Chinese family over here. And the prices of these houses are outrageous. How the hell can these people afford to pay $100,000, $600,000 for an apartment building that used to be worth $50,000? Are they paying cash for it? Do they have a mortgage? Then rumors start flying and they say Chinese have their own lending institutions and all Chinese go to work: grandma, grandpa, husband, wife, and they got ten restaurants, work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; they even work in their sleep. They are always working, working, working. Despite Jane's proclamation of her multicultural family heritage, her perception of Chinese immigrants in Bridgeport still rests on dated orientalist images of Chinese people as the mysterious foreign “Other” that does not choose to assimilate. Even when she was praising the Chinese for their hardworking ethics, her comments were blended with a racialized image of the unassimilated foreigner: “The Chinese are very ambitious. They are hard working. They do not assimilate into the community once they come here. They mind their own business. They don't talk to anybody because they are always going to work.”

Interestingly, this image of Chinese immigrants as foreigners quickly faded away once our conversation turned to Latinos:

Hispanics always sound like they speak from Mexico. I would have never ever known anything about their food. I would never have gone to their neighborhood. That was like a taboo. They are too... [pause] foreign. They don’t assimilate. Mexicans in Chicago, they are looked at with disdain... drugs, gangs, they have totally destroyed the city.... The Chinese are entirely different. They assimilate to American culture. Their children, there are no accents. I find that Chinese are more superior as far as adapting to the American way of life.... People are welcoming the Chinese because the Chinese take education very seriously: when they come into a school, the school grades rise. Everybody looks at the Chinese and say, “Oh, they are brilliant! They are so intelligent.” They work so hard and they regard education as the most important thing in the world.

“But just now you said they never assimilate,” I interrupted Jane in a joking manner.

No, no. They don't go out of their way to make friends with me. They are

53. Id.
54. See generally ROBERT LEE, ORIENTALS: ASIAN AMERICANS IN POPULAR CULTURE (1999) (describing the role of Orientalism in American popular culture, which greatly influenced the formation of an American racial ideology against Asian Americans). For an elaboration on the concept of Orientalism, see EDWARD SAID, ORIENTALISM (1978) (evaluating and critiquing Orientalism as based on misguided Western assumptions about the East).
55. Interview with Jane, supra note 51.
56. Id. (emphasis added).
not going to embrace me on the way, but they assimilate into American way of life, even the names. You might have a Chinese child with a Chinese name. When they are in school, they got an English sounding name: Stanley, Harry. They assimilate into American way of life.  

It is fascinating to observe how quickly Jane's description of the Chinese American shifts from the inassimilable foreigner to the assimilated model minority. It must be noted that Jane's definition of "assimilation" for Chinese Americans in Bridgeport means that they must conform to the dominant (white) American cultural norm, not to form personal relationships with white residents in the community. Somehow in Jane's narrative there is a fissure between personalized spaces, such as "me, my family, my kids, my neighborhood," and rhetorical spaces, such as American culture and the American way of life. In other words, the Chinese may be considered assimilated to the so-called American culture, but they are still not considered part of "my" community.

Resuming her multicultural spirit, Jane proudly explained to me: "My kids know all the Chinese food and they know how to use chopsticks because they hang out with Chinese kids at school." When I asked her whether her kids ever invited their Chinese classmates to their birthday parties, she responded: "No, we don't have birthday parties at home. I am not a good cook. I say, my kids used to have Chinese friends, but when they grew up, they have fewer Chinese friends." By this Jane was suggesting that some white youths' friendship with Chinese youths remains largely within the school context and rarely extends to the domestic space.

In her study of Puerto Ricans in New York City, Bonnie Urciuoli distinguishes between racializing and ethnicizing discourses. She explains: Racializing is defined by a polarity between dominant and subordinate groups, the latter having minimal control over their position in the nation-state.... In ethnic discourses, cultural difference is safe, ordered, a contribution to the nation-state offered by striving immigrants making their way up the ladder of class mobility.... Ethnicization is a kind of mediating discourse: if the chief polarities are white, middle-class Anglo versus non-white, poor and culturally/linguistically deficient, then being ethnicized is a way to mediate these extremes. Ethnicized people are not Anglo (they may or may not be white), but their origin is pedigreed by an external high culture that validates their difference because it somehow makes them act like Americans in crucial ways (i.e., their culture provides a work or education ethic, family values, and so forth).

There are at least three important points made by Urciuoli in this passage.

57. Id.
58. Id.
59. Cf. DAVID ROEDIGER, COLORED WHITE: TRANSCENDING THE RACIAL PAST 212-240 (2002) (noting that some white youths' cross-racial impersonations are related to a specific life stage and are more often the product of a commodified consumer culture than serious antiracist motives).
60. See URCIUOLI, supra note 41, at 15-16.
First, in an ethnicizing discourse, an essentialized notion of culture is excavated as the replacement of race. Second, ethnicizing as a mediating discourse facilitates the incorporation of certain minority groups into a Black/white racial order, with these minorities occupying an awkward and undefined middle position. Third, class mobility and ethnicizing discourses are mutually corroborative in a racially oppressive society.

With the example of Bridgeport, working-class Chinese Americans are both racialized and ethnicized, depending on the shifting interests of white privilege. Compared with long-time white residents, Chinese Americans are racialized as "inassimilable foreigners." When compared with poor African Americans and Latinos, however, Chinese Americans are ethnicized as the "model minority," which possesses a high culture superior to that of African Americans and Latinos. To a large extent, white society's racialization of Chinese Americans as foreigners is based on the latter's working-class status, which can be historically traced back to the Chinese Exclusion Act and the consolidation of whiteness as a racial and national identity.61 Meanwhile, the ethnicization of working-class Chinese Americans as the model minority helps perpetuate the further racialization of African Americans and Latinos in a way that moves these two groups to the bottom of the Black/white racial hierarchy.62 It also reflects the changing strategies used to maintain white power, with multiculturalism as one of the major code words for race and the pitting of one minority group against another as a means to obscure white domination.63 In fact, the expansion of Chinese Americans to Bridgeport was exactly governed by this divide-and-rule strategy. According to Eric, a prominent Chinese American community leader, Chinese Americans were allowed to move in as a buffer group to prevent the integration of African Americans and to check the growing political power of Latinos:

The Irish prefers to include Chinese into Ward Eleven64 because Chinese is not a threat to them yet. Mexicans' influence is expanding too fast. If there is one more Mexican alderman, it means one less white alderman. Remapping is a zero sum game: either a Mexican ward or a white ward. There is no middle ground....The white people in Ward Eleven are afraid that Chinese will get united with Hispanics. They want to keep the area an Irish territory. So they prefer to keep the minorities scattered.65

61. See LOWE, supra note 32, at 14 (drawing on the experience of early Chinese immigrants to argue that the racial formation of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans has always included a class and gender dimension).
62. Cf. URCIUOLI, supra note 41, at 38 ("[E]thnicization does not negate racialization but perpetuates it.").
64. Bridgeport is in Ward Eleven.
65. Interview with Eric, in Chi., Ill. (July 18, 2003).
As noted by Urciuoli, ethnicizing is not only a mediating discourse within the Black/white binary, but also a class-inflected discourse. It is not a coincidence that both Jane and Albert find in culture a handy substitute for race. Mary Waters once remarked that “[t]he more socially mobile the individual, the more he or she clings to ethnic identity as a hedge against racial identity.” Albert’s embracing of the model minority myth, his adoption of the contemporary rhetoric of colorblindness, and his public display of Chinese ethnicity as a commodity for consumption, all speak to the mutually corroborative nature of class mobility and ethnicizing discourses. Urciuoli further points out that unlike racializing discourses, which often deprive racialized individuals of their agency to talk back, ethnicizing discourses give some voice to ethnics to speak for themselves and their “group,” but within certain limits. As such, middle-class Chinese Americans have to negotiate between their roles as spokespersons and representatives of Chinese culture and the need to conform to the dominant white power structure and white norms. I would argue that middle-class Chinese Americans and mainstream white society have found a connection through culture. Because of their use of culture as a code word for race, ethnicizing discourses are legitimized by the U.S. racial ideology of multiculturalism and work together with the model minority stereotype to foster a strategic alliance between whites and a segment of Chinese Americans while further disguising the shared racialization experience of different minorities.

One last thing that I want to do in this section of the article is to reflect on my own identity as a mediating factor in my interview with Jane. There were several interrelated factors at work during the interview. First, it was conducted and audio-taped in a public place—a coffee shop—out of Jane’s choice. Recalling the division between personal space and public space in Jane’s narrative, it is not hard to understand why she chose to overemphasize her multicultural background yet stopped short of doing so when discussing cross-racial relations between her children and Chinese children. Also, my identity as a Chinese woman researcher in pursuit of a doctoral degree at a prestigious American university—a living embodiment of the model minority stereotype—may have prompted Jane to keep silent on interracial harassment against Chinese Americans in Bridgeport, and instead elaborate on the “superiority” of Chinese Americans as the model minority in opposition to African Americans and Latinos. Nevertheless, all of the above mediating factors do not necessarily make the interview less valid as a realistic depiction of the white perception of working-class Chinese Americans in Bridgeport. While there is no doubt that there was a tinge of performance in Jane’s overemphasis of her multicultural

66. WATERS, supra note 40, at 324.
67. See URCIUOLI, supra note 41, at 18.
background, her discussion paradoxically highlights her intimate knowledge of both the neighborhood’s anti-Black history and the multiracial transformation it is currently going through. While my position as a Chinese woman may have restrained Jane from making more explicit references to the racialization of Chinese Americans in Bridgeport, my status as a student who is both young and an outsider actually evoked a patronizing maternal attitude, which made Jane more willing to hear my questions and explain things with greater detail.

To sum up, in this part, I explored how the racialization of working-class Chinese Americans in Bridgeport is complicated by both the neighborhood’s Black/white racial history and the reconfiguration of whiteness in light of the contemporary U.S. racial ideology of multiculturalism. The discussion throughout this section makes up the core of my formulation of “overlapping racializations” as the major analytical framework in interpreting working-class Chinese American experiences in Chicago.

VI. “WE ARE BOTH IMMIGRANTS”: PARALLELS BETWEEN THE CHINESE AMERICAN AND MEXICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

An interesting discovery from my research is that, within Bridgeport, there is a shared racialization experience between working-class Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans.68 While fully aware of the heterogeneity among Latinos as a racial group, I am using Mexican Americans within this article—the largest Latino subgroup in Bridgeport—as just one example to explore the possibility of interracial cooperation between two racialized minorities. By reflecting on both the constructive aspects and the drawbacks of this interracial congeniality, this part attests to the importance of devising new paradigms to theorize interracial relations without perpetuating existing racial stereotypes.

In his article Race, Nation, and Culture in Recent Immigration Studies, George Sanchez draws attention to “the racialized construction of nationhood by Anglo Americans and European immigrants alike.”69 He argues that whiteness as a racial and national identity was constructed not only in opposition to Blackness, but also in opposition to other nonwhite groups, such as Asian Americans, American Indians, and Latinos.70 This is particularly true for Bridgeport. While the consolidation of whiteness as a racial identity in the neighborhood’s past was largely based on the exclusion of African Americans as the racial other, the reconfiguration of

68. Parallel to my use of Chinese American in this article, my use of Mexican Americans also includes both Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans born in the United States.
70. Id. at 72-74.
whiteness in the face of the neighborhood’s recent multiracial turn also
depends on the construction of immigrants of color as the racial other. For
example, one of my middle-aged Chinese female informants related the
following story to me. One day she was exercising in the morning as usual
in a local park near her house in Bridgeport. An elderly Caucasian man
approached her and remarked that Chinese and Mexicans are cousins: “You
look alike; you have similar skin colors.” My informant then explained to
me: “I am not happy with his observation, but I don’t know how to refute
in English.” She quickly added, however: “I am not offended either. After
all, we are both immigrants.” We are both immigrants. This is probably
the most commonly acknowledged point of affinity for both working-class
Chinese immigrants and working-class Mexican immigrants. It points to
the two groups’ shared experiences of being racialized as outsiders in the
U.S. nation-state.

Viewed from a historical perspective, the migration and immigration
of both Asians and Latinos to the United States have been subjected to the
discriminating mechanism of U.S. immigration laws. In her study of the
history of Chinese exclusion, Erika Lee recognizes a connection between
Chinese exclusion and the racialization of illegal Mexican immigrants in
the formation of the United States as a gate-keeping nation. Additionally,
Mae Ngai’s research on U.S. immigration policy from 1924-1945 also
shows that restrictive immigration policies and their construction of
racialized categories through the national origins quota system served both
to consolidate the sovereignty of the United States as a modern nation-state
and to determine the differential racialization experiences of different
immigrant groups. The consolidation of white racial status for European
immigrants went side by side with the construction of illegal alien status
for Mexicans and the image of permanent foreigners for Asians. Sanchez,
Ngai, and Lee’s work stretch our critical vision to see beyond Black and
white and to study minority experiences as interrelated in the crucible of
U.S. nation-state building.

In today’s Bridgeport, Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans
are the two largest minority groups, and they usually share common

71. Interview with middle-aged Chinese female informant, in Chi., Ill. (June 4, 2004).
72. Id.
73. Id.
74. See Erika Lee, American Gatekeeping: Race and Immigration Law in the Twentieth Century,
in NOT JUST BLACK AND WHITE: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION,
RACE, AND ETHNICITY IN THE UNITED STATES 119, 119-21 (Nancy Foner & George M. Fredrickson
eds., 2004); see also ERIKA LEE, AT AMERICA’S GATES: CHINESE IMMIGRATION DURING THE
EXCLUSION ERA, 1882-1943 (2003) (discussing the history of Chinese exclusion in the U.S., as well as
the consequences and legacies of such exclusion).
75. MAE M. NGAI, IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECTS: ILLEGAL ALIENS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN
residential spaces (many whites are unwilling to rent to Mexican Americans). Since the majority of both groups come from working-class backgrounds and are racialized as foreigners to the U.S. nation-state, the two occupy similar structural positions in the U.S. economic hierarchy. Many Chinese immigrants find themselves working side by side with Mexicans in low-skill, blue-collar service occupations. Since both are largely excluded from the mainstream formal economic sector, the two groups find creative ways to develop ethnic enterprises and to depend on each other for survival in the post-industrial city. Several job agencies in Chinatown maintain bilingual staffs that can speak both Chinese and Spanish in order to recruit Mexican immigrant workers in the food service industry. It is no surprise to find Mexican chefs cooking Chinese food in Chinese fast food restaurants in downtown Chicago. Conversely, the favorite shopping place for many Chinese Americans in Bridgeport is a Mexican grocery store, where free Chinese language newspapers are provided and Chinese fruits and vegetables are sold at a lower price than at ethnic Chinese stores.

It is amazing to observe the quickly developing information networks between Chinese and Mexican immigrants, which sometimes transcend language and racial barriers. Take my working-class host family, for example. Uncle Lu works in a Chinese restaurant in the suburbs. He speaks a little everyday English. While Uncle Lu does not feel confident going to downtown Chicago by himself, he knows how to drive to the Mexican grocery store in Pilsen every week to get fresh groceries. When he had a flat tire, he knew where to find a Mexican auto shop that sold cheap secondhand tires. I asked him where he got that information. He smiled and said, “My coworkers in the Chinese restaurant told me.”76 In the free English class in a local Chicago public library, Chinese and Mexicans are the two largest student groups. They often banter with one another during break time. One of the Mexican students told me, “Chinese, they are my friends.”77

In Unequal Freedom, Evelyn Glenn comments on the division between material reality and various social ideologies. She notes: “[O]ne cannot make a direct connection between concrete material conditions and specific forms of consciousness, identity, and political activity. Rather, race, gender, and class consciousness draw on the available rhetoric of race, gender, and class.”78 In the Bridgeport case, the material reality of the shared racialization experience between Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans sometimes feeds on existing racial stereotypes of the

76. Interview with Uncle Lu, in Chi., Ill. (July 9, 2005).
77. Conversation with Mexican student, in Chi., Ill. (July 13, 2004).
78. GLENN, supra note 8, at 15.
hardworking immigrants as opposed to the "lazy" African Americans. Merida, the associate director of a local Mexican art museum, listed to me all of the shared cultural values that she perceived between Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans: both are family-oriented, both have entrepreneurial spirit and are adept at small business, both enjoy meats and peppers, both have a rich cultural history, and both cultures are male-oriented.  

On the Chinese side, for some working-class Chinese Americans, their shared feelings of being immigrants in this country with Mexican Americans are sometimes triangulated by their negative perception of African Americans. By this I mean that stereotypes of African Americans as lazy and welfare-dependent are internalized by some working-class Chinese immigrants and used to bolster the images of hardworking Chinese and Mexican immigrants. One Chinese American man told me:

Blacks are lazy people. They don’t want to work. Chinese are hardworking people. Also we Chinese are proud people. We would feel ashamed to beg in the street for money. If you lose an arm or a leg, if you are unable to work, it’s fine for you to beg, but if you are safe and sound, there is no reason for you to stay idle. They can always find a job. You never see any Chinese or Mexicans begging on the street.

This man’s observation serves as a good example of the disjuncture between material reality and existing racial ideologies: while working-class Chinese Americans are sometimes racialized together with African Americans as people of color in Bridgeport (as shown in Part V of this article), this shared experience of racialization does not necessarily generate interracial solidarity. Also, while the shared feelings of being outsiders in this country might enhance relations between working-class Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans, prevailing racial stereotypes of the hardworking immigrants versus the lazy African Americans may have thwarted the building of a united front among all the racialized minorities in Bridgeport. This murkiness of reality challenges scholars to develop new paradigms and rhetorical devices in order to theorize interminority relations in a way that helps demolish existing racial stereotypes. It is towards this effort that the final part of this article now turns

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80. See generally Claire Jean Kim, The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans, 27 POL. & SOC'TY 105 (1999) (exploring the concept of racial triangulation, and explaining how Asian Americans experience relative valorization and civic ostracism when positioned compared to members of different racial groups).
81. Interview with Chinese American man, in Chi., Ill. (June 29, 2003).
VII. THEORIZING OVERLAPPING RACIALIZATIONS

In her reinterpretation of W.E.B. DuBois, Gina Dent points out that DuBois’s concept of double-consciousness not only depicts the tormented psychological state of African Americans as straddling two different worlds, but also the *mode* through which Black people came to understand themselves as racialized subjects.\(^8\) Vijay Prashad, in his book *The Karma of Brown Folk*, creatively applies DuBois’ double-consciousness to the Indian American case. For Prashad, the “desi” dilemma is the awareness of white racism and the unawareness of being used as a weapon against African Americans.\(^3\) In fact, Indian American understanding of white racism is a truncated one because it fails to note the interconnectedness between the Asian American experience and that of African Americans. Following DuBois’ emphasis on the *mode* of the production of racialized subjects, and Prashad’s call to treat different minority experiences as interrelated, I propose to view the racialization experience of working-class Chinese Americans in Bridgeport through a lens of “overlapping racializations.” Drawing on Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s idea of “racialization” and Earl Lewis’ concept of “overlapping diasporas,” this conceptualization of “overlapping racializations” includes at least three aspects: first, how the racialization experience of each minority group articulates with the Black/white racial structure in the United States; second, how the racialization experiences of different minority groups overlap with one other; third, how intraethic differences such as class, gender, language, place of origin, generation, and other parameters of social inequality mediate interracial and group relations. By codifying the concept of overlapping racializations, I want to capture a specific moment or a specific cross section of these overlaps, where interethnic relations, whether conflicts or aspects of coalition building, are magnified and premised on specific historical conjunctures.

Although this idea of overlapping racializations is more a strategic position or frame of analysis rather than a full-fledged theory, I consider it important in several ways. First, it enables us to explore the interrelatedness of different minority experiences without losing sight of white domination. The reconfiguration of whiteness in post-industrial America is marked by the strategic use of one minority group against another, which serves to further obscure the fact of white domination as the ultimate source of social inequality. An overlapping perspective will enhance our understanding of white domination and promote the seeking of common ground in interethnic coalition building. Second, in light of the radical changes of the U.S. racial landscape after 1965 and the fact that U.S. race relations are

\(^3\) See PRASHAD, supra note 63, at 157-83.
increasingly developing along multiple color lines,\textsuperscript{84} it is important to explore how the racialization experiences of different minorities are related to each other in intricate ways. An overlapping perspective may avoid the drawbacks of a unidimensional understanding of race relations marked by the use of "racism" as the overarching label in all situations of interethnic conflict.\textsuperscript{85} Last but not least, by drawing attention to the heterogeneity within each minority group and the strategic alliance of white power with a segment of certain ethnic minorities, my formulation of overlapping racializations avoids a strictly hierarchical view of U.S. race relations based on essentialized notions of racial and ethnic difference.

\section*{VIII. Conclusion}

As I was getting ready to leave the field in August 2004, I noticed that children, both African Americans and Chinese Americans, from a local elementary school were working on a mural under the viaduct that connected the Chinese American community with the African American community. Lisa, one of the Chinese American teens working on the mural explained to me: "Our mural project is to break the racial gap. I think people in Chinatown are too conservative, they don't want any changes."\textsuperscript{86} The mural depicted Asia on one of its ends, the African continent on the other, and Chicago in the middle. A blue ocean wave carried people from one direction to another. The human figures had no face. The only faces floating above the ocean were Peking Opera masks, highly decorative, but also highly unrealistic. Race was erased from the mural by those opera masks, by generic colors such as blue, orange, and green. A few steps away from the viaduct was a Chinese style pavilion. At the foot of the pavilion, a notable sign read: "NO LOITERING, NO SLEEPING, NO DRINKING." This sign was obviously written for African Americans, who sometimes sit in the area to rest after they are done with their grocery shopping in Chinatown.

Here are two contrasting symbols within extremely close proximity: the mural as the potential site for the creation of interracial space, and the prohibitory sign as the means of policing interracial boundaries. Together

\textsuperscript{84} CLAIRE JEAN KIM, BITTER FRUIT: THE POLITICS OF BLACK-KOREAN CONFLICT IN NEW YORK CITY 223 (2000) ("[T]he problem of the twenty-first century will be that of the multiple color lines embedded in the American racial order.").

\textsuperscript{85} In his study of working-class Japanese and Filipinos in prewar Hawai'\textsuperscript{i}, Moon-Kie Jung calls for an abandonment of a unidimensional definition of racism in American sociology, which is based on the presumed superiority or inferiority of one racial group in relation to another. See Moon-Kie Jung, \textit{Different Racisms and the Differences They Make: Race and "Asian Workers" or Prewar Hawai'\textsuperscript{i}}, \textit{28 CRITICAL SOC.} 77, 77 (2002). This unidimensional approach is exemplified by the dominant Black-white paradigm in the study of U.S. race relations. Jung argues that Japanese and Filipino workers "faced different racisms, different not only in intensity but in kind." \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{86} Interview with Lisa, in Chi., Ill. (July 22, 2004).
they speak of the complexities and contradictions in interracial relations and the untold stories yet to come. The overlapping racializations experienced by working-class Chinese Americans in relation to Latinos and African Americans in a multiracial Chicago challenges any simplified view of race relations in the United States. To the extent that Bridgeport can be viewed as a microcosm of the larger American society, I hope this research can shed light on critical reflections of essentialized notions of racial and ethnic differences, and eventually lead to a more dynamic understanding of interracial relations in a multiracial United States.