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Claremont McKenna College

Reimagining Identity through Photography: The Experience of Intersectionality for
Asian-American Women

submitted to
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Professor Nancy Macko

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for
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Introduction

A photograph is worth a thousand words. What happens when that image misrepresents the subject or does not convey their identity correctly? This paper, “Reimagining Identity Through Photography,” challenges modern society’s most frequent stereotypes of Asian-American women. To better understand the importance of this topic, one must examine the history of what it means to be both an Asian American and a woman. I organized a physical gallery space including eighteen total images of nine Asian-American women that closely examine common stigma against this demographic to further argue these racial and gender myths. This work invokes and challenges the harm behind the model minority myth through standpoint theory and intersectionality. By unpacking these concepts and examining their relevance to modern societal practices, I aim to expose the harm of the so-called “complimentary” stereotypes that are often associated with Asian-American women.

Asian American refers to individuals in the United States who have roots or origins in the Asian continent. This broad term encompasses a diverse group of people, including those from East Asia (such as China, Japan, and Korea), Southeast Asia (such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Philippines), South Asia (such as India and Pakistan), and other regions. According to the latest US Census data from 2020, Asian Americans make up around 6% of the total US population, with over 22 million individuals identifying as Asian American (Monte and Shin). This population is projected to continue to grow, making it one of the fastest-growing racial or ethnic groups in the country (Monte and Shin). Furthermore, the demographic shift towards a more diverse population, raises important questions about identity, belonging, and inclusion in the United States. As the country becomes more diverse, it is important to recognize and address

issues of racism, discrimination, and xenophobia that arise towards marginalized communities, including Asian Americans.

Model Minority Myth

The Model Minority Myth is a stereotype that describes Asian Americans as a "model minority" due to their supposed exceptional academic and financial success. Through this lens, Asians are an example of the "if they can, then why can't you?" mentality that distracts from the real issue of idealizing whiteness. In this case, "you" refers to all other races who do not meet the performance level of Asians who are supposedly born smart or excel in academics naturally. The myth is an oversimplification of the experiences of Asian Americans and has damaging effects on their daily lives. This myth affects Asian Americans by portraying them as inherently successful and hardworking, leading to the expectation that they will excel academically and professionally. This stereotype creates pressure to conform to narrow standards of success, which may not align with individual interests. This erasure of diversity leads to tensions within Asian-American communities, as individuals with different experiences may feel more marginalized. For example, the myth ignores the significant differences among Asian American communities, such as differences in immigration histories, languages spoken, and socioeconomic status. It also serves as a tool to reinforce the idea that people of color who were not successful had only themselves to blame, rather than acknowledging the role that systemic racism and discrimination played in their lives. Therefore, making it difficult for minorities such as Asian Americans to unite around common goals and restricting access to the resources they need to thrive.

The Model Myth Minority also ignores the systemic barriers and historical injustices that many Asian Americans faced such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment. This

myth has been around since the 1960s and has roots in the post-World War II era when the United States was in need of a new image to project to the world after the war. Japanese Americans faced significant discrimination prior to and during World War II, which culminated in their forced incarceration in internment camps. The community responded to this injustice by advocating for their civil rights and demonstrating their loyalty to the United States, which included a focus on education and achievement as a means of proving their worthiness as American citizens (Nagata et al.). This effort to succeed in American culture despite facing historical trauma contributed to the emergence of the "model minority" stereotype. Ignoring the historical significance of this myth prevents the recognition of the unique struggles that different Asian-American subgroups face, such as the trauma experienced by Southeast Asian refugees or the ongoing discrimination against South Asians and Pacific Islanders.

For example, the myth leads to a sense of invisibility, as Asian American struggles and experiences are not acknowledged. This results in a lack of support and resources for those who need it, as they are often seen as self-sufficient. Additionally, the pressure to conform to these stereotypes is overwhelming, leading to high levels of stress and anxiety for those who feel that they are not living up to societal standards. Asian Americans feel the need to prioritize careers in fields such as medicine, law, or engineering, rather than pursuing creative or artistic pursuits. This pressure leads to a lack of representation in fields outside of stereotypical career paths and less diverse representation in those industries.

Without challenging the status quo in racial idealization, Asian-American women continue to face violent oppression. There was a surge of hate crimes towards this specific demographic during the COVID pandemic that resulted in targeted shootings and individuals being pushed into train tracks (Yam). Specifically, the Atlanta shooting of eight people in

Asian-American spas is one of many tragedies that happened with the rise of Anti-Asian American violence (Chavez and Chen). It is imperative to understand what stereotypes play a key role in perpetuating harmful stigma towards these individuals to prevent future attacks on Asian Americans.

The way in which Asian Americans are held up to “white” standards creates a false sense of unity by creating the perception that Asian Americans are a monolithic group with a shared experience. The myth also reinforces the white supremacist notion of a racial hierarchy by positioning Asian Americans as a model to which other racial minorities should aspire. By pitting marginalized groups against each other, it prevents them from uniting and taking collective action toward liberation and equality, which maintains the power structures that benefit whiteness. The Model Minority Myth perpetuates the idea that racism is an individual issue, rather than a systemic one, which deflects attention from the broader societal and institutional factors that contribute to racial inequality. This obscures the ways in which white privilege is embedded in society and reinforces the belief that individual actions are sufficient to overcome structural inequality.

It affects non-Asian-American BIPOC individuals by perpetuating the false idea that success is solely based on individual effort, ignoring the systemic barriers and structural inequalities that exist against them in society. The U.S. government seized on the success of high-achieving Japanese Americans to paint a picture of all Asian Americans as successful and assimilated, in stark contrast to the African American community, which was still struggling with poverty and inequality. Chow discusses how the model minority stereotype can have negative effects on other BIPOC communities, particularly African-Americans (Chow). She suggests that this stereotype perpetuates the idea that the success of Asian Americans is due solely to their

hard work and individual effort, rather than the structural advantages they may have had. There is also a direct contrast between Asian-Americans seen as studious and rule-abiding while African-Americans face stereotypes of bigotry and poverty with a history rooted in slavery (Chow). This can lead to the idea that other BIPOC groups are not working hard enough, which in turn can lead to greater discrimination and marginalization. In the Model Minority myth, other races do not work as hard as Asians and therefore have no excuse to be marginalized. Maintaining this belief leads to greater discrepancies between minorities. Furthermore, the Model Minority Myth reinforces the notion that success is only possible by assimilating to dominant cultural norms rather than celebrating diverse individuality. Therefore, contributing to the lack of recognition and understanding of the challenges that non-Asian-American BIPOC individuals face in navigating systemic racism and discrimination.

Popular TV and movies have perpetuated the Model Minority Myth for decades. Asian Americans are often portrayed as successful and high-achieving due to their cultural values, work ethic, and intelligence. This reinforces the stereotype of the "forever foreign" or outsider where an Asian American cannot fully assimilate into American society. One example of this can be seen in the 2018 film "Crazy Rich Asians," which features a predominantly Asian cast and tells the story of a wealthy family in Singapore. While the film is celebrated for its representation of Asian characters, it also perpetuates the model minority myth by portraying them as highly successful and privileged. The characters are depicted as well educated, affluent, and accomplished, with little exploration of the struggles that they may face. Another example can be seen in the popular TV show "The Big Bang Theory," which features a group of scientists, including two characters of Asian descent, Raj and Howard. This show also perpetuates the myth by representing Raj and Howard as naturally intelligent scientists, with little exploration of the

challenges they face as minorities in their field. It is crucial for the media and society to recognize the potential harm caused by perpetuating these stereotypes and work towards more authentic and diverse representations of Asian Americans. By breaking down these harmful tropes, we can create a more inclusive environment for marginalized groups in media. According to Hall, representations in the media are not simply reflections of reality, but are constructed through a process of selection and interpretation that is influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are produced. While some viewers may see the portrayal of Asian characters as positive and empowering, others may recognize the problematic nature of the representation and its reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. Challenging Asian American misrepresentation through media will lead to a more accurate racial and gender influence to the millions of viewers that watch these popular shows and movies.

Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory offers a valuable lens to view the ways in which Asian-American women's experiences intersect with the model minority myth and the challenges posed by their intersectional identities. This theory is a feminist sociological theory suggesting that the social, economic, and political position of an individual or group influences their understanding and experience of the world. According to this theory, people who occupy marginalized positions, such as women, people of color, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have experiences that are not available to those who occupy positions of power and privilege (Crenshaw 1241). Standpoint theory can also be used to inform research and educational efforts, by centering the perspectives of marginalized groups and working towards a more inclusive and equitable understanding of societal issues.

An Asian-American woman working a minimum-wage job experiences the everyday world fundamentally differently than a white-American male in a high-earning job. Of the two, the man has more respect and opportunity in his career compared to the experience of the woman. Stereotypes associated with Asian-American women often contribute to lower pay, fewer promotions, and less respect and recognition for their contributions in the workplace. AAPI women also tend to earn less than White men and are more likely to work part-time or part-year in every single state supported by an article written by Eve Mefferd titled “The Wage Gap for Asian American and Pacific Islander Women by State” (Mefferd). These perspectives are shaped by their social location, and provide valuable insights into social structures and power dynamics. For example, they face discrimination based on both their gender and their race, such as being stereotyped as exotic or submissive. Moreover, they may be overlooked or excluded from discussions due to their marginalized status, leading to a lack of representation and a failure to consider their perspectives. Understanding the standpoint of Asian American women informs efforts to promote gender and racial equity in the workplace, and to challenge stereotypes and biases against Asian Americans.

Gender plays a crucial role in forming the ethnic identity of Asian-American women. In addition to being influenced by Asian cultural values, traditional gender norms also play a significant role in shaping identity. Gendering traits means assigning certain qualities, behaviors, or attitudes to specific genders. Asian culture tends to uphold stereotypically "feminine" qualities such as gentle, submissive, and modest while “masculine” attributes like assertiveness, ambition, and competitiveness are discouraged (Seow 75). This creates a complex and intersecting dynamic for Asian-American women, who may experience difficulty in conforming to both Western and Asian cultural gender norms. It also creates a false binary where masculinity is

associated with strength, power, and rationality, while femininity is associated with weakness, submissiveness, and emotionality (Milesi et al). This narrow view of gender not only reinforces the subordination of women, but also reinforces the marginalization of individuals who do not conform to white/western gender norms, such as LGBTQ+ individuals.

Furthermore, Asian Americans may also experience the "bamboo ceiling," which refers to the difficulty in advancing in their careers due to both explicit and implicit biases held against them (Westfall). It is a manifestation of the broader racial and gender biases that exist in society, which limit the opportunities available to Asian-American women and perpetuate harmful stereotypes about their abilities and leadership potential. A study conducted by Kang and colleagues (2016), published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that Asian Americans were less likely to be promoted to executive positions compared to White Americans, even when they had similar qualifications and performance ratings. The authors suggest that implicit biases and cultural stereotypes may be contributing to this phenomenon, such as the belief that Asians are more passive and less assertive in leadership roles (Kang et al). These experiences shape the cultural understanding of Asian-American women and provide them with an important perspective on societal issues related to gender and race. Breaking the bamboo ceiling is about changing the narrative around Asian Americans and their contributions to society. It involves recognizing the unique cultural perspectives and experiences that Asian Americans bring to the table and valuing these perspectives as important contributions to the workplace and society at large. At the same time, it requires dismantling harmful stereotypes about Asian Americans, such as the belief that they are all highly academic and lack social skills or leadership potential.

The experiences of Asian-American women provide a unique standpoint on the intersection of race and gender. If the perspective of Asian-American women had been taken into

account through the use of standpoint theory, their experiences of being stereotyped as exotic or submissive would have been acknowledged and addressed. Policies could be created to promote greater cultural understanding and sensitivity towards Asian-American women. Additionally, Asian-American women's voices could be incorporated into discussions about workplace diversity and inclusion efforts. A report by the National Women's Law Center (2021) found that women, on average, make just 82 cents for every dollar earned by men, and women of color experience even larger wage gaps. Another study by Holoien and colleagues (2020) found that discrimination and bias against marginalized groups in the workplace can result in missed career advancement opportunities and lower job satisfaction. By using standpoint theory to identify the unique perspectives and experiences of Asian-American women, organizations create a more equitable and inclusive workplace that promotes equal opportunities for all employees regardless of their race or gender. A study conducted by Grace Ma and colleagues in 2018 examined the health disparities experienced by Asian-American women, specifically focusing on the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The study found that Asian-American women faced multiple barriers to healthcare access and utilization, including language barriers, lack of health insurance, and cultural barriers (Ma et al). By taking an intersectional perspective, the study highlighted the experiences and challenges faced by Asian-American women in accessing healthcare, and provided recommendations for addressing these disparities. By recognizing the diverse and intersectional experiences of Asian American women in healthcare and promoting policies that address their needs, standpoint theory helps prevent negative stereotyping and appreciation for the diversity of experiences within the Asian American community. Centering the perspectives of Asian-American women is important for these

programs to be effective in addressing the specific challenges they face and promote a more nuanced understanding of marginalized groups.

Intersectionality

Asian-American women face unique challenges, including experiencing stereotypes related to both their ethnicity and gender, and being subject to the "double jeopardy" of discrimination based on these aspects of their identity. Double jeopardy for Asian-American women refers to the intersectional discrimination they face based on both their gender and race, resulting in unique forms of marginalization that are not experienced by those facing discrimination based on one axis of their identity. For example, an Asian-American woman may experience racism from the dominant white culture as well as sexism and misogyny within her own cultural community. Furthermore, these gendered and cultural expectations are harmful, leading to internal conflict and difficulty in finding a sense of self that is authentic and true to one's experiences.

At the same time, this pressure also contributes to a sense of cultural pride and community support, as Asian-American women draw on their cultural values to navigate these challenges and find their own paths. One example of how this pride might manifest is the celebration of cultural traditions and customs. Asian American women may take pride in their cultural heritage by participating in cultural festivals, cooking traditional dishes, or wearing traditional clothing. Despite the obstacles they face, Asian-American women continue to demonstrate resilience and agency in navigating their experiences and promoting social justice. Recognizing the impact of gender on Asian-American women's identity and the harmful effects of these stereotypes underlines the need to break down biases perpetuated by white/western

cultural values, and intersectionality aids in addressing the challenges faced by those who do not conform to these standards.

Applying an intersectional lens to the study of gender and racial identity can shed light on how these identities intersect to shape the experiences of Asian-American women and how these experiences are influenced by cultural stereotypes and biases. Crenshaw is a scholar and professor of law who is well-known for coining the term "intersectionality." This concept highlights the ways in which different forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism, intersect and overlap to create individual experiences of marginalization for individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw 1244). The objectification of Asian-American women is rooted in both racism and sexism. This concept relates to the way that Asian-American women are often cast as obedient, passive, and exotic. Therefore, these stereotypes reinforce traditional gender roles, which are influenced by both Asian cultural values and Western imperialism (Kang et al.). The intersection of gender and race creates a distinct experience of marginalization that is specific to Asian-American women. This experience is not adequately addressed by traditional approaches to combating sexism or racism as separate issues. Consequently, Crenshaw argues that traditional approaches to anti-discrimination law and activism often fail to address the experiences of minorities (Crenshaw 1242). This concept recognizes that individuals are not defined by a single aspect of their identity, but rather by the intersection of multiple identities and experiences. By centering the experiences of those who hold multiple marginalized identities, it allows for a better understanding of the ways in which power and privilege operate in society.

Representation Theory

Stuart Hall's representation theory is important to recognize the power of subconscious biases as it refers to the fluidity of interpreting a person or event's meaning. He suggests that representation is a means of communicating and interacting with others that would not be possible otherwise. The theory suggests that culture is formed through meaning and language, which acts as the foundation of human connection. To make sense of the world, humans use type-casting and broad categories to process information. Hall's writing demonstrates the numerous misinterpretations that stereotyping causes because it omits the complex nature of one's identity. In essence, stereotypes declare what a person is and forces the individual to fit into a certain image of that race or gender. His theory suggests that meaning and language play a central role in shaping culture and human connections, and that stereotyping is a way in which individuals use type-casting and broad categories to process information and make sense of the world around them. In the context of Asian-American women, this means that harmful stereotypes that portray them as submissive, passive, or overly intellectual can have far-reaching consequences. These stereotypes not only deny individuals the opportunity for meaningful discourse about their own lives, but also perpetuate violent acts of crime against specific minorities. By pigeonholing Asian-American women into narrow and limiting roles, stereotypes deny them the opportunity to fully express themselves and to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

Another part of representation theory presents the idea of splitting where those who do not fit into society's norms or ideals are excluded and deemed as outsiders (Hall 20). The denial of individuals' meaningful discourse about their lives perpetuates violent acts of crime against specific minorities. Hall also examines the nature of power when stereotyping mass communities

of a specific race. He describes how this practice constitutes a form of collective stereotyping that supports hegemonic control over other areas (Hall 24). These observations align with the premise of this project because it forces viewers to confront their impressions of a specific race and gender that is not the ideal western model. Furthermore, Hall's theory suggests that there is a conscious and unconscious level to stereotyping, which highlights the importance of examining our own biases and assumptions. This theory presents the idea of splitting where those who do not fit into society's norms or ideals are excluded and deemed as outsiders. The denial of individuals' meaningful discourse about their lives perpetuates violent acts of crime against specific minorities. Hall examines the nature of power when stereotyping mass communities of a specific race and describes how this practice constitutes a form of collective stereotyping that supports hegemonic control over other areas. These observations align with the premise of this project because it forces viewers to confront their impressions of a specific race and gender that is not the ideal western model. Furthermore, Hall's theory suggests that there is a conscious and unconscious level to stereotyping, which highlights the importance of examining our own biases and assumptions. Stuart Hall's representation theory supports the project idea that humans naturally stereotype others in an attempt to better understand something that is not themselves by generalizing a person's race and gender.

Introduction to Photography Gallery

To demonstrate the pervasiveness of harmful stereotyping, I pursued a photography project that provides space for individuals to explore the impact of gender and racial discrimination by capturing two distinct images of their identity. This curated photo series confronts the viewer, bringing to light the harmful gender and racial discrimination that exists in our society today. I want to closely examine what type of social stigma Asian-American women

face by photographing two distinct images. By having different images of the same individual next to each other, the viewer compares the visual differences between the stereotyped image's negative connotations and the personality picture's openness. The first one highlights a chosen stereotype that the person dislikes while the other embodies their true personality. Both prompts allow the individual to freely choose what they want to wear and behave to portray how they want to be seen. By organizing a physical space in a gallery, I explore common stereotypes associated with Asian-American women that subject them to misrepresentation and harmful behaviors. In Figure 1, Athulya Nath is portrayed covering her eyes with the word "mathematician," while simple equations are written across the wall behind her. This depiction represents the stereotype that Asians are naturally gifted at math and are good with numbers, which Asian American women must confront regularly. This stereotype can create a perception that Asian Americans are robotic or lacking in creativity and innovation, which can limit opportunities for them in fields outside of math and science. Illustrating the most common stereotypes associated with this demographic will prompt individuals to reassess their own subconscious biases and help dismantle the existing rigidity of racial and gender expectations associated with Asian American females.

History of Photography: Nadar

There are several artists that lend themselves to the foundational power and influence of a photograph capturing a specific moment in time. My work as a photographer best aligns with the principles set forth by the French photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon or known by his pseudonym Nadar, who pioneered the act of capturing a subject's true character through portrait photography. Photography became a popular device used to record the emotion, character, and status of individuals rather than paintings in the 1840s, highlighting the significance of this new

medium in capturing the essence of an individual. In particular, his photographs of women are notable for their realistic poses and individual personality. Therefore, audiences are drawn more toward the authenticity and natural beauty of each individual's photograph. This idea plays into the intentionality of having the second image of every individual in my photo series as a personality portraiture that is self-directed. All nine Asian-American female students chose what to wear, act, and pose themselves to convey their authentic identity that is not limited by the common stereotypes others place on them. Nadar sparked a movement towards creating better portrait photographs that accurately represent the individual instead of conforming to the traditional methods of photographing subjects. In conclusion, by following in Nadar's footsteps and focusing on capturing the unique personalities of the Asian-American women in my photo series, I aim to contribute to a more authentic and diverse representation of this group in photography, while also paying homage to the pioneering work of Nadar in the field of portrait photography.

Cindy Sherman: *Untitled Series*

To further expand on the use of photography to critique social constructs of gender, artist Cindy Sherman gained international recognition for her work in challenging the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding female identity. She is an American artist who uses photography as a tool to reveal the social stigma surrounding female identity by reenacting the fetishization of daily activities. Her work uses scenarios such as going to the library to expose the unconscious biases that individuals conceptualize about women (Schweitzer). Her art series, *Untitled Film Stills*, addresses the most prevalent gender stereotypes; Sherman assumes the role of various female identities found in Western culture. She believed that this series of artworks re-represents female identity and deconstructs prevailing cultural expectations of femininity. In *Untitled Film*

Still #2 from 1977, Sherman plays the role of a woman studying her reflection in a bathroom mirror. The photo visually portrays a woman catching a glimpse of herself in a mirror while wrapped with a towel around her body. Sherman becomes the fetishized version of each female stereotype that exposes the way men traditionally view a woman's role in the community. Therefore, she embodies this character to critique female stereotypes through her intentionally provocative work and calls more attention to societal preconceptions of gender.

Like Sherman's artwork series, this photo gallery critiques the culture of beauty that imposes unrealistic standards on women and highlights the harm that results from such expectations. Similar to Sherman's work, this project uses positioned photographs to embody a specific gender stereotype and reposition the subject as the person controlling the narrative. My project differs from Sherman's photograph series because it focuses more on both gender and racial stereotyping and visually denies the existence of these categorizations. Using inspiration from Sherman's direct representation of these common tropes, I challenge the frequent complimentary words associated with female stereotyping and provide a physical space for further conversation about the images. Overall, Sherman's photographs compel their viewers to question what cultural and sexual barriers exist in one's mind while my artwork focuses on gender and racial identifications. Visually embodying stereotypes that place certain demographics in a negative light brings awareness to a systemic issue of misrepresentation of gender and race that needs to be addressed.

Modern Photography: Michelle Watt

Michelle Watt's photography challenges harmful stereotypes of Asian-American women by presenting their multifaceted identities in a visually compelling way, departing from the stereotypical depictions often seen in mainstream media. She uses elaborate sets, makeup,

vibrant lighting, props, and costuming to bring the individual's culture to life in these photographs. In particular, her portrait series "Lunar Geisha", was published in Blanc Magazine as an exploration of female Asian identity (Kaur). Using the Geisha as a metaphor for the hypersexualization and fetishizing of East Asian women. The photo gallery starts with an image of a young girl playfully sprawled along a bench with blossoms surrounding her and turns into a young woman in subsequent photos using bold colors of red to signify maturity and sexuality. She explains that this series challenges how East Asian women are perceived as sexual objects in society and demonstrates how these women are forced into playing certain roles to fulfill the desires of men (Skelton). Michelle Watt's approach to fashion and portrait photography helps combat the harmful power of objectifying stereotypes frequently imposed upon Asian-American women. Her images serve as a visual inspiration for my gallery to create engaging photographs that invoke viewers to question and challenge their assumptions about Asian-American women.

The Influence of Photographs

Using photography as a medium in this gallery project serves several purposes. Firstly, it provides a means to challenge the harmful and limiting stereotypes of Asian-American women by showcasing their complexity and diversity through images. Photography also enables marginalized individuals to control their own narratives and tell their stories, which is crucial for representation and visibility. This artform is a powerful tool that allows marginalized people to take control of their own stories and challenge negative stereotypes. By capturing their experiences and sharing them with the world, minorities use creative images to increase visibility and representation. Incorporating this medium into the gallery project contributes to a larger conversation about equity for Asian-American women. Through the standpoint theory lens, viewers are prompted to reassess their biases and create a more nuanced and intersectional

understanding of their experiences. The use of photography as a medium can help to center their voices and offer a counter-narrative to the negative preconceptions that are often projected onto them. In this way, the gallery project is a powerful tool for social change and promoting greater equity and justice.

Project Scope

Each image of the nine different Asian-American women prompts viewers to better understand each individual's choices in how they were photographed to illustrate the consequences of social stigma. This project examines the specific words that each individual dislikes the most about their gender and race, which sheds light on the greater social discrimination that minorities face. The physical photo collection provides space for individuals to examine the intimate details within each photograph composition. Every aspect of the image including outfit, hair, framing, and props are all intentional. Sabrina Stone in photograph 3 features her sitting in a kitchen with her hair tousled and her mouth covered in duct tape, conveying the oppressive effects of being stereotyped as submissive based on her Asian-American and female identity. In addition, the photograph is taken from a top angle, emphasizing the power dynamic and further reinforcing the stereotype of weakness and submissiveness that she confronts from her male peers. Collecting two photos each for the nine different individuals provides a baseline to analyze patterns in their chosen words and gain a better understanding of their misconceptions.

The word that repeats the most is submissive which overlaps with negative preconceptions of both women and Asian Americans. Specifically, the word submissive was chosen twice and both subjects felt that it best describes the discrimination they face relating to both their gender and race. This idea ties back to intersectionality and recognizes that an

individual's identity is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single defining characteristic. Instead, an individual's identity is shaped by a combination of various intersecting factors, such as race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status, that interact and compound to create their unique identity. This prominent theme in word choices focuses on the idea that women are seen as quiet and compliant to fulfill the desires of men, which references the power of Cindy Sherman's Untitled Series previously mentioned. More specifically, there is an overlap between female stereotypes and Asian American stigma surrounding docile behaviors. In Figure 3, Sabrina Stone decided to use duct tape to cover her mouth as a representation of the silencing effect she feels when being seen as submissive. Her personal experiences in group projects and feeling the need to earn respect from her male peers may have influenced her decision to use this particular stereotype. By positioning herself in a closed-off manner and covering her mouth with the word "submissive," Sabrina is highlighting how this stereotype can limit the opportunities and experiences of Asian-American women. The word itself is often associated with weakness and lack of agency, which can have a profound impact on individuals. Overall, Sabrina's photograph is a powerful representation of the impact of harmful stereotypes on marginalized communities. Through this platform, I explore how stereotyping subjects in photographs is a testament to one's preconceptions of gender and race while providing a visual representation of these debunked biases.

Within the first set of photographs, the individual writes a racial or gender stereotype on a piece of paper that is then held up to cover their eyes. This detail represents the lack of individual identity that occurs when others project their biases onto them. Furthermore, it was a choice to remove this visual identifier, in particular to Asian Americans, because it represents a major source of harmful discrimination for them. Furthermore, the eyes are often seen as a window into

a person's soul or personality, and by covering them up, the subject becomes more of a blank slate onto which viewers can project their own biases and assumptions. Asian-Americans often face violent discrimination due to their identifiable physical features such as their eyes and nose because these features are seen as markers of their ethnicity. Therefore, covering the eyes allows the viewers to focus their attention on the subject's body positioning and specific word choice without implicit bias from their racial identity. By hiding the eyes, the subject becomes less identifiable and more representative of a larger group of people who face similar stereotypes and discrimination.

The second picture prompts the individual to bring a prop or outfit that best represents their true personality. In this image, the photo is in full color and portrays the individual however they see fit. First impressions are formed in a matter of a few seconds, so it is important to understand what subconscious biases influence the perception of certain people. I am using photography as the medium because it freezes that initial first impression, allowing individuals to spend more time analyzing the details within each photographed individual. These performative pieces shift the power back to the individual in the photograph because it acknowledges the stereotype and provokes the viewer to understand its negative implications. Moreover, the subject chooses how they want their real identity to be perceived, offering them more agency. By having a physical gallery of both stereotyped and personality images, the audience can work to recognize and deconstruct any existing preconceived notions about the gender and racial identity shown in the photographs.

This project addresses common stereotyping of female Asian Americans in a direct visual comparison to challenge the viewer's perceptions of race and gender identity. A crucial part of this project is hearing the thought process behind each person's choice of stereotype. For

example, one of the individuals asked what others put on their paper and whether to worry about repeating a certain word. I decided to not mention others' answers and told them not to worry about repetition. This allowed the individual to freely select the stereotype that they resonate the most with rather than conforming to another individual's word choice. By creating their own images and choosing the elements that align with their individual identities, participants in this project were able to challenge these stereotypes and present a more nuanced representation of themselves. This process of self-representation is crucial in empowering marginalized communities to assert their own narratives and challenge the dominant stereotypes that often limit and dehumanize them.

An unexpected part of this process was a majority hesitated when deciding how to represent their authentic self in a single photograph. There are significant consequences in becoming complacent to the misconceptions that Asian-American women face that affect how they are seen and treated by others. Stereotypes placed on this demographic result in cases of harassment, objectification, and social anxiety (Hwang 599). Representing oneself in a single photograph can feel like a daunting task, especially when the goal is to accurately convey one's authentic self. Additionally, the societal pressure and stereotypes that Asian American women face can create a sense of vulnerability and discomfort when it comes to self-representation. It is unclear whether the hesitation was more or less pronounced in photo 1 versus photo 2 since each participant's experience was unique. However, it is possible that some participants may have felt more at ease in photo 2 since they had already gone through the process once and had more choices in how they wanted to present their authentic self. The addition of the student's request to represent submissiveness with duct tape over her mouth in Figure 3 is a powerful example of the level of authenticity that the participants brought to this project. This request highlights the

importance of allowing individuals to fully embody their stereotypes, even if it may be visually disturbing or uncomfortable for some viewers. By encouraging this level of self-expression, the photo gallery was able to capture a more diverse range of representations of the racial and gender stigmas faced by Asian-American women. It allows individuals to reclaim their narratives and challenge societal expectations, which provides a space for social commentary.

Misrepresentation in Media

Asian Americans have been marginalized and underrepresented in media, leading to a lack of diverse representation and a perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. By creating and showcasing their own artwork through this gallery, the Asian-American women were able to provide a more nuanced and accurate representation of their experiences. When comparing different racial representations, many examples reaffirm Asians as inferior to white individuals where women are particularly discriminated against. In mainstream media, white women are often portrayed as the epitome of beauty and desirability, while Asian-American women are often relegated to a secondary, exoticized status. For example, in the world of fashion, white models are often used as the standard of beauty, while Asian-American models are typically cast in roles that play up their exoticness or submissiveness. This can lead to a sense of inferiority and a loss of self-esteem for Asian-American women, who may feel pressure to conform to Western beauty standards and cultural norms in order to fit in or be accepted. This standard of ideal femininity towards only specific races is problematic in social situations. Becoming complacent to images and articles that denigrate Asian femininity while glorifying white femininity ostracizes individuals and promotes inauthenticity.

Conclusion

The photography work included eighteen total photographs highlighting the experiences of nine individuals. The exhibition was in a physical gallery space as part of the IMS senior seminar final project event in fall 2023 on the Pitzer campus. This decision was made to increase conversation with surrounding peers of different races and gender about the photographs. By having enlarged images of each individual's choice of stereotype word, viewers can examine the subjects in detail. I had also considered the idea of a video interview segment for the project but decided that it would be better to focus on the impact that a still photograph can have in capturing a moment in time. The use of still photography and the intentional contrast between the black-and-white stereotype images and the vibrant personality images effectively highlight the negative effects of placing individuals into limiting checkboxes. The physical gallery exhibition of these photographs fostered meaningful conversations among peers from diverse backgrounds, promoting greater understanding and empathy towards the experiences of those portrayed.

This photography project serves as a presentation, shedding light on the negative consequences of complacency to racial and gender stereotypes, particularly concerning Asian-American women. Exploring the complexity of these stereotypes, my work examines the model minority myth, intersectionality, and standpoint theory, while also providing historical context to understand the violent crimes committed against this demographic. The use of complementary stereotypes on Asian-American women sets unrealistic standards, leading to societal pressure to conform to preconceived notions of how one should behave. This exhibition explicitly demonstrates the negative consequences of these stereotypes by showcasing Asian-American women in a multifaceted perspective. Harmful stereotypes placed on marginalized groups can lead to a sense of internalized oppression, where individuals begin to

believe and embody the negative stereotypes assigned to them. In the case of Asian-American women, these stereotypes often involve being exoticized, fetishized, or seen as submissive and obedient, leading to sexual harassment and objectification. Through the use of intersectionality and standpoint theory, this project challenges preconceptions and encourages a more conscious understanding of our biases by first recognizing the destructive behavior of complementary stereotypes. The result is a powerful message that emphasizes the need for social change and highlights the importance of addressing harmful stereotypes to promote a more inclusive society.

Appendix
Fig 1

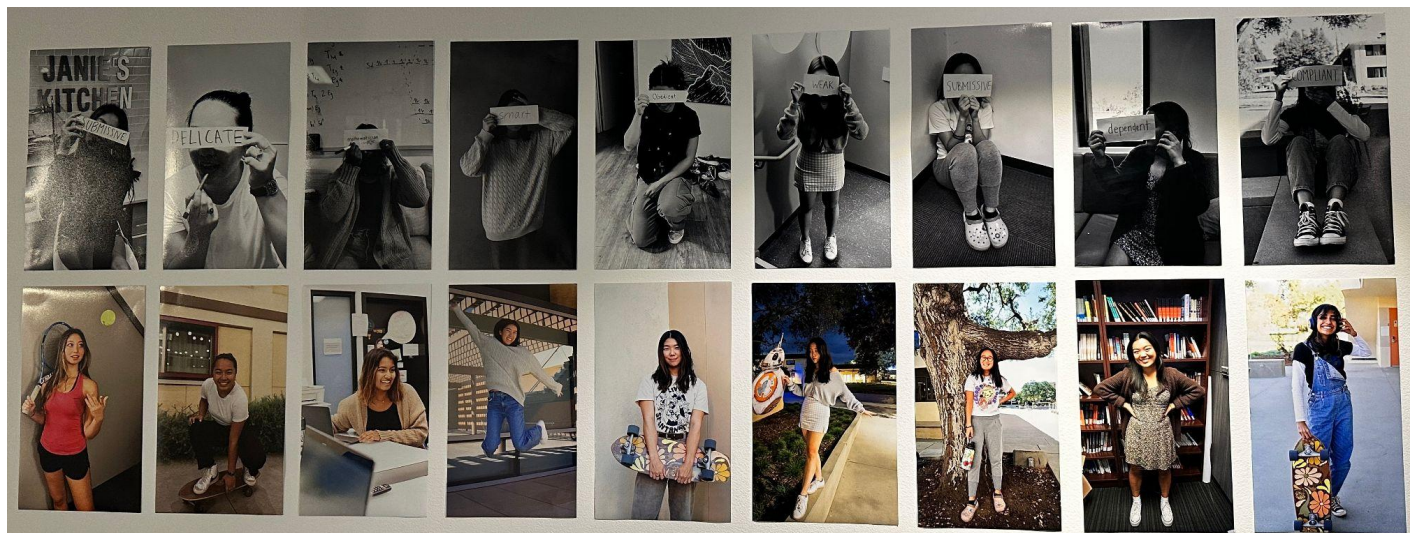


Fig 2



Fig 3





Reimagining Identity Through Photography
 Noelle Song
 Media Studies & Economics, Claremont McKenna College

A picture is worth a thousand words. A project focused on how we perceive others through photography. Using images to demonstrate the importance of dismantling negative stereotypes in modern society.

This installation creates a space for viewers to reimagine racial and gender identity. It challenges common stereotypes focusing on Asian American females that place them as objects for male needs and desires. Each individual has two photos: 1st (black/white) stereotype portrait and 2nd (color) personality picture. The first prompt asked the subjects to write down the stereotype associated with their race/gender they disliked the most. The second prompt allowed them creative freedom in embodying their authentic self through clothing, scenery, and body language. By placing these two photos next to each other, viewers can better understand the limitations of placing harmful stereotypes about others that misrepresent the individual. Therefore, it encourages viewers to reassess their own biases that can negatively impact their perceptions of different people.

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