Your Best American Girl: Asian American Sexual Literacies in Family, Schooling, & Media

Annie Wang

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Your Best American Girl:
Asian American Sexual Literacies in Family, Schooling, & Media

A dual thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degrees of Bachelor of Arts in Educational Studies and Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies

Annie Wang
Vassar College
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Advisors:
Ah-Young Song, Visiting Assistant Professor of Education
Dara Greenwood, Associate Professor of Psychological Science
Abstract

This dual thesis utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to examine Asian American sexual literacies in the distinct areas of family, schooling, and media using Critical Discourse Analysis to consider the role of power in knowledge and panopticism in normative sexual behaviors. I conceive of sex education in broad strokes as messages and sexual communications absorbed and challenged in different spaces such as the home, the predominantly white school, the liberal arts college, and the Asian/American media landscape. Centering of the voices of Asian American women and gender non-binary people aimed to discern the particular vulnerabilities in being the object of sexual fetish and exoticism. How do these individuals make sense of biculturalism, intergenerational conflict, and intersectional identities to develop sexual agency? I adapted Jean Kim’s Asian American Identity Development (AAID) framework to incorporate sexual identity development concurrently with racial identity. I collected data from eight semi-structured, qualitative interviews with college-age 1.5/second generation Asian American women/gender non-binary people of East Asian descent. Based on interview findings, I conclude with suggestions for sex education curriculum to promote an anti-racist, feminist perspective as well as directions for future research.

Keywords: Asian American, sex education, sexual literacy, identity, self-surveillance
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Introduction

Before diving in, I will provide some insight as to my positionality to this work. I am a straight, cisgender second generation Chinese American woman who grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. My parents immigrated to the U.S. in the early 90s with my older sister who was around three years old at the time. I was born in Gaithersburg, Maryland in August 1999 three miscarriages later. My parents often joke about how I would not exist if they had stayed in China. They gave me the name 安怡 (pronounced anyi), a phrase meaning “peace and happiness” to signify what they hoped my life in America would be characterized by. After some rough early years of working whatever jobs they could with limited English, my dad eventually obtained a research position where he has worked all my life. I would consider my family to be middle class. Even though my mother was almost painfully frugal at times, I always had my basic needs met and then some. We spoke Mandarin at home, though my rusty speaking skills now amount to something resembling Chinglish. Unlike my sister who spent much of her childhood bouncing around different states, I had a lot of consistency in mine. I grew up falling asleep to Celine Dion in the car, eating hot pot for dinner, and watching a select few Chinese dramas with my family on repeat.

My interest in Asian American sexual literacies emerged from a blend of academic curiosities and personal experiences. Before college, sex was always a topic that had made me uncomfortable. A tension you could cut would manifest if a sex scene appeared on screen in my household. I had crushes on boys, but dating was generally not a priority for me. My mom answered the questions I had about my first period but never really explained anything to me because she assumed I had learned about it in school. I barely remember anything from my abstinence-only sex education other than a girl asking if it hurt “shoving a tampon up there” and
a video where some girl felt insecure about not having breasts yet. The first time I saw a penis (if you exclude my male classmates’ phallic doodles) was in my first-year college drawing class on a model. I probably first saw the word “clitoris” in a game of Cards Against Humanity. My lack of sexual knowledge never bothered me until I entered the college dating landscape and men sexualized my Asian appearance. The first guy I ever dated in junior year did not understand why men with Asian fetishes grossed me out. At the time, I could not explain beyond “it just makes me uncomfortable.” This thesis might serve as a more coherent response.

The initial threads of my thesis began coming together in Spring 2020 during my short study abroad in London before the COVID-19 virus required my rapid retreat back to the U.S. Before I left, I was struck by how my feelings of foreignness took new forms. I stuck out with my American accent and Asian face, but I did not mind as I find that we learn the most when we are immersed in unfamiliar spaces. That is, I did not mind until a British man went on and on about how “special” Asian women were to me in a bar. I did not mind until bus passengers shifted away from me assuming I had a deadly disease as the virus spread from Europe to the U.K. I did not mind until I heard about an Asian man being beaten up on Oxford Street and began feeling fearful waiting for a bus alone at night. These feelings of frustration shaped my desire to center Asian Americanism in my research and put these frustrations to paper.

Then the Atlanta spa shootings on March 16, 2021 happened. The loss of Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Sun Cha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng still weighs heavily on me. Six Asian women taken and reduced to the casualties of a 21-year-old white man’s “really bad day.” Feeling sick to my stomach, the shootings only confirmed what I had been researching and writing about for months. The media, as it always does in American mass

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1 Given the power of language, my decision to not capitalize “white” in this thesis is deliberate despite the American Psychological Association’s guideline to capitalize all racial and ethnic groups. I borrow from McIntyre (2008)’s logic to use the uppercase for all races but white as part of a “counter-hegemonic practice” (McIntyre, 2008, p. xiii).
shootings, made efforts to humanize the shooter because he was white. He was white, and he had a “sex addiction.” A “sex addiction” culminated in trying to eliminate his “temptations” and the deaths of eight people. The lengths that the narrative will go to protect the image of the white man and trivialize the victims is a symptom of normalized racism and decades of Asian invisibility. These Asian women suffered the consequences of racism, sexism, misogyny, and exoticism. So much for “harmless” sexual preferences. For non-Asian readers, I encourage you to ponder: What are you personally doing to make the world a safer place for women who look like me?

My interests in researching the sex education experiences of Asian American women/gender non-binary people were grounded by the want to center a largely neglected population in previous literature. Sex education offers a unique space of exploration to consider the forces of power in disciplining bodies and appropriate sexual behaviors. Sex education also exemplifies an unstandardized curriculum with great variety in what and how much schools cover in preparing students for their sexual development. However, learning about sex is not limited to school curriculum as adolescents receive messages from family, friends, local churches, and media (T.V., advertisements, porn, etc.). While other scholars have considered the lack of Asian representation in American history and other areas, very few have tackled sex education. As such, I use an interdisciplinary approach for investigation. I was curious as to how these messages interact for 1.5 or second generation Asian Americans like myself growing up in bicultural environments. My primary research question posed: How do race, gender, and sexuality intersect for Asian American women/gender non-binary people in family, schooling, and media to develop distinct sexual literacies?
Chapter One begins with an eclectic literature review drawing from a variety of theoretical frameworks such as Freirean critical literacy, Foucauldian disciplinary power, Critical Race Theory, AsianCrit, and media psychology organized within Jean Kim’s Asian American Identity Development Theory. By doing so, I cover in broad strokes the ecosystems of sexual literacy while revealing gaps in previous literature to effectively center Asian Americans. Then in Chapter Two, I explain my methodology to use Critical Discourse Analysis to examine dominant discourses of sexuality in data from semi-structured qualitative interviews. I provide charts to summarize demographic details about the eight participants and the prominent thematic discourse codes used for analysis later on. These chapters lay the groundwork for my data collection.

The methods section is followed by three findings chapters split into the areas of family, schooling, and media which are examined together in the subsequent analysis chapter. Chapter Three on family sex education situates the home environment within the Ethnic Awareness stage and reports on the role of parents, extended family, and local Asian community members in early sexual socialization for my interviewees. Chapter Four on school sex education follows the White Identification stage to detail my interviewees’ experiences with sex ed curriculum and peer cultures, illustrating how sexual messages within predominantly white contexts differ from the Asian household. Chapter Five on media sex education considers my interviewees’ passive and active media consumption of American and Asian content, moving from Awakening to Social Political Consciousness to Redirection to an Asian American Consciousness. Chapter Six uses a Critical Discourse Analysis to put the areas of family, schooling, and media in

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2 While I draw from previous literature that discusses Asian American experiences more broadly, my research centers people of East Asian descent and the particular media images surrounding East Asian women. Consequently, I will not use the category Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) in this paper to avoid making generalizations about a social group that already suffers from monolithization.
conversation with each other by identifying the major thematic trends that recurred for my interviewees’ sexual literacies. I conclude with recommendations for incorporating dialogic spaces and anti-racism in sex education curriculum as well as implications for future research on Asian American sexual literacies.

Above all else, this thesis is a labor of love. While I hope its pages stimulate thought for non-Asian readers and raise awareness about the particular vulnerabilities women/gender non-binary people of East Asian descent face, I hope that my fellow Asian Americans who might stumble upon this piece feel seen. I hope that my own voice and excerpts from the eight interviewees provide validation for those moments of feeling invisible and disposable. I am here to affirm: Your comfort matters. Your relationships matter. Your stories matter. And if you do not feel seen in this study, I hope that motivates you to ask more questions, conduct more research, and pursue more creative projects.
Chapter One: Literature Review

Defining Sexual Literacy

Before investigating Asian American sexual literacies, I will contemplate what sexual literacy even means. According to Jonathan Alexander, sexual literacy refers to:

“the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self- and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and or ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms” (Alexander, 2008, p. 5).

Alexander conceives of sexuality and literacy as co-constructions, insisting that meaning-making systems are always already sexualized through the body, desire, relationships, and social status in the social hierarchy. For Alexander, sexual literacy is not simply knowledge about sex/sexuality, but an intimate understanding of how discourse constructs sexuality and utilizing this understanding to advance personal sexual health. Additionally, Alexander considers “literacy events,” or how representations of sex/sexuality are continually “constructed, written, and disseminated” and controlled by the state/collective (Alexander, 2008, p. 4). I opt for the term literacy sphere when considering family, media, and schooling as contexts instead of singular “events” as literacy events are continually reproducing dominant ideologies within family communications, sex education classes, and media images for adolescents.

Sexual literacy is informed by various literacy spheres in which literacy events are continually reproducing themselves. Sex education includes the process of sexual socialization, the development of literacy on sex/relationships, and the consequent arrival at sexual agency. Sex education is not limited to available curriculums within the traditional schooling environment as media diets, parental communication, peer interactions, and interpersonal relationships co-construct knowledge around sexual health and the self as a sexual being. Asian Americans navigate distinct cultural frames within spheres of family, schooling, and media
before arriving at critical sex talk. This review will consider the development of Asian American sexual literacies by expanding on the format of Jean Kim’s model of Asian American Identity Development. I will create a critical analysis examining race, gender, and sexuality among other constructs within dominant discourses of sexuality that center white, cisgender, heterosexual, male pleasure.

**The Self: Asian American Identity Development**

Jean Kim (2001) theorizes a process of self-formation through Asian American Identity Development (AAID) Theory by drawing from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the consequences of the rationalized superiority and normalcy of whiteness. This model unfolds in five distinct stages (Ethnic Awareness, White Identification, Awakening to Social Political Consciousness, Redirection to an Asian American Consciousness, and Incorporation) as Asian Americans undergo a process of negotiation between their Asian ethnic roots and predominantly white school settings to arrive at a distinctly Asian American identity. White racism is inseparable from AAID due to the pervasive nature of racism in the social environment (the public/collective self) and its role in shaping the private self (Kim, 2001). The tendencies of Americans of Asian heritage toward group orientations socialize a private self that is attuned to the expectations of others around them in the collective, linking the development of self to external messages and alignment to the host context. AAID provides scaffolding for how Asian Americans grapple with a bicultural learning environment between their Asian households and white school settings to develop a distinct racial identity.

I will position AAID as a co-construction of racial and sexual identity when considering how Asian Americans navigate distinct norms surrounding attitudes toward dating, sex, relationships, and romance. Much in the way that Kim (2001) acknowledges her stages as
conceptually distinct and progressive, Asian American sexual literacies are continually constructed by the interaction of the literacy spheres of family, schooling, and media in a not necessarily linear fashion. While Kim (2001)’s stages are temporal, noting what types of social environments are particularly influential in each, I adopt the language of “spheres” to describe the saliency of specific ecological layers in the stages of development. The spheres do not act separately, so the value of considering them together facilitates an understanding of how cues from each literacy sphere contribute to Asian American Sexual Identity Development (AASID). The following chart provides an overview of how I will proceed to discuss each literacy sphere:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAID Stage</th>
<th>AAID Social Environment</th>
<th>AASID Literacy Sphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Awareness</td>
<td>Home/family</td>
<td>Family: parental role modeling, parental sexual communications (i.e. “the talk” and implicit attitudes), extended family/Asian immigrant communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Identification</td>
<td>Public arenas (e.g., school systems)</td>
<td>Schools: formal sex ed curriculum, (subtext: peer cultures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awakening to Social Political Consciousness</td>
<td>Social political movements and/or campus politics</td>
<td>Media: Online queer/BIPOC³ communities, Stereotype-confirming representations in media, media impacts on interpersonal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirection to an Asian American Consciousness</td>
<td>Asian American community</td>
<td>Media: Asian/Asian American media content, stereotype-resisting representations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporation</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Synthesis of literacy spheres with social identities to arrive at sexual agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sphere 1: Ethnic Awareness and Family Attitudes on Sex**

1.5 and second generation Asian Americans experience the distinct literacy sphere of the immigrant household, prompting an ethnic awareness from a young age. Kim (2001)’s stage of

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³ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
Ethnic Awareness lasts until Asian Americans enter the school system, but these lines blur when explicit sexual interest and development do not commence until adolescence. However, family is still an effective starting point when conceptualizing Asian American sexual literacies as parents model attitudes and behaviors even before their children enter institutions. Sociocultural learning theorists recognize how individuals learn and develop cognitive processes in both educational and non-educational settings (Phan, 2017). In line with Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory, family is a part of the microsystem where person-others interactions occur. In the home, Asian Americans observe how their parents interact in their partnership: physical affections (or perhaps lack thereof), gender roles, and communication techniques. Talk about sex might not occur until later (if ever), but parents serve as the first sex educators, and Asian immigrant parents exhibit a different type of relationship and values than that of the child’s non-Asian peers. Okagaki uses a triarchic framework of the school, the family, and the community to take into account the sociocultural and environmental settings of marginalized students (Phan, 2017). This perspective is helpful to situate Asian Americans’ learning as being immersed in both the Asian immigrant household and predominantly white school systems and communities.

Acculturative stress for Asian immigrant parents breaks down the interconnections between school, community, and family. The fracture of existing social networks from the home country compels Asian immigrants to take on the languages and cultures of the host country like a prosthetic limb. Given the commonality of children in immigrant families acculturating faster than their parents from having either immigrated at a young age or being born in the U.S., a role-reversal in the parent-child relationship results in parent dependency on child in language acquisition.

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4 Bronfenbrenner’s other layers include the mesosystem (connections between situations), the exosystem (indirect influence on a person from others’ relations), and macrosystem (relation with society at large and one’s own cultural identity) to culminate in the bioecological systems framework where individuals learn and acquire knowledge from their surroundings (Phan, 2017). This thesis focuses on literacy spheres within the microsystem (family, schools) and macrosystem (media).
translation and social interactions (Xia et al., 2013). The more readily achieved acculturation in 1.5 and second generation children can also lead to the adoption of American values and behaviors that conflict with the values of their parents’ culture. Asian immigrant parents and their Asian American children are socialized in entirely different literacy spheres with diverging norms in sexual and romantic relationships, though the patriarchal structures underlying both cultures communicate sexual suppression in women.

“The talk” is not usually verbally given by Asian parents due to cultural taboo. Implicit attitudes around sex and sexuality are still communicated, but the word “sex” is seldom mentioned. Hierarchical familial relationships where youth are expected to respect their elders deter “open and explicit communication about this sensitive topic,” and intergenerational knowledge further complicates communication with a lack of shared vocabulary in multilingual households (Kim & Ward, 2007, p. 24). This creates a greater reliance by both Asian parents and their children to derive knowledge from white pleasure-centric sex education and peers in school settings, as I will discuss in the White Identification stage. However, comprehensive and inclusive sex education programs are rare, which in turn steers Asian American youth toward white mainstream American media for sex ed. Though not uncommon for adolescents to seek out sex education in media, Asian Americans grapple with how dominant narratives frame Asian sexual pleasure.

Asian cultures uphold sexual conservatism as a vital practice for the maintenance of the family unit that aligns with Victorian views to keep sex as a hush hush topic (Hahm et al., 2006). Sexuality is viewed as a taboo topic kept within the private self, and the expression of sexual desire (especially in women) outside of marriage is shameful. Less acculturated Asian parents do not view dating as a “normative component in adolescent development,” standing in direct
contradiction to “expectations conveyed by the dominant U.S. culture through avenues such as peers or the media” (Kim & Ward, 2007, p. 20). Double standards in both Asian cultures and white American culture further limit female sexuality to solely reproductive purposes or for the pleasure of male partners. In accordance with the patriarchal position of the male lead of the household, young Asian American women are socialized in specific gender roles to defer to male family members (Xia et al., 2013). As a result, Asian American daughters receive more prohibitive messages surrounding sex and dating. Intergenerational conflict tends to increase with later generations in issues relating to dating and marriage for Asian American daughters who report tensions with family members due to overly protective and traditional viewpoints (Xia et al., 2013). Kim and Ward (2007) notice a gap in research to examine how young Asian American women “contend with conflicting cultural expectations about dating and sexuality” when Asian cultures suppress their sexuality with an emphasis on chastity while dominant American culture hypersexualizes them (Kim & Ward, 2007, p. 26). My research will explore how sexual literacies emerge in Asian American women and gender non-binary individuals when reading mixed messages between Asian parental sexual communications and white mainstream sex education.

Sphere 2: White Identification and Sex Education Curriculum in Schools

Kim (2001)’s White Identification stage marks the acknowledgement of difference as Asian American youth recognize their own racial differences from their peers. Yet, analyzing sex education will demonstrate the consequences of Asian Americans receiving the same curriculum despite these differences. The Asian cultural tendency toward group orientation sees Asian Americans attempting to negotiate these differences by performing to white societal values and
standards in physical attractiveness, dating, and sexual debuts. Using white peers as a reference group, Asian Americans feel the pressure to fit in to avoid discrimination.

The legacy of Victorian traditions in the West must be dissected before considering the dominant discourses on sexuality communicated within American schooling. Here, I draw on Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault to map out structures of power within the classroom and the society at large which students are educated to enter. Freire critiques the reproduction of the status quo through the sole instruction of oppressive dominant ideologies, offering literacy and continual unlearning as revolutionary acts. Foucault’s disciplinary power uses Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon as an architectural model to illustrate how surveillance regulates individuals to behave in a way that aligns with dominant discourse. As Foucault tends “to view the East through Western eyes” and little research has been done on sexuality discourse in Asia, I will primarily engage with his ideas of panopticism to comment on American schooling and Western sexuality discourse as a context Asian Americans are immersed in for sexual socialization (Chou, 2012, p. 43). Discourse on sexuality regarded as indisputable truth roots the landscape of sex education through which to socialize individuals.

For sex to be regulated and defined, it must first be talked about. Shame, silence, and secrecy only came to pass once the idea of a normative couple took form, “safeguarded the truth,” and “imposed itself as a model” (Foucault, 1990, p. 3). Foucault theorizes the repressive hypothesis to describe how pleasure and discourse on sexuality became exclusive to the confines of marriage with the rise of capitalist bourgeoisie. With an emphasis on productivity, the expenditure of energy on activities such as sex became restricted to a practical and highly private affair between husband and wife. Sex for pleasure became a waste of energy while sex for reproduction produced more middle class people for productive means. Conceiving of sex in this
way is rooted in a singular epistemological view and perpetuated by participants who reinforce the absence of sexual discourse as the norm. Therefore, regulating bodies and sexual activity demonstrates disciplinary power through the production and continual reproduction of dominant discourse. Knowledge becomes linked to power, and discourse on sexuality becomes a liberation tactic, a revolt.

Literacy can be conceptualized broadly as the capacity to read the world as “part of the indispensable process of self and social formation” in navigating social environments through fluency in the oppressor’s language (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 27). The curriculum developed to teach such a language serves a political function to uphold and reproduce relations of power, making schools inherently political sites. Sex education varies across the country in state, district, and local settings due a lack of standardization, but some commonalities can be drawn across these sites with the framing of sex based on an emphasis on risk prevention and policing bodies. Very few curriculums position sex and biological processes as natural facets of health and well-being, keen on reducing alarming numbers of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and teen pregnancies. This “fear-based curricula” reflects the pervasiveness of “morally conservative Victorian ideals” fixated on prevention and preservation of purity (Trudell, 1993, p. 2, 6). It presents a singular narrative on what sex is, what purpose it serves, and what viewpoints adolescents should endorse. Such a narrative emphasizes individual self-control through either delayed gratification or a complete disregard for sexual pleasure. As such, this perspective forces sex ed curriculum to revolve around fear, leaving a limited reading of the world for students to consume. Sexual literacy becomes an act of resistance because sexual illiteracy is a tool of the oppressor to disempower.
Sex education curriculum is situated within particular relations of power that prioritize whiteness and heterosexuality. The suppression of sexual literacies exemplifies a dominant ideology that centers “white, male, middle-class, English-speaking” narratives (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 60). Emily Martin (1991) explores these narratives through examining the gendered language used to depict biological processes such as fertilization and menstruation to discover a stark contrast in the treatment of masculinity versus femininity in supposedly objective science. The personification of gametes invalidates claims to objectivity due to the embedded gender bias. Not only do these descriptions favor male activity, but they also construct Eurocentric romanticisms around heterosexual relationships. The egg is a sleeping beauty waiting for its knight in shining armor, the sperm, to come to its rescue and give meaning to its life. Rather than an equitable partnership, the woven narrative idealizes the image of the white, middle class, suburban nuclear family where the wife patiently awaits the return of her husband at home. The Sleeping Beauty fairytale teaches the lesson that the fate of women is “to lie in bed and live in bed for the man” (Kim, 2020, p. 28). In any case, the sperm (i.e. the male/man) is always the incredible actor and the egg (i.e. the female/woman) is merely a vessel for male actualization and gratification. Adolescents incorporate these narratives of white heterosexual male power into their sexual literacies which are then very rarely disputed due to the suppression of alternative narratives.

Foucault’s panopticon illustrates a perfect surveillance state in which the potential of the gaze outweighs the gaze itself. Individuals police themselves under the guise of constant state and self-surveillance. Via the surveillance of the panoptic gaze, schools act as institutional sites that function “as a disciplinary regime of the body” by indoctrinating specific norms of the ideal gendered body through uniform/dress codes and the ideal student through relations of power in
which students have very little say in anything (Azzarito, 2009, p. 21). Schools implement disciplinary power through the construction of “acceptable and unacceptable bodies” in regard to individual regulation of expression in dress/behavior as well as relationships with other students (Graham et al., 2017, p. 3). Panopticism in American schools functions to establish Eurocentric norms through thought and practice in areas of language, cultural mannerisms, history, and depictions of science.

Sex education others nonnormative identities and expressions by excluding them. Female pleasure is absent while low-income groups and people of color are underrepresented (Trudell, 1993). Sometimes pleasure is not discussed at all in favor of prevention-centric pedagogy. The absence or afterthought of pleasure/desire constructs sex as “primarily reproductive for women” (Graham et al., 2017, p. 4). Limited curriculum serves binaries across intersections: white/other, straight/other, man/women. A focus on cisgender heterosexuality neglects the sexual health of “trans, gender diverse, and intersex individuals” by denying their existence as valid expressions of sexuality (Graham et al., 2017, p. 5). Students fall victim to the panoptic gaze of such sex ed curriculum that erases their existence through lack of representation in media (both sex education videos and the American media landscape as a whole) and sexuality discourse. The invisibility communicates that being non-white, non-binary, and queer are not viable options to participate in and be desirable in sex/relationships. These dominant discourses of race, gender, and sexuality promote sexual suppression rather than sexual empowerment for adolescents. For Asian American sexual literacies, the White Identification stage compels adolescents to adhere to the norms of dominant discourse to blend in and be accepted in white-dominated school peer cultures.

*Sphere 3: Awakening to Social Political Consciousness and Orientalism in American Media*
In the third stage of Kim (2001)’s model, Awakening to Social Political Consciousness, Asian Americans shift their worldview to reject personal responsibility for experiences of racism. The awareness of white racism draws appropriate parallels to analyzing portrayals of orientalism in American media and gaining a critical literacy to resist stereotypical images. Kim (2001) characterizes this stage of racial literacy as Asian Americans relinquishing feelings of self-blame and inferiority to recognize that they will never gain full acceptance into dominant society so long as white racism exists. This can apply to sexual literacy as Asian Americans accept that they are not at fault for the racialization in their sexual experiences.

Panopticism extends beyond school walls into media as normative bodies are defined through visibility. Nonnormative bodies suffer simultaneously from invisibility (the complete lack of representation) or hypervisibility (sole visibility in stereotypical images that serve dominant narratives of pleasure). The absence of any representation assumes that a community is not recognized by the dominant group or valued in society while stereotype-confirming portrayals induce negative attitudes about individuals from the subgroup and “precipitate acts of discrimination” towards marginalized communities (Besana et al., 2019, p. 203). The internalization of the panoptic gaze of images that privilege whiteness and associated ideas of conventional attractiveness and romance gives rise to a self-surveillance on subjectivity in dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality. Conforming to dominant narratives more readily provides access to social capital, motivating individuals to self-surveil to obtain currency in a racist patriarchal society at the cost of nuanced personhood. The promotion of “particular kinds of sexual practices” in turn promotes “a certain kind of citizen, a particular way of being.”

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5 Stereotype-confirming and stereotype-resisting images are not necessarily exclusive as positive/negative. Both types of representation have the potential to contribute to positive/negative identity development. Positive identity development is contingent on nuance and centrality; negative identity development feeds on one-dimensional tokenism that serves dominant narratives.
compelling individuals to self-surveil and conform so that their behavior is in accordance with dominant discourse (Alexander, 2008, p. 4). Previous researchers have found that the media can act as a powerful force and accessible educator. In the realm of sex education, media can help developing youth circumvent asking awkward questions to their parents and school teachers by seeking out information themselves (Brown et al., 2005). TV and other channels become almost an “ideal’ sex educator” with their “accessibility, frankness, and appealing nature” (Ward et al., 2006, p. 134). As such, sexual pedagogies continually circulate throughout the media.

Dissecting the racialization of Asian Americans in the United States as a group will contextualize Asian American sexuality in the media. AsianCrit, a branch of CRT, constitutes a framework that conceptualizes how nativism works within structures that maintain the dominance of whites in U.S. society (An, 2016). AsianCrit elaborates on how “an assumption of foreignness” shapes the Asian American experience (Tuan, 1998, p. 18). The perpetual foreigner stereotype is a “significant predictor of identity conflict and a low sense of belonging” in white mainstream American culture (Besana et al., 2019, p. 203). The most common stereotypes alternate between the yellow peril and model minority myth, predicated on preserving narratives of foreignness for Asian Americans regardless of their generational status. Racist and xenophobic “yellow peril” rhetoric from the California Gold Rush era casts Asians as “pollutants” and a threat to the white immigrant working class (Kim & Chung, 2005, p. 74). COVID-19 has seen a resurgence of such xenophobia by scapegoating Asian Americans for being “dirty” or “immoral” for eating bats or other cultural stereotypes. The model minority myth positions Asian Americans as academically and economically successful due to values of hard work and individualism in a seemingly positive stereotype (Besana et al., 2019). Not only can the expectations of this stereotype be harmful for Asian American identity development due
to unrealistic expectations and psychological distress, but the myth is also rooted in anti-Blackness and pits Asian Americans against other people of color in the U.S. through the promotion of American meritocracy.

For Asian American youth looking to elevate their social status through dating—especially without the knowledge or permission of their parents—media is readily available to supplement the lack of sexual communication given in immigrant households (Lau et al., 2009). The problem with Asian Americans seeking out sex education through media is that mainstream American media continues to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of exoticism and submissiveness in Asian bodies through popular films and advertisements (Hahm et al., 2006). Lotus blossom babies (e.g., subservient and doll-like) and dragon ladies (e.g., devious and domineering) demonstrate two extremes to reproduce the perpetual foreigner stereotypes of model minority and yellow peril. Both extremes serve to stimulate the sexual voyeurism of white American males by objectifying “Oriental” women as rightful property (Kim & Chung, 2005). Prasso (2006)’s in-depth analysis of what she refers to as the Asian Mystique dissects the extreme depictions of Asian women in a Western gaze from the gentle geisha to the steely dragon lady from the standpoint of white loss. The Asian Mystique prioritizes the wrong loss as whites relinquishing fantasies of the Orient and fails to recognize the Asian bodies continually suffering the loss of their humanity for the sake of white male pleasure. Images such as Suzie Wong center the pleasure of a white male gaze to conceive of Asian women as devoted and sexually available “objects for entertainment” (Fong, 1998; Hamamoto, 1994 as cited in Tuan, 1998, p. 143). Embodying the dragon lady stereotype, Suzie exemplifies “shameless sexual desire,” manipulation, and an “inability to resist [w]hite men” (Kim & Chung, 2005, p. 76).

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6Nancy Kwan’s portrayal of Suzie Wong in the 1960 film The World of Suzie Wong popularized the “sexy, submissive prostitute” depiction of Asian American women (Chou, 2015, p. 19).
Suzie’s image (and her contemporaries) are incorporated into Asian American sexual literacies as the notion that desiring white men offers a ticket to acceptance in a white racist society.

Critical Race Theory can offer an illustrative framework to critique acts of sexual racism precipitated by media stereotypes. The basic tenets of CRT include ordinariness, interest convergence, and social construction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Firstly, ordinariness asserts that racism is commonplace and integrated into the everyday for people of color in the U.S.; CRT holds that the cure for racism is evasive because colorblind rhetoric seeks to deny the felt impacts of race. Second, interest convergence illustrates that whites have little impetus to eliminate racism as it maintains and advances white material interests. Third, race is a product of social relations rather than fixed biological or genetic categories. Critical race theorists assert that color-evasiveness allows only the addressing of “extremely egregious harms,” the brand of violence that should elicit audible shock due to an explicitly unacceptable nature (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 22). This attitude assumes that society has moved beyond race and racism into a post-racial world where skin color does not matter.

The ordinariness of racism bleeds into sexual preferences. Racial fetish can be defined as “a person’s exclusive or near-exclusive preference for sexual intimacy with others belonging to a specific out-group” (Zheng, 2016, p. 401). In the case of fetishizing Asian bodies, this “harmless preference” is commonly referred to as yellow fever. This harmlessness is often conflated with aesthetic preferences for height or blue eyes to minimize the problematic nature of objectifying prospective partners for phenotypic features tied to race. The “unwelcome attention toward their race-specific physical characteristics” demonstrates the “intersection of multiple traumas” through racialized sexism (Ho et al., 2018, p. 292, 282). Being met with colorblind ideology,
Asian Americans (women in particular\textsuperscript{7}) are denied the validation of their psychological burden when their desirability is reduced to their race. Above all, this casting of the submissive “sexual model minority” in Asian American women preserves white cis heteropatriarchy by prioritizing the wants of white pleasure at the expense of the needs of the dehumanized other (Zheng, 2016). Sexual relationships driven by racial fetish are sites of racial domination built on exotification and objectification.

In addition to stereotype-confirming portrayals, Asian Americans are continually being fed singular ideas around dating, sex, relationships, and romance where they cannot identify with media characters such as the conventionally attractive white leads in Nicholas Sparks movies who end up together against all odds. Media panopticism reinforces norms of attractiveness and romantic ideals as a social script for behavior that Asian Americans are simultaneously excluded from and sexualized within. According to Ward et al. (2018), fostering media literacies is important to help young women (and gender non-binary people) combat the negative effects of sexualized media by adopting feminist identities and rejecting traditional gender roles and sexual scripts. Such literacies amplify in importance for women of color who must simultaneously reject sexual scripts of race in addition to gender.

**Sphere 4: Redirection to an Asian American Consciousness and Active Media Consumption**

Sphere three discussed the critical awareness of stereotype-confirming representations of Asian sexuality. Sphere four will consider an opposition to the white cis hetero male gaze through pride in an Asian American pan-ethnic identity through the active consumption of nuanced, stereotype-resisting representations of Asian sexuality. The sense of Asian American community may not result from the literal forging of relationships with other Asian Americans,

\textsuperscript{7} Though I am excluding Asian American cisgender men for the purposes of my research, there is much to be said about the emasculation of Asian men in the American context as sexually undesirable and unattractive.
as defined by Kim (2001), but could arise from, for example, identification with authentic media portrayals of Asian American relationships. This may include viewing parties with other Asian Americans, seeking out content produced by Asian creatives, or any other form of imbibing Asian American culture to develop sexual identities. Such a stage demonstrates a need to branch outside of white-dominated literacy spheres to formulate one’s own thoughts and feelings on Asian sexuality to combat the distortion of Western panopticism. Redirection to an Asian American Consciousness in sexual literacy is characterized by an active search for Asian-looking role models of sex/relationships for positive identity development through social mirroring in Asian/Asian American media.

Besana et al. (2019) conducted an analysis of Asian American representation by coding a sample of films from the last 25 years to notice the upward trend of lead roles and more diverse genres in recent years. Stereotype-resisting female characters in the romantic comedy genre are particularly noteworthy such as Rachel Chu in Crazy Rich Asians (2018), Lara Jean in To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before (2018), and Stacy De Novo and Lady Margaret in The Princess Switch (2018) for a variety of character traits such as compassionate, playful, and humorous (Besana et al., 2019). Those coded as “down to earth” such as Astrid from Crazy Rich Asians exemplify a resistance to the greedy and elitist image of Asians, especially given the affluent background of her character. These movies are significant because they enable young Asian American viewers to see themselves in a traditionally almost exclusively white genre and consequently as the protagonists in an American love story. Always Be My Maybe (2019) and The Half of It (2020) did not make it into Besana et al. (2019)’s film sample due to their recency but are in step with the upward trend and mark a particular win for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans with the character of

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8 Social mirroring is “the ways in which people internalize others’ perceptions of one’s self based on the views of society” (Cooley, 1902 as cited in Besana et al., 2019, p. 203). Authentic representations of marginalized groups can induce positive social mirroring through favorable images.
Ellie Chu from *The Half of It*. These examples show an increase in the visibility of Asian culture as well through food and language that is less evident in Besana et al. (2019)’s sample. Ali Wong’s and Leah Lewis’s portrayals also function as Asian female protagonists who stray from conventionally attractive standards. The presentation of alternate sexual scripts for Asian women has the potential to facilitate earlier arrivals at positive identity development and sexual literacy.

That being said, Besana et al. (2019) also acknowledge the persistence of stereotype-confirming representations such as the common trope of a timid Asian female character needing the influence of white male leads to gain confidence or family-oriented traits. Though not mentioned by Besana et al. (2019), Lara Jean from *To All the Boys* demonstrates white internalization despite the undeniable win for representation. Netflix may have recast a few of her love interests in the films to include people of color, but the original source material describes all five of her love interests as white men, showing the author’s own self-surveillance and desire to uphold white cis hetero male pleasure. Additionally, the movie shows her white male father as being the only available parental sex educator (as her Korean mother has died), handing her a bag of condoms from the car. In contrast to the absence of Lara Jean’s mother in *To All the Boys*, the active role of Ah Ma from *Crazy Rich Asians* to sabotage her son’s romantic relationship with Rachel Chu confirms the image of controlling Asian parents and families having a strong influence on their children’s life decisions. While Lara Jean’s Asian mother cannot intervene in her daughter’s love life, Nick Young’s Asian mother goes out of her way to involve herself in his prospective marriage. Though not necessarily a crime to have white male love interests for Asian actresses or remove Asian mothers from the storyline, these details are noteworthy when considering how media literacies shape desires and how Asian American creations might reproduce such desires. Celebratory discourse surrounding these films is
understandable but should still air on the side of caution to account for the ways in which they might simultaneously confirm stereotypes while resisting them in order to appeal to mainstream audiences. Despite these reservations, *Crazy Rich Asians* and *To All the Boys* still mark gateway literacy events for positive sexual identity development and racial identity development for young Asian American viewers through authentic/central visibility and nuance.

While Asian American representation has made major strides in recent years, there is still room for growth in terms of intersectional portrayals. Besana et al. (2019) raises issues of compulsory heterosexuality⁹ and petiteness in Asian female characters as markers of further oppressions of gender and sexuality in addition to race in film. No examples were found for gender non-binary/non-conforming or genderqueer Asian representation, signifying adherence to dominant discourse for media visibility. In short, Asian women are acceptable for mainstream audiences only when they are straight, slim, young, and feminine. With exception to *The Half of It*, the generally heteronormative representations of sexual identities point to a need for the future production of media that displays diverse sexualities, genders, abilities, ages, and body types alongside race. The lack of non-normative Asian sexual representation denies Asian Americans access to visibility of marginalized genders and sexualities to explore and develop their sexual literacies alongside their racial literacies (Besana et al., 2019). As a socializing agent, the literacy sphere of media is a salient context for Asian American adolescents and young adults to envision themselves and others within social ecosystems at a time when they are particularly sensitive to media messages (Mok, 1998 as cited in Besana et al., 2019).

**Sphere 5: Incorporation and Asian American Sexual Agency**

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⁹ I draw from Adrienne Rich’s theorization of compulsory heterosexuality as a political institution that upholds male power and dominance over women by denying women their own sexuality (Rich, 1980).
Unlike the first four spheres, I will not use stage five to discuss a specific literacy sphere to instead highlight how Asian Americans interpret, synthesize, and challenge the sexual socialization they have received in family, schooling, and media (amongst other spheres I have not discussed) to develop distinct sexual literacies and arrive at sexual agency. For Incorporation, Kim (2001) identifies the key factor as confidence in one’s own Asian American identity and the ability to relate with many different groups of people without losing that confidence. This stage is also when Asian Americans blend their racial identities with their other social identities, making it an appropriate point to discuss the final stage of sexual identity development. Sexual agency is the acknowledgement of the self as a sexual being, the ability to identify and assert one’s sexual needs, and the successful satisfaction of sexual desires through initiated behavior (Ward et al., 2018). A sex education that encourages Asian American sexual agency must be culturally sensitive and intersectional to actively incorporate the tenets of AsianCrit:\(^{10}\):

1. *Asianization*: the normalized racism of the perpetual foreigner and model minority stereotypes in American society
2. *Transnational contexts*: the importance of looking at national and transnational contexts and how the lives of Asian Americans are shaped by both due to imperialism, the global economy, international war, and migration
3. *(Re)constructive history*: the transcendence of invisibility in American history through the collective construction of Asian American historical narratives
4. *Strategic (anti)essentialism*: anti-essentialism (the oppressive nature of panethnicity) and strategic essentialism (using identity politics as empowerment)
5. *Intersectionality*: the intersection of systems of social oppression

\(^{10}\) The summary of these tenets are paraphrased from An (2016)’s AsianCrit analysis of U.S. history standards and expand on the core tenets of CRT.
6. *Story, theory, and praxis:* the need to bring the voices/scholarly works of Asian Americans to (de)construct dominant discourse

7. *Commitment to social justice:* Asian Americans joining the fight to eradicate injustice and uphold rights of the oppressed

With dominant discourses streamlining prevention models in sex education, risk and fear are at the core of it all. The dearth of literature surrounding Asian Americans on sexualities, dating/relationship attitudes, and sex education programs are attributable to the pervasiveness of the model minority myth. It not only bleeds into constructing Asian women as sexual model minorities for white pleasure, but also constructing Asian Americans as model minorities practicing safe sexual behaviors in general due to an academics first and abstinence-only mentality (Lee et al., 2015). Asian Americans are frequently identified as low-risk for STIs and teen pregnancies (Kim & Ward, 2007). But this again begs the question: Should fear serve as the baseline for sex education? In what ways are students (in particular those of marginalized identities) underserved by pushing aside discussions of identity, consent, sexual health/well-being, and relationship skills?

Within the parameters of at-risk language, the perception that Asian Americans are not at risk for unsafe sexual activity neglects the vulnerability of this population in a variety of ways. It ignores that Asian Americans are more likely to skip over a non-exclusive dating stage and immediately enter serious relationships, pointing out a need to counsel adolescents about the risks of sexual activity (Lau et al., 2009). It does not take into account the strong social stigma about sexuality in the Asian American community and how these youth need additional support when growing up with American host country dating norms. It disregards that Asian American adolescents need access to healthcare with the right to privacy from parental knowledge when
they want to simultaneously engage in normal American teen behavior while being mindful of their familial roots (Lee et al., 2015). It fails to acknowledge the ways in which Asian American women are subjected to sexual experiences of racialized fetish in media and in interpersonal relationships. Like all women of color, Asian American women are constrained by the “dual strains of sexism and racism” in addition to exotification (Hall, 1995 as cited in Ho et al., 2018, p. 293). Asian Americans may not be as “at risk” for disease or unwanted pregnancy, but the burden of internalized shame surrounding sex/sexuality identifies an urgent need for cultural sensitivity in issues of sex education.

Alexander’s sexual literacy relies on open, honest, and critical sex talk through active sexual identity (Alexander, 2008). However, this interpretation of sexual literacy may not be suitable for Asian Americans who regard sexuality as part of the private self and may not find empowerment through regular sex talk. So, what do Asian American sexual literacies look like? The navigation of conflicting Asian/white mainstream cultural attitudes and literacy events around sex and relationships in the spheres of family, media, and schooling culminates in a distinct sexual literacy that will differ from their white/non-Asian counterparts. Though Alexander explores criticality in queer sexualities, Asian American sexual literacies require a critical lens to dissect the impacts of dominant discourse from an intersectional approach to include the complexities of acculturation, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Asian Americans may find limited empowerment through sex talk when their sexual socialization typically predicates on their silence whether as the good daughter in the Asian immigrant family or the exotic, subservient woman. Though lotus blossom/dragon lady media images actively disempower, more implicit communications of sexuality might empower Asian Americans.

11 This assumption is also the consequence of low STI screening rates, lack of statistical data, and mixed findings for Asian Americans (Trinh & Kim, 2020). A national study of HIV-positive adults showed that Asian Americans had the highest rate of late intervention (Hahm et al., 2006).
This literature review has framed previous literature in the areas of Asian American parental sexual communications, Asian American acculturation and dating attitudes, Western sex education curriculum, and stereotype-confirming/resisting media representations by adapting Jean Kim’s Asian American Identity Development Model to discuss Asian American sexual literacies. The domain of sex education results from the culmination of literacy spheres that consistently interact and perpetuate dominant narratives about race, gender, and sexuality. Rather than adhering to strictly linear developmental stages, particular literacy spheres are more prominent at specific moments of sexual curiosity and exploration. Adolescents model behavior from these spheres as they develop sexual literacies by drawing source material from world examples from around them (Ward et al., 2006, p. 149). Many studies fail to actively include and center Asian American populations (especially in survey research) and consider intersectionality. The exploration of literacy indicates the crucial need to support the work of Asian Americans and other marginalized identities to tell their own stories in “authentic, nuanced, and meaningful ways” (Besana et al., 2019, p. 221). By interviewing college-age students, I ask my participants to think reflexively about family attitudes, formal sex education, and media messages they received throughout the course of adolescence and in early adulthood to get a picture of Asian American sexual literacies. What does Asian American sexual agency look like?
Chapter Two: Methods

This chapter covers my methodology to research sex education experiences in Asian American women/gender non-binary people using semi-structured qualitative interviews and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Research Design

Broadening the conception of sex education, I collected data in the three spheres of family, schooling, and media. The school environment and curriculum are essential for evaluating experiences of traditional sex education while the larger media landscape situates schooling in relation to popular culture portrayals of sex, sexuality, and relationships. With the focus on 1.5 or second generation immigrants in this study, family acts as a grounding literacy sphere when specifically looking at the Asian immigrant household in America and how cultural norms within the home potentially pose tensions with American host country norms depicted in school and media. The negotiation between these cultural frames shapes the development of Asian American sexual literacies. Consider how the three literacy spheres interact to develop Asian American sexual literacies in the following model.\footnote{This model is intended to illustrate where sexual messages may converge or diverge in family, schooling, and media. Stereotype-resisting and Asian-centered media representations could disrupt suppressive and white mainstream sexual socialization through positive sexual identity development.}
Sample

Reflexivity and Participants

Reflexivity is critical when making sense of research and how the self shapes the researcher’s interpretation and interaction with findings (Rogers, 2018). As such, I will first acknowledge my own positionality in this research and its implications. I sought out interviewee participants whose demographic characteristics mirrored my own in the dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and generation. As a second generation Chinese American woman, I hoped to use my own subjectivity as a personal entry point for centering the Asian American voices. I was...
conscientious of research tendencies to treat social groups as monoliths for generalizability, so I was deliberate with both my inclusion and exclusion criteria. Participants meeting the inclusion criteria self-identified as being (1) female/gender non-binary, (2) of East Asian descent (Chinese, Japanese, or Korean), (3) 1.5 or second generation (meaning they grew up in a household with at least one immigrant parent), and (4) college-age (18-22 years of age) in addition to (5) having received some sort of sex education in an American school context. I did not specify whether the sex education had to be received in public/private school settings in recruitment. To be inclusive and yet specific when considering the critical comprehensivity of sex education through the lenses of race, gender, and sexuality, I recruited all genders except cisgender men as the emasculation of Asian men/masculinity deserves its own analysis. Similarly, I did not actively recruit South Asians, Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders because these populations need care in regards to the ways in which they are particularly vulnerable and how they are racialized differently in the U.S. from Americans of East Asian descent even though census data asks them to identify with the “Asian” label. Two of my participants spoke to multiethnic experiences of having Vietnamese/Filipina immigrant mothers. I hoped my own positionality would benefit the interpretation of data by being in community with my interviewees through the shared experience of marginalization in spaces of education and media.

**Recruitment of Interviewees**

For the recruitment of my eight interviewees, I utilized snowball sampling through personal networks, emailing, and social media. I reached out to people I personally knew who met my inclusion criteria starting with a few contacts from my hometown Omaha, NE and students from a liberal arts college in upstate New York, asking them to forward an email invitation to participate in my study to their personal networks in their hometowns,
colleges/universities, or places of residence. I also reached out to the Asian American identity organization on campus and asked them to forward an email with the same instructions and link to the recruitment survey. Finally, I made a post in an informal student body Facebook group asking for volunteers to directly message or email me for the survey link if interested in participating. Individuals who saw my post and reached out then received the same email template. Those who met my inclusion criteria were invited to fill out the recruitment survey and provide an email to follow up with if they were interested in participating in the second part of the study involving an in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interview over Zoom. The short survey asked for basic information on demographics and recall of received sex education (See Appendix A). The survey respondents selected to interview speak to the particular experiences of Asian American women/GNBs\textsuperscript{14} in American sex education while providing their individual narratives.

**Selection of Sample**

As established previously, the culmination of at-risk narratives in sex education, the model minority myth, and the peculiar place Asian American women have navigating the diverging discourses around their sexuality (either as subdued or hypersexual) in addition to my personal experiences inspired the selection of this sample. Gender non-binary people were encouraged to participate in my research as well to further critique the centering of white cis hetero male pleasure in sex education. I opted to interview college-age students to collect data from individuals who had already completed any formal sex education they would have received in late primary or secondary schooling with an interest in how the curriculum served (or failed to serve) these individuals in navigating sexual/romantic relationships in early adulthood. 26 people

\textsuperscript{14} Gender non-binary
responded to the initial recruitment survey. 19 of the 26 provided emails to indicate interest in the interview. Out of those 19 individuals, I selected eight interviewees.

Interviewees were chosen in an attempt to reflect a variety of experiences across ethnicity, sexuality, and sex ed backgrounds so that each individual brought a unique perspective that other participants might not be able to provide. Multiracial/multiethnic participants were welcomed to complete the survey as long as they met the rest of the inclusion criteria and had at least one parent of East Asian descent. Upon completing my first two interviews, the role of the Asian mother as a sex educator for young women became apparent in conjunction with the relative absence of Asian fathers in sexual communications. This was consistent with an observation made in previous research (Kim & Ward, 2007), so the one biracial participant was selected based on the presence of an Asian immigrant mother in their home and their physical appearance, allowing them to speak to experiences of being racialized as Asian. I was struck by an observation made in Bailey’s interview in which they detailed how looking “visibly Asian...is [an] interesting, unique, and often traumatizing thing to go through as a child.” As such, I decided ultimately to not select specific multiracial survey respondents as their racial experiences would deviate due to forces of colorism and being a part of (or apart from) other ethnic communities. Further investigation is needed as to how multiracial/mixed women/GNBs are fetishized in ways that differ from Asian women/GNBs.

The role of liberal arts colleges (LACs) in sexual literacy development became apparent in the first couple of interviews, so I selected remaining interviewees who were currently attending or had recently graduated from such an educational context to explore this idea further. All interviewees other than Bailey and Angela were students at a coeducational liberal arts college in upstate New York. The overrepresentation of Chinese ethnics in my sample reflected
that of the survey respondents’ pool. Pseudonyms were chosen to reflect an appropriate degree of Americanization and gender neutrality for each participant. All gender non-binary participants were assigned female at birth. I have provided a basic overview of my participants in the below chart. The sex ed topics checked (out of 20 topics in total) on the initial recruitment survey provide a measure on how comprehensive my participants’ curriculum was in covering content. I have also included some commentary on unique characteristics about their schooling contexts, noting that Bailey and Angela attended different colleges from the other participants, as well as parental backgrounds with relevant ethnicity information and immigration histories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym &amp; Pronouns</th>
<th>Age, Sexuality, Generation, Ethnicity, Gender</th>
<th>Primary State Sex Ed Received In</th>
<th>Number of Sex Ed Topics Checked</th>
<th>Schooling Contexts</th>
<th>Parental Backgrounds, Commentary on Asian Diaspora</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel (she/her)</td>
<td>20 y/o, Bisexual, Second gen, Mixed (Filipina and Chinese), Woman</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>9/20</td>
<td>Christian private schooling</td>
<td>Filipina mother who immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager and Chinese American father (divorced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey (they/them)</td>
<td>21 y/o, Bi/pansexual, Second gen, Chinese, GNB</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>18/20</td>
<td>Humanities program in public high school; Student at a historically women’s LAC in MA</td>
<td>Chinese immigrant parents (Shanghai, China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age/Gen/LGBTQ/Location</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>20 y/o, Straight, 1.5 gen, Korean, Woman</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>13/20</td>
<td>Public schooling</td>
<td>Immigrated to the U.S. at ~one y/o with Korean mother from South Korea; Korean immigrant stepfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>20 y/o, Straight, Second gen, Mixed (Vietnamese and Chinese), Woman</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>5/20</td>
<td>Public schooling</td>
<td>Vietnamese mother who immigrated to the U.S. at 10 y/o from Laos and second gen Chinese American father (divorced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Em</td>
<td>21 y/o, Asexual, Second gen, Chinese/Mixed, GNB</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>8/20</td>
<td>Public schooling</td>
<td>Chinese mother who immigrated from Brazil in her 20s, white father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natsume</td>
<td>20 y/o, Bisexual, Japanese, 1.5 gen, Woman</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>7/20</td>
<td>Public schooling</td>
<td>Immigrated to the U.S. at ~three y/o with parents from Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>22 y/o, Straight, Second gen, Chinese, Woman</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>10/20</td>
<td>Public schooling, attended both Chinese and American schooling; Recent alumna from LAC in CT</td>
<td>Chinese immigrant parents (Sichuan, China)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Olivia (they/them) | 21 y/o, Bisexual, Second gen, Chinese, Woman/GNB | Massachusetts | 13/20 | Public schooling | Chinese parents immigrated from Vietnam, white stepfather

*Making Connections during COVID-19*

Given the social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic and the normalization of virtual interactions, I conducted all of my interviews over Zoom. Selected interviewees were emailed consent forms for the interview and audio/video recordings on Zoom and were made aware of the research’s strict confidentiality (See Consent in Appendix B). I hoped to take advantage of the physical limitations to connect with people I might not otherwise to gain insight on sex education and college experiences from a variety of backgrounds. That being said, the virtual space inherently alters the experience of human interaction, limiting the readability of the nuances of in-person communication such as body language, gaze, and gesture through the suspension of the screen. As a result, my interview analyses were reliant on readable upper body language and spoken word. I made live shorthand observational notes and post interview notes in the data collection process as a sort of journal to be reviewed alongside transcribed data. Interviewees had the option to review transcribed and written data to give feedback. I shipped the participants small paintings of Asian/Asian American media figures to show gratitude for their time and contributions (See Art & Compensation in Appendix C).

*Qualitative Research Methods*

Although survey research can be useful for finding trends and making generalizations, I found that many quantitative analyses favored statistical data over narratives and lacked nuance. As such, my research favored an in-depth look into the experiences of a few individuals rather
than a broad pattern sweep on the basic commonalities of many. I drew from and expanded on
metrics from previous literature in a variety of disciplines such as psychology, social sciences,
and culture studies through a qualitative methodology.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Discourse Analysis is essentially “the study of language-in-use” and how the language functions in social practices (Gee, 2011, p. 8). Gee (2011) argues that all discourse analysis is

critical discourse analysis due to the inherently political nature of language and its reproduction of the cultures and institutions of the world. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines the role of power in dominant discourse through the production, dissemination, consumption, and reproduction of knowledge. In other words, CDA functions to “disarticulate and to critique texts as a way of disrupting common sense,” a common sense constructed by dominant discourse (Mogashoa, 2014, p. 108). Given the “great deal of synergy between CDA and critical literacy,” CDA is a helpful tool for examining the role of dominant discourse in sex education and the development of sexual literacies in Asian American women/GNBs (Rogers, 2018, p. 4). Within a panoptic gaze where the incentive of power is to normalize and discipline bodies, the dominant discourse of sex education is intent on preserving singular narratives of white male cis hetero pleasure by communicating explicit and essentialist binaries of gender, sexuality, and race. Foucault’s ideas of how “certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, [and] certain desires” normalize the individual subject apply to how sex education disenfranchises any nonnormative expressions of sexuality through the withholding of comprehensive and inclusive knowledge (Foucault, 1980, p. 98 as cited in Yates & Hiles, 2010, p. 56). This sex education is further situated in a sexually conservative American culture that discourages open sex talk.
By inviting my interviewees to talk about their sex education experiences, my use of CDA was ontological. Rather than pulling excerpts from sex education materials, I sourced the discourse of analysis from the recipients of such education, enabling interviewees to “recogniz[e] themselves as certain types of being” and “refe[r] to themselves as individuals” (Yates & Hiles, 2010, p. 66). I considered the felt impacts of white mainstream dominant discourses of sex/relationships on my participants’ literacies and how they read their role as Asian Americans in narratives that fixate their status as hypersexual beings or neglect their existence altogether. With the incorporation of Asian American Identity Development, my recruitment survey and interviews required my participants to first acknowledge their own selves as people of Asian descent living in the United States in order to provide counternarratives to dominant discourse. This version of CDA as an inquiry “begins from individuals’ own talk and accounts,” focusing on the self as a site of investigation and resistance (Yates & Hiles, 2010, p. 72).

CDA proves appropriate when recognizing “talk about sexuality [as] the medium of sex education” (Irvine, 2000, p. 58). The controversy surrounding sex education discourages open sexual speech, for fear of corrupting childhood innocence by encouraging sexual activity. Through discourse and open sex talk, this project seeks to normalize and destigmatize sexual health through CDA as a research methodology. The American historical context has seen the Christian Right employing rhetorical strategies based on anxieties, sexual danger, and shame (Irvine, 2000). The qualitative interviews function to provide insight in two ways: (1) to examine sex talk received (or censored) through lived experience and (2) to use a critical lens to analyze who has been excluded from the narrative of and the collective construction of sexual discourse. Broadly, I chose CDA for my methodology because of its multidisciplinary nature to create an account of “intricate relationships between text, talk, social opinion, power, society and cultures”
Rather than examining sex education through family, school pedagogy, peer relationships, and media separately, this research positions these areas in conversation with each other as the lines between these texts continually blur in the development of sexual literacies.

**Instruments and Interviews**

In general, my survey and interview questionnaire sought to leave space in dimensions previous research has not. For the recruitment survey, I tried to combat reductive identity politics by allowing respondents to check multiple options or respond “Other” for gender identity, sexuality, and ethnicity. The generation question intentionally only had options for 1.5 or second generation to limit the scope of my research by including only those who grew up in a household with at least one immigrant parent. To gauge the comprehensivity of received sex education, the survey items became increasingly specific, asking participants to first rate how comprehensive they believe their sex education schooling was which ranges from “No sex education curriculum presented” to “Comprehensive” before asking about the emphasis or topics covered. For topics covered, I referred to a content breakdown presented in *Doing Sex Education: Gender Politics and Schooling* for respondents to check in an itemized list (Trudell, 1993, p. 20-21). These include information on human anatomy, reproduction, contraception, STIs, etc. alongside some items of my own addition such as consent, orgasm/pleasure, sexual agency, sexual orientation, gender identity, society and culture, etc.

For the semi-structured qualitative interview, my questionnaire covered family/home environment, schooling environment, sex education curriculum, media consumption, and experiences pertaining to race. The first section on family drew from Tuan (1998)’s Appendix A, or more specifically the questions on engagement with Asian culture through holiday celebration.
and the passing of culture (Tuan, 1998, p. 169-176). In this part of the interview, I gained an understanding of the interviewee’s experience in the first stage of Asian American Identity Development, Ethnic Awareness (Kim, 2001). I noted that acculturation was a salient factor for my interviewees and complicated previous measures reliant on spoken language at home and country of origin by asking about means of continual engagement with Asian culture alongside mainstream American culture through traditions and media consumption. This dimension was also particularly noteworthy as previous studies have found that highly acculturated young women tend to have earlier sexual debuts (Lee et al., 2012; Hahm et al., 2006). Religiosity was another factor of relevance in some literature, so I included a question on familial religious practices as well (Kim & Ward, 2007). The first part of the interview intended to determine the degree of parental communications surrounding sex education. I took into account that communicated attitudes may be implicit rather than verbal in Asian immigrant households (Kim & Ward, 2007). By asking about both a formal “sex talk” and holistic attitudes such as reactions to a sex scene during a movie, I acknowledged that parental communications may be limited due to buffers of culture, language, intergenerational conflict, and other factors. I ended this section by asking about any communications between parents and child on relationships.

Similarly, the questions on the schooling environment intended to mirror the second stage of Kim (2001)’s model: White Identification. These questions contextualized the site of sex education curriculum by asking about student demographics, friend groups, dress code, and social status, or in other words, the school culture. Though my research did not focus on peer culture, previous literature has noted the significance of these relationships as another mode of sex education (Lau et al., 2009; Hahm et al, 2006). I asked about dress codes specifically to consider the role of gender role socialization in the schooling environment (Graham et al., 2017).
In relation to surveillance within the school environment, the relationship status question intended to get at normative dating behavior to see how my interviewees’ motivations were shaped by their peers’ actions. Once the context was established, my questions moved into asking about the explicit sex education received in school. The video stimulus “Filling in the Sex Ed Gaps: What I Wish I’d Learned in Sex Ed” screenshared over Zoom intended to generate discussion surrounding the content presented in my interviewees’ sex education. My questions asking participants to recall what they learned about pleasure, consent, relationships, and emphasized material (i.e. abstinence or sexual health) sought to reveal patterns in the dominant discourse of sex education.

After discussing the “gaps” in my interviewees’ formal sex education, the interview moved into supplementary sex education found in media diets through either passive or active consumption. These questions considered the role of Asian media characters regarding not only the degree of representation (i.e. protagonism versus tokenization) but also the engagement of these characters in sexual behavior. Though I anticipated more references to American media, I included a question about media content produced in Asian countries to consider whether my participants consumed and learned about Asian ideas of romance through media in addition to or alongside parental communications. Due to the close correlation between attractiveness and romantic prospects, I included a few questions on beauty standards to see how my interviewees grappled with a sense of self in the context of white American ideas of sex/romance. This section concluded with four statements on romance, adapted from a romantic beliefs subscale to have my participants elaborate on whether they endorsed certain views (Lippman et al., 2014).

The final section of the interview related to the role of race in relationships. To avoid imposing my own perspectives on fetishism/exoticism, I avoided explicitly naming this
phenomenon in these questions by asking generally about attempts at social proximity through Asian references and/or features. I avoided using the term “sexual harassment” as previous research has considered how less acculturated Asian women may not read encounters as sexual harassment because of internalized gender roles (Ho et al., 2018). I asked about the use of Asian language, the complimenting of features, physical type, and assumptions on sexuality. This questionnaire explored the areas of family, school, and media as relevant to Asian American sexual literacies.

**Analysis**

Once I collected my interview data, I coded for patterns of discourse surrounding sex and relationships. In my expansion of sex education, I simultaneously expanded considerations of text beyond the written text to include a variety of media texts. What common messages around sex appear in the Asian immigrant household? How do these messages compare to the American schooling context or media landscape as a whole? What does this mean for Asian Americans navigating bicultural spheres for sex education? Thematic analysis was the primary means of interpreting data, drawing on recurring tropes. The search for salient words and phrases in the data threaded together a relevant narrative for sexual literacies in the discussion of fills and gaps in sex education. By making note of answers that converged thematically, an argument emerged through “designed, enacted, [and] recognized” discourse (Gee, 2011, p. 125). I identified five larger thematic trends manifesting in distinct ways in each stage of sexuality development which I discuss in more detail in the following chapters. The chart below provides a brief summary of my thematic codes with descriptions and examples from interviews.
<table>
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<th>Thematic Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Discourse Examples</th>
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| Sexual Silence                | Lack of sexual discourse in Asian immigrant families and lack of open dialogues surrounding sex in school sex ed curriculum and society as a whole                                                                 | ● “I guess our position was we will not talk about it at all. Because we’re not like, an open sex-positive family.”  
● “Close the blinds, someone walking by can see this.”  
● “I feel like in high school there was this kind of contradicting culture of like ‘Oh, the cool kids are having sex but also sex is like a really shameful thing and we shouldn’t talk about it that much.’” |
| Intergenerational Sexual Illiteracy | Adult discomfort (parents/elders, sex educators, community members) around topics of sex passed onto youth by perpetuating silence and shame through prevention model sex ed curriculum and/or prohibitive attitudes | ● “I think when [my mom] got her first period as an adolescent my grandmother also taught her that [the] period is something to be hidden away. Don’t talk about it, you just take care of it, manage it by yourself.”  
● “So then, even the older generation of these Catholic school teachers is lost because of their deficient sex ed, and then that just continues to my generation.”  
● “Our health teacher was never absent except for that one day. He was just like, ‘I don’t want to do this’ I guess.” |
| Reliance on Media as a Sex Educator | Looking to/relying on various forms of media for sex education by parents, teachers, peers, and interviewees                                                                                                   | ● “[My mom] bought me this series by American Girl doll about like how to develop into a woman.”  
● “[The sex ed teacher] showed us videos about like 16 and Pregnant.”  
● “Tumblr...was kind of the only place I could get same sex education.”  
● “Friends, porn, and movies/media is where I filled in the gaps.”  
● “At some point, I just binge-watched all of [Lindsey Doe’s splanations] videos.” |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>White Centrality</th>
<th>Desire to be more proximate to whiteness by adhering to Western beauty standards or engaging with white partners, observations of the Eurocentrism in Asian beauty standards/media</th>
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|                | ● “So [my parents] were just kind of like, if it’s not a white person or an Asian person, we don’t want him. Like they were pretty explicit about race.”
|                | ● “Even within the Asian community, there is kind of like, not a fetishization, but there is like an elevation of white people I think, especially amongst Asian Americans as the ideal.”
|                | ● “From what I am starting to understand is that even if you don’t idolize white people, Eurocentric standards are always going to seep into what your understanding of a good image or good body image is.”
|                | ● “Even growing up with Korean media, all of the main characters had Anglo Saxon features... It was never just like a normal Asian face. It was always like a face that would also be accepted in American media...Western standards.”
|                | ● “A white cis het man out there who will find me attractive is kind of contingent on me resigning myself to being fetishized.”

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<tr>
<th>Asian In/visibility&lt;sup&gt;15&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Inability to see the self in American media either due to lack of Asian representation or hypervisibility of stereotypical portrayals; Acknowledgement of racism/invisibility and instances of sexual racism (fetishization) as normal and part of the lived experience of Asian women/GNBs</th>
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|                                | ● “It always makes me wary if a white guy gives me a compliment...because then I have to be like, ‘Okay, do you like me? Or just are into Asians? Do you have this preconceived notion of me?’”
|                                | ● “I don’t even think the idea that Asian women can be gay is something that crosses most of their minds because they’re like ‘oh, Asian woman—object for me, object for me to hit on.’”
|                                | ● “Like guys who have an Asian fetish—they always look at me and they’re like ‘Oh my god, you look so innocent like all those girls in anime.’”
|                                | ● “In terms of not being able to see people like me on screen...it felt like that’s just how it was.”

<sup>15</sup> I borrow from Yamamoto (2000)’s “Asian in/visibility” to point to how the Asian body “is visible only to be dominated sexually or in combat by white masculinity to the discursive realm,” rending the Asian American subject invisible (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 46).
Limitations

While I draw from literature on Asian Americans more broadly, my interview research focuses on those of East Asian ethnic identity. Based on the fourth tenet of AsianCrit, my sample is anti-essentialist while my research as a whole employs strategic essentialism through panethnic identity empowerment in the analysis of population-specific struggles. In the selection of a specific sample, my research only speaks to a small segment of Asian American experiences in sex education for those of East Asian descent, those growing up in immigrant households, and those identifying as women or gender non-binary who were assigned female at birth. Additionally, the size of my sample prioritizes specificity over generalizability, meaning that any conclusions drawn in this paper are from my interpretations of what a handful of individuals said. I hope that my research will encourage future studies to consider a variety of areas such as the experiences of Asian American adoptees who are racialized as Asian but may have little to no engagement with Asian values or culture, the experiences of non-East Asian Americans, the experiences of biracial/multiracial Asians, and the experiences of Asian American men, to list a few. Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, generational differences, and sexual orientation should be researched as well, particularly in regards to access to and navigation of healthcare services.
Chapter Three: Family Sex Education

This chapter will examine the development of Asian American sexual literacies in the home. I will consider what messages my participants received from family surrounding sex and relationships by looking at modeled parental relationships, sexual silence in the Asian household, implicit sexual communications, and intergenerational exchanges.

Ethnic Awareness

“Like when I look at these movies, the [Asian] home always looks like [an] average American home.” (Nina describing the portrayal of the Asian American household in To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before)\(^\text{16}\)

The influence of parents and other caretakers on “children’s early understandings of sexuality” makes sexual communications within the home an appropriate starting point for examining Asian American sexual literacies (Kim & Ward, 2007, p. 3). When it comes to conceptions of Asian parenting, strictness and traditionalism are at the forefront of “tiger mom” stereotypes where children are pushed by high standards to achieve. Though an often exaggerated image, previous literature reports Asian parents favoring “academics first” mindsets and Asian American adolescents having relationships outside of their parents’ knowledge as dating is viewed as a distraction to academic success (Lau et al., 2009). From my participant sample, only one interviewee explicitly cited academics as a priority for herself and as a parental expectation. For participants who engaged in relationships, they recounted differing degrees of parental knowledge of their relationships such as complete secrecy, implicit parental awareness, neutral awareness, and disapproving awareness. Extended families and local Asian American/Asian immigrant communities also influence Asian American relationships as part of the collective self to contribute to familial attitudes on sex. Family plays the most prominent role

\(^{16}\) As part of my approach to CDA, I highlight short excerpts of quoted material from interviews throughout my three data findings chapters to preview what specific ideas I will elaborate on. These epigraphs aim to provide an unfiltered opportunity to digest what my interviewees said before reading my commentary and interpretations.
in Ethnic Awareness within Asian American identity development in the passing down of Asian home country values and cultural attitudes, including those surrounding sex and relationships.

Due to the vastness of the Asian diaspora, my interviewees’ households reflect varying modes of cultural engagement and preservation through food, language, holidays, and religious practices. Many described speaking mostly an Asian\textsuperscript{17} language, a mix of an Asian language (or Portuguese for Em’s case) and English, or solely English with parents. The adoption of Western attitudes also impacted their views on suitable partners for their children, sex, dating, and relationships with the more acculturated favoring more neutral attitudes in contrast to the generally more prohibitive attitudes expressed by traditionalist parents. For example, Angela described her mother as “pretty westernized” in terms of her beauty standards to favor tan skin over paleness and her attitudes to encourage dating many people. However, I would like to note here that a variety of factors played into nuanced parental communications such as multiethnic households, separations/remarriages, religiosity, geographical location, etc. and that the lived experiences of my interviewees provide specific snapshots of their interpretations based on recollection.

Interviewees who grew up in a household with two immigrant parents indicated more “connectivity” with Asian culture (Angela) while those with either a second generation Asian American father or non-Asian stepfather figure indicated vaguer connections to Asian culture or more “Americanized” cultural experiences (Lucy), which resultingly impacted what attitudes their parents communicated to them on sex and relationships.

\textbf{Modeled Relationships Between Asian Mothers and Their Partners}

“I feel like they do love each other. And like, I feel like it’s a very good and warm and loving household and I think that it’s probably a lot less overtly affectionate than a lot of white American households like my parents aren’t super physically affectionate. They’re

\textsuperscript{17}I am referring to specifically East or Southeast Asian languages here. My interviewees reported the use of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese intermixed with English in their households. Em reported the use of Portuguese as their mother grew up in Brazil.
not really the type to be like ‘Oh, I love you’ to one another. But it’s definitely not antagonistic by any means.” (Natsume)

A commonality for my interviewees when remembering the relationships they observed between their parents (or their parents with new partners) was an emphasis on partnerships and less overt physical affection in comparison to observations of non-Asian relationships. The hallmark of these relationships was not grounded on high passion and romance but rather on a steadfast reliance on one another and a love developed over time. Though having separated when Lucy was young, her parents showed her that one can “stay cordial or friendly with an ex partner” and still have open communication. The “healthy divorce” for Lucy’s parents was in the minority as most interviewees discussed arguments as consistencies in their parents’ relationships. For some parents, constant arguing ended their relationships while for others, arguing serves as a regular exchange. Nina described how there is something “endearing” about these arguments as “always knowing each other [and] always bugging each other.” In chronicling how their parents arrived at tolerance and a “weird platonic friendship,” Bailey detailed their parents’ shared life goals to move to America and have children as the main thing that brought them together and how “they absolutely hated each other,” fighting regularly during Bailey’s youth. Angela also witnessed her parents arguing frequently growing up and described her parents setting their differences aside in “family-centered decision making” where “divorce was never really even put on the table” because she was her parents’ priority. Olivia mirrored this wording with the “children come first” belief that their grandmother instilled in their mother as they recalled an instance in which their mother was scolded for being out late on a date when Olivia was young. These narratives diverge from white mainstream American messages to marry for love or to marry a best friend that Asian American youth consume simultaneously while observing their parents’ relationships.
The interactions between Asian mothers with non-Asian partners for Em, Olivia, and Rachel demonstrate interesting movements toward or away from white narratives. For Em, their parents modeled “a little bit of a nuclear family” where their white father acted as the breadwinner and their Chinese Brazilian mother fell into the role of the homemaker as “lifelong companionship” remained a priority in the relationship. For Olivia, their white stepfather and Chinese mother engage in a “civil” relationship that is not as publicly affectionate which more closely resembles the characteristics of previously described Asian immigrant parent relationships. Rachel described the relationship between her Filipina mother and Black partner of one year as a “little bit abusive” and “toxic” due to observations of possessive behavior. Rachel’s mother exhibited feelings of self-blame when making excuses for her partner for being “justifiably jealous” and that she “deserve[s] to be yelled at.” When examining attitudes on sexual harassment, Ho et al. (2018) described how Asian American women might be influenced by their subscription to Asian cultural norms in gender-based interpersonal interactions. Even though Rachel’s mother “considers herself very American now” and may orient more towards white culture, her feelings of self-blame might reflect an internalization of traditional Asian gender dynamics in which women are subordinate to men. How my interviewees’ Asian mothers carried themselves in relationships or how much they adhered to or rejected cultural expectations translated into what behavior they expected from or what relative freedom they afforded their daughters.

**Sexual Silence in the Asian Household**

“If guess our position was we will not talk about it at all. Because we’re not like an open sex-positive family.” (Rachel)

Consistent with previous findings, all of my interviewees reported the absence of a formal, sit-down sex talk from their parents and the more prominent role of their Asian mothers
in communications. Silence could be attributed to the combination of the topic of sex being taboo and parents’ assumptions that sex education will occur in school contexts, eliminating the need to address it. Sexual silence is a recurring theme where Asian parents use “implicit and nonverbal ways to communicate their sexual values” to their children (Kim & Ward, 2007, p. 3). Instead of receiving explicit verbal communications, Asian American adolescents pick up cues from the adults around them. Sexual communications happen even amid verbal silence. Asian American adolescents have a clear idea of their parents’ expectations around dating and sex by picking up cues from community gossip, comments from extended family, body language when watching sex scenes and off-hand comments as I will explore further.

**Sexual Communications Between Asian Mothers and Daughters**

The particular sexual communications that occur between Asian mothers and their daughters include female gender roles and menstruation. Four participants reported being given puberty books by their mothers (Rachel, Nina, Em, Natsume) with two specific citations of the American Girl series. Rachel recalled commentary on “hair and boob sizes” for bodily changes and potentially “notic[ing] boys more” in the growing up for girls book that she received and did not finish. Em did “end up consulting [their book] a couple of times” which talked about sex, romance, and pleasure in addition to puberty and “tak[ing] care of yourself.” Though somewhat helpful, this mode of transmitting knowledge facilitates the avoidance of sex talk while still imparting information through relying on American media. Nina’s Korean mother and Natsume’s Japanese mother both made use of the American Girl series as a means to quietly pass along information. In addition to “how to develop into a woman,” Nina remembered the series covering topics such as “how to make friends...[and] how to be popular in middle school.”
American Girl covers topics to regulate individual behavior and individual behaviors within social norms.

For those assigned female at birth, menstruation is a noteworthy component of sex education to consider how menstruators come to understand their developing bodies through this process. Some participants described being prepared for menstruation and receiving verbal communications (Bailey, Em, Olivia) while others described shame and embarrassment surrounding menarche (Nina, Angela):

“I got a period talk from my mother...I think probably when I was like 10, she sat me down and said, ‘One of these days you’re gonna start bleeding from your vagina. It’s going to happen once a month for like decades.’” (Olivia)

“But I was still kind of ashamed. I was just like, ‘I don’t want to tell my mom that I just got my first period.’ So I waited I think like three months after I got my first period until my mom found my underwear.” (Nina)

Menarche is an interesting event to dissect for Asian American women and menstruating GNBs to consider how Asian mothers frame their daughters’ coming-of-age to either treat periods as a natural process or something to be discreet about. Natsume’s mother was very “practical” about her first period and “just gave [her] some supplies and...some advice,” but “it didn’t feel super taboo.” Her mother also was more amenable to Natsume getting birth control to help control her period as she went through similar complications when she was younger but was also sure to utter the words “use protection” when walking out of the doctor’s office. Natsume was not so sure how the encounter “would have gone down if [she] had wanted it for a contraceptive.” Lucy’s recollection of her parents’ response was similarly practical without ever “fully explaining what it was” as they “felt that [she] already learned about it at school.” Nina noted a generational shame in the women of her family by describing how her grandmother also taught her mother that “the period is something to be hidden away” and to be “manage[d]” alone.
Nina’s mother taught discretion when it came to her period in which no blood should ever be visible on her underwear. Even though Bailey felt their mother prepared them well for their first period, they also observed the judgemental view their mother took on toward their friends’ periods “in a way that was like...Asian aunts talk about their kids” grounded by “Chinese old wise tale” superstitions on poor health associated with early periods. Period shame in Asian cultures derives from embedded shame, silence, discomfort, and secrecy. So, even within the singular aspect that Asian mothers feel compelled to prepare their daughters for, attitudes are rooted in the burden of female restriction.

**Gossip and Cultures of Shame in Asian Communities**

“My mom will mention how family friends are doing and their dating lives, talking about like my cousin’s boyfriends and what to look for in a partner.” (Lucy)

“Asian aunts talk" about more than just periods. Despite an overwhelming silence within the household, my interviewees implicated how there are appropriate settings for verbal communications in the form of gossip about relatives or other people within Asian communities. The role of the church is worthwhile to consider as a space of congregation for Asian immigrant communities regardless of how religious families are. Half of my interviewees (Rachel, Bailey, Nina, Olivia) mentioned some sort of engagement with a church or Asian ethnic church space (i.e. Chinese American/Korean church) in their childhood and adolescence as a means to be in community with other Asian Americans. Bailey described their family as being “still pretty religious” even if they are not personally religious, understanding how the church was “one of their first communities and first places they could feel at home” after coming to America. Rachel noted the consistencies of Christianity being integral to her life growing up as her mother grew up Catholic in the Philippines, claimed to have met her father at a Christian study group, and wanted her children to be surrounded by Christian settings as demonstrated by Rachel’s
enrollment in Christian/Catholic private schools. This level of religiosity was unique to Rachel’s experience and contributed to her feelings of guilt upon losing her purity ring, internalized homophobia, and discomfort with open sex talk. For other interviewees, the church functioned to regulate community behavior even if their household was not committed to Biblical practices. Nina’s mother was “excommunicated from members of [a Korean full gospel] because she was a divorced woman” before her family switched to a nondenominational American church. Olivia’s family also fled an Asian ethnic church because their mother did not like “how pushy” people were if they missed a service. The conservatism of Christianity aligns with the prohibitive attitudes of traditionalist Asian parents, and the church environment’s ritual convening creates regular opportunities for community gossip and communal surveillance.

Even interviewees who did not have sustained engagement with Christianity in their families still absorbed clear expectations for their relationships communicated by parents, family friends, and extended family. Angela recalled her mother telling her “a horror story” about somebody getting an STI or becoming pregnant to ensure that her daughter received prohibitive messages on sex. Lucy conveyed how Asian gossip culture created an aversion to dating as she observed her extended family’s “negative and judgemental” reactions to her female cousins’ dating lives alongside “being constantly told to focus on schoolwork” which left little “brain space” for dating. Her Asian family friends reiterated similar ideas of no dating or “think[ing] about boys” until college. Rachel talked about how her mother’s side of the family is “always bad talking the spouses, new people, [and] boyfriends” and how her uncle disapproves of her mother’s current partner. The involvement of family elders extends beyond the U.S. to extended family in Asian countries as well. Natsume described an “underlying awkwardness” and “tensions” when greeting extended family in Japan as they ask whether she has a boyfriend or
when she will get married and have kids as she is still uncertain as to whether she wants “any of those things” for herself in the future. These instances indicate certain appropriate contexts for verbal sexual discourse in Asian communities. Gossip, disapproving chatter, and horror stories performed by adults perpetuate a culture of fear around sex for Asian American adolescents leading to intentional silences later on in personal behavior to avoid family/community scrutiny.

**Parental Expectations on Partners, Sex, and Relationships**

Many interviewees were able to pinpoint particular preferences their parents had communicated about future partners for children typically based on financial stability and good family background with underlying messages about race, gender, and class. Some parents expressed hopes for Asian (or white, if not Asian) son-in-law’s, though the degree of importance varied. Angela’s parents communicated “anti-Black, anti-Indian, [and] anti-Vietnamese” explicit biases, but these were not “in practice...a deal-breaker by any means.” Bailey discussed how their parents “luckily” like their boyfriend and he falls under the acceptable options of “a white person or an Asian person” and “fits all of [their parents’] criteria.” While Olivia has “mostly dated white men,” they understand how their parents would be able to “connect with” someone of Asian descent “a little better.” Nina believes that her mother “deep down” still has “subconscious biases” and would prefer for her to marry “another Korean or Asian guy” with “some sort of interest in being religious.” Other than being “well-off,” Rachel’s mother hopes her daughter’s partner will be “a good God-fearing, devout Christian guy,” upholding the consistency of Christianity. Although her parents have dated a “variety of races,” Rachel feels as though her “dad would be more comfortable with white people for some reason” but does not think her partner’s race would “be a big thing.” Natsume’s parents have not communicated an ideal partner, but her mother likely has a “desire for her to get married...with an implied man at
some point.” Above all, Asian immigrant parents value hardworking male partners who can protect and treat their daughters well, which is an expectation often rooted in a well-off background, and the well-off background in America is more readily attainable for whites due to systemic racism and generational wealth.

Aware of heteronormative expectations to marry men, some of my interviewees described sexual silence around their queerness. Natsume described talking about LGBTQ+ issues with her parents “in the abstract” and their theoretical acceptance of bisexuality, but she had uncertainties about her “don’t ask, don’t tell” household as a whole and how she would introduce a partner or “slip it in casually.” Similarly, Olivia feels that their parents are “generally supportive” of the LGBTQ+ community “even if they don’t really understand it,” but is hesitant to come out to their parents because they “don’t know how [their parents] would react when it’s so close to home.” Rachel recounted an instance when her father noticed that she put “bi” down on college applications and thought it was a mistake. Although her father said that it was okay if she actually was and that she could tell him, the awkwardness of the exchange did not elicit a declarative response. Part of this uncertainty surrounding coming out to her parents stems from family silence and the “low key or high key homophobic” cues from extended family as Rachel thought back to an uncle being out as gay to only her mother and “no one else.” Based on this instance, Rachel assumes that it would “probably be fine” to come out but also hopes that she would be “at an old enough age where [she] can support herself” if her mother disapproves. Bailey has never talked to their parents about queer relationships because they “know they’re homophobic,” clarifying that they love them a lot but are aware that it would not be well-received. A silence around queerness in these participants’ Asian families is the culmination of homophobia, lack of open discourse around sexuality, and uncertain parental attitudes. Em
feels more comfortable having discussions around sex and relationships with their highly acculturated Chinese Brazilian mother, but also acknowledged the limitations of intergenerational differences and their mother’s warnings against “picking identity labels for [themselves]” too young. Their asexuality “doesn’t really make sense in [their mother’s] head” as she grew up knowing only straight, gay, and bisexual as potential sexualities. Although “kind of a headache sometimes,” Em’s mother “seems to be fine with” their asexuality and polyamory, demonstrating the potential for common ground through dialogues and the significance of the mother’s acculturation to facilitate acceptance of her daughter’s non-heterosexual relationships.

Alongside heterosexuality, the expectation to abstain from sex until marriage perpetuates adolescent silence around their sexual debuts to have relationships without parental knowledge. Lucy described sex as being an infrequently talked about topic in her family as something that feels like in the “faraway future” even if she is at “sexual maturity.” Though Lucy was the only participant who specifically discussed academics as a priority, other participants absorbed a similar message that they were too young to be dating, having sex, and seeking out birth control as high schoolers. Rachel and Bailey reported hiding or being secretive about relationships in adolescence, the present, and/or both. Rachel described her mother’s stance as “You shouldn’t do these things before marriage, but if you end up doing it, then I’ll just silently judge you” with the main concern with her daughter’s dating being “the sex aspect.” However, Rachel also noted a certain degree of hypocrisy in her mother’s attitude with the knowledge that her mother had had premarital sex and had gone through an abortion before meeting her father, demonstrating another layer of silence with Asian mothers maintaining discretion with their sexual histories. Rachel described finding out about this fact as “a weird thing that [they] haven’t addressed” and consequently being further confused about what she and her sister are “allowed to do.” Her
parents do not know about her current relationship. Bailey has been dating their white male partner for several years now and their parents approve of him, but also said that they had a girlfriend in high school who their parents “definitely did not know about.” As they only know about their daughter’s boyfriend, Bailey passes as straight in their parents’ eyes which appeared to be a commonality amongst bisexual participants. Many of my interviewees practiced strategic and intentional silence with their relationships especially when they knew their parents would be unlikely to approve of their partners.

Angela described most of her relationships as being outside of her parents’ knowledge “especially when [she] was younger.” Her parents met some of the people that she was dating at the time, but she never introduced them as her dating partner. Natsume mentioned that her parents were aware of her more serious high school relationship because they were bound to “figure it out” from living under the same roof but described how her older sister has been dating someone for almost a year and her parents “still don’t know that he exists.” Though Natsume does not feel as though she can only introduce the person she intends to marry to her parents, she is not over-eager to introduce early-stage partners. On the other hand, Olivia once wrote a Subtle Asian Traits¹⁸ post to illustrate their mother’s strictness as they were dating a guy for a long time but their mother “insisted that she didn’t want to meet him unless [he] was the person [they were] going to marry.” Their mother eventually “warmed up a little bit and ended up really liking him” before they broke up, but Olivia described their mother’s attitude as “very reserved” and not wanting “to engage too much in case the relationship ends” and being “removed from” their romantic relationships. Olivia did not have many reservations about letting their parents know about their relationships, but kept the sexual component under wraps to either make sure their parents were out of the house if they were having sex or at their partner’s house in adolescence to

¹⁸ Facebook group and one of the largest online Asian communities connecting Asian individuals around the globe
ensure “that there was no opportunity for [them] to talk about sex because [they knew] that it would be awkward.”

When asked about watching sex scenes together with their parents, most participants described intense awkwardness and their parents’ attempts to censor the content by changing the channel or covering their eyes when they were younger. Many parents did not have verbal commentary, but the avoidance of or disgust at media with more explicit sexual content (for example, Bailey described the “horrible” experience of watching a “gratuitous sex scene” in *Deadpool* with their father) embodies the chasm between hypersexualized American media and sexually suppressive Asian households. Consequently, Asian immigrant parents are only able to pass on some aspects of silent conservative attitudes on dating and sex to their children who grow up with bicultural expectations, usually being those that align with Western patriarchal values as they converge with Asian values and limit cognitive dissonance in reading the world.

**Intergenerational Persistence and Resistance**

“I think it’s interesting because I think that advice [to date as many people as possible] actually came from [my mother’s] personal experience but the other way around where she was like ‘No, I only dated a person and then I could do all of these things, so I think you should figure out how to be your own person and do all these things before you settle down with one person.’” (Angela)

When considering intergenerational sexual literacy within the context of Asian families, the persistence of and resistance to Asian values trace patterns of continuity and change in the passing of sexual communications between generations. The Asian grandmother socializes the Asian mother who socializes the Asian daughter with some attitudes remaining clear while other expectations become more malleable. Sexual silence is a chronic symptom of generational shame and discomfort. Many of my interviewees expressed either resisting their parents’ values when it
came to dating/sex or having more freedom as a result of their Asian mothers’ resistance to traditionalist values.

More acculturated parents leaned toward sexual neutrality (Em, Lucy, Olivia) while less acculturated parents expressed cautionary or prohibitive attitudes toward premarital sex (Rachel, Bailey, Nina, Natsume, Angela). Acculturation in this sense relates specifically to Asian parents’ adherence to traditional views on sex, not necessarily all aspects of American life. Em attributed their mother’s sex neutrality to her growing up in Brazil and being immersed in a culture that tended toward “sex positivity” and openness to communicate to her child to “do whatever [they] want that makes [them] feel comfortable.” In stark contrast, Bailey described how their mother “was horrified” when they first asked about birth control because “[she] would rather die than have [Bailey] be pregnant or having sex.” Bailey talked about “wearing [their] mom down” to get a birth control implant from Planned Parenthood in a “ask forgiveness, not permission kind of thing.” Though not necessarily eager to rebel, Bailey’s birth control acquisition shows an eagerness to resist and self-advocate for their sexual needs even if their parents may not approve. In addition to menstrual silence, Nina’s mother also communicated conservative values on sex. Though Nina’s mother allowed her daughter to date in high school, she wanted Nina to have innocent, cute relationships with physical touch being limited to hand-holding and wanting Nina to “respect herself” and only have sex with her husband after getting married to have children. Nina recalled feeling “so bad” when her mother would cry after finding out about her daughter’s engagement in sexual activity. These feelings of guilt, however, were overridden by feelings of peer pressure and wanting to assimilate within predominantly white school dating cultures.

Differing ideas of dating and relationship norms between Asian mothers and their Asian American daughters reflect the contexts they were socialized in. Rachel demonstrated
intergenerational resistance when criticizing her mother’s partner to point out the potentially unhealthy patterns, saying that the only thing she has against him is that “sometimes he’ll make her cry” and that her mother should “have [her] self-worth and know when to break it off.” At the same time, Rachel recognized how her mother’s “standards of bad things are different and complicated” and how her mother perceived her partner’s attitudes to be her own fault because of “what she did in her past relationships.” Rachel’s mother employed strategies of enduring hardship through internalizing shame and self-blame while Rachel’s sexual socialization in closer proximity to white culture, in contrast, presented as more of a vocal response that diverged from her mother’s. While Rachel’s mother’s strategy of silence may be perceived as passive, it represents “active internal processes of coping and resistance” (Ho et al., 2018, p. 295). Rachel’s pushback endorses an individualist perspective to defer responsibility to the perpetrator, rather than the victim.  

Angela’s mother instead imparted advice after thinking back on her own lived experience in hopes that her daughter would not imitate her behavior. Though still communicating largely negative and risk-centered implicit attitudes around sex, Angela’s mother was “very insistent that [Angela] date as many people as possible before [she gets] married so that [she has] a good sense of what [she wants].” Having married at a young age, Angela’s parents have “settled into a good rhythm” despite their “very different personalities” to put their “family first.” Angela’s mother prescribed dating advice as an act of intergenerational resistance which her daughter has taken advantage of, but Angela simultaneously described internalizing prohibitive attitudes for the vast majority of her teen and young adult years, not wanting to have sex with someone until knowing

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19 Ho et al. (2018) acknowledge that the patriarchal structures of social/legal systems in both collectivist and individualist cultures may burden victims of sexual harassment. While the individualist standpoint might favor a “stand up” response, that does not automatically mean that women speaking up will be well-received and supported. They also recognize that Asian American women have diverse strategies for coping with stressors depending on their cultural orientation, ethnicity, and a variety of other factors.
that she would “be with [that] person for a long time” and not “actively engag[ing] in hookup
culture” as a result of the beliefs her parents instilled. Angela’s family sex education illustrates
that some sexual attitudes (i.e. prohibitive attitudes on casual sex) are passed on while some (i.e.
dating multiple partners before getting married) are rejected.

Some interviewees expressed little faith in their parents’ ability to impart helpful advice when it comes to healthy relationships. Bailey did not know what their parents could teach them about a healthy relationship having “seen them act.” Lucy assumed that her parents do not “have a lot of life experience” with dating, knowing that they met in college and being unable to imagine her “grandmother allowing [her] mom to do any...dating or having sex outside of marriage.” Olivia felt that with “the Internet at [their] disposal,” they have access to information that is likely more accurate and judgement-free than the advice their parents would give “especially if they’re biased about sex and relationships.” Nina recounted a time when she once sought advice from her mother on what it meant to be attracted to a guy and if she wanted to have sex with him, and her mother appallingly responded “Don’t even think about that. You’re way too young to be thinking about that.” Had her mother been more comfortable having dialogues around sexual curiosity, Nina felt that she would have been more comfortable being open about the subject. These instances demonstrate intergenerational sexual illiteracy in the dimension of inherited silence and lack of sexual discourse. The advice Asian mothers have to impart is incompatible for helping their daughters navigate the American dating landscape as it differs so much from their lived experiences and cultural framework on relationship values and conceptions of sex.
Summary

This chapter has explored the literacy sphere of family to interrelate early ethnic awareness with early sexual socialization. The Asian immigrant household for my interviewees favored sexual silence to provide mostly implicit sexual communications on future partners, sex, and relationships. My interviewees described returning sexual silences if they worried about their parents’ disapproval on their sexuality, partners, or dating activity. Asian mothers were significant sex educators for female and gender non-binary respondents, but their advice sometimes presents a cultural mismatch for their Asian American daughters growing up in the United States. I will explore this mismatch more in the next data chapter on school sex education as my interviewees discuss social pressures in adolescence to make sexual debuts in order to assimilate into white peer cultures.
Chapter Four: School Sex Education

After considering what sexual communications occur in Asian immigrant households and communities, this chapter will examine the development of Asian American sexual literacies in schooling environments. Parents’ reliance on schools as a legitimate place for their children to learn about sex/sexuality through dominant narratives inherently assigns these contexts with power. I will consider what messages my participants received from formal sex education curriculum and how they diverged from or converged with their Asian parents’ attitudes on sex and relationships. In addition to reporting patterns in sex ed pedagogy, I will discuss secondary school peer pressures to engage in sex before comparing them with the dating cultures at liberal arts colleges.

White Identification

“Growing up in such a white environment I really, really, really wanted to kind of blend in so that I could finally be accepted. Because all of my life, I just felt like I was never good enough because I was Asian.” (Nina)

While Asian caretakers help introduce early conceptions of sexuality for Asian Americans, school environments socialize dating behavior and norms through peer influence and sex education curriculum. Kim (2001) characterizes White Identification by feelings of difference and alienation from peers. Most Asian American adolescents navigate two distinct and sometimes oppositional cultures and try to incorporate values of both to preserve ethnic identity and fit in (Phinney, 1989 as cited in Lau et al., 2009). While their Asian households emphasize collectivist values through elder reverence and the family as a unit, their American schooling settings push individualistic paradigms of success (Lau et al., 2009). My interviewees that expressed stronger pride and ethnic awareness in their Asianness from a young age also expressed less of a desire in their adolescence to be white, although a desire to be proximate to
whiteness or the pervasiveness of whiteness was consistent across most responses. While Nina’s excerpt from above illustrates what Kim (2001) refers to as active white identification, passive white identification more appropriately fits Bailey’s and Angela’s experiences in which their parents instilled Chinese culture in them from a young age. Bailey described feeling “so alone and out of place” when entering a majority white high school after growing up in a predominantly East and South Asian area. They eventually learned how to “code switch in a way” with peers who did not “share the same culture anymore” because “for the first time in [their] life [they] had to be friends with white people.” Even so, Bailey asserted that “it was never like [they] wanted to be white,” and they would “idolize” beautiful Asian women over white women. Angela described being grateful for her connectivity to mainland Asian culture because she “never really wanted to conform the way a lot of [her] peers who didn’t have that same connection did.”

She reflected on a time when she sported a “traditional Japanese haircut” with “blunt bangs” and her other Asian friends were unsure about the look on her because it made her “look so Asian,” but she “loved it.” The pressure for her Asian American friends to conform to the predominantly white context originated from their own internalized whiteness to adhere to mainstream culture. This is a relevant point to keep in mind when framing Asian American students as recipients of Eurocentric education and as minorities in their schools.

**Dominant Pedagogies in Sex Education Curriculum**

Asian Americans already experience erasure and invisibility from the dominant pedagogies in core school subjects such as history and English literature (An, 2016). Sex education curriculum follows this trend. Given that Asian parents lean on or anticipate school sex ed curriculum imparting knowledge to their children, this curriculum necessitates a critical

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20 Angela was raised almost evenly between Chinese and American culture. Her parents emphasized not only learning Chinese but also preserving cultural heritage; her father taught her Confucian texts when she was young and sent her to school in China for periods of time.
lens to dissect what messages are embedded. Selective traditions reflect the “perspectives of the most powerful groups in society” on sex, sexuality, and gender relations (Trudell, 1993, p. 29). Sex education is particularly tricky because it relies on the fabricated objectivity of science and reflects inherent biases with what information is left out when establishing normative sexual relationships.

**Prevention Discourse**

“It’s not about pleasure...it’s about ‘this is a bad thing that is going to get you all these STDs and you’re going to end up pregnant and stuff like that.” (Natsume)

Prevention model discourse and fear-based curriculum was common across most of my participants’ sex ed to overshadow sexual health with risk. Rachel mainly recalled the consistent messages of “Don’t have sex, you might get pregnant” or “you might also get this disease” from her Catholic private school setting. She described having thought her sex ed “was pretty good” prior with the teaching of abstinence and anatomy but “upon reflection” during our interview realized how much content was missing given her present struggles with not even knowing what she does not know. Rachel had not considered that certain topics could be even points of discussion in sex education until completing the recruitment survey.

Participants who qualified their curriculum as abstinence-only reported the extremes of the prevention model with schools having more inclinations to withhold information than give. Em remembered the teaching of “mostly abstinence until marriage” and “all the different types of STIs” that were “basically used as evidence” for the students being too young to be having sex. Centering graphic images of STIs was a part of their Georgia school’s “scare tactics.” Em also noted how “heteronormative” their sex education was as it assumed that everyone would “be in a heterosexual relationship, get married to the person, and then be having reproductive sex.” Lucy felt her “super clinical, very biologically focused” sex education presented the “bare
minimum information” about her body and “maybe even a tiny bit more about the opposite sex’s body and how it would change.” While some interviewees recalled contraceptives and consent as mentioned topics, Lucy’s sex ed failed to even address STIs and framed sex as solely for “procreation and not recreation.” Natsume described “a general kind of anti-contraception vibe” as the area she grew up in had a “pretty large Catholic population.” She recalled hearing about the experience of a friend who went to another nearby school that misconstrued condoms as “only 50% effective.” The language Natsume relayed similarly emphasized sex as “a bad thing” with deplorable outcomes of STD transmission and pregnancy. Her sex ed discussed the male orgasm and ejaculation as the moment pregnancy and “bad things happen,” and it “wasn’t situated in a framework of pleasure.” The female orgasm was entirely absent. Abstinence-only preventionist tactics relied on the absence of pleasure in sexual communications, especially to regulate female behavior.

Some participants illustrated more of an abstinence-plus approach in their sex education in which information on safe sex was provided, but abstinence was still largely emphasized. Nina thought her “protection-centered” curriculum provided substantial information but was “heavily focused on the risks of having sex” rather than “how sex could be done in a safe, enjoyable, consensual way.” Angela reported learning about contraceptives in a “very abstract” way without any “examples or demonstrations or any sort of way to integrate [them] into [their] lives” and learning about abstinence as “the only sure way to prevent bad things from happening.” Thinking back, Angela said her sex ed did “scare [her] into definitely using protection when [she] did have sex” which she guessed could be considered “a positive.” Olivia felt that school “made [them] more nervous about sex and sexual relationships and intimacy just because of the way that they
presented it by stressing “basically all the things that can go wrong.” Even in their curriculums that presented information about contraceptives, the framework of prevention was prominent.

Bailey was the only participant whose curriculum could be categorized as comprehensive sex education. They were still taught that “abstinence is the best way of going about [sex],” but described their sex ed as sex-positive “compared to the rest of the nation.” Though not perfect, the “sex neutral” lens never set out to shame students for having sex. Other than a mention of “sex can be fun,” pleasure was not particularly covered in detail. Bailey felt that their sex ed prepared them as much as it could in the “theoretical or academic context,” but also observed that they still experienced “a steep learning curve,” and there are some things that people cannot learn until they “actually start having sex.” While covering certain topics (such as vaginismus and how it might impact a sexual relationship) would have been helpful for Bailey, they “couldn’t really think of any questions [they] had that couldn’t be answered in class or by Google” by the time they were a junior in high school. Their curriculum demonstrates that sex ed can still teach abstinence alongside consent, contraceptives, and sexual identity without teaching students to be fearful about their own bodies and sexual expression. Rather than stripping away information to solely talk about abstinence and reproductive sex, adding in material promotes sexual health and self-advocacy. Both abstinence-focused curriculum and traditionalist Asian parental communications favor prohibitive attitudes on sex, but schooling verbally denounces the behavior through scare tactics while parents implicitly communicate shame through silence.

Banking Education Tactics

“I think my parents didn’t really discuss [sex] or address it because they felt that I already learned about it at school. And for that sex ed talk, they actually had all parents sign a permission slip for it and then just made a bunch of fifth graders watch a video” (Lucy)
Messages from prevention discourse are strengthened by banking education which assumes that students are empty vessels for expert teachers to deposit knowledge into (Freire et al., 1993). Traditional sex education lacks dialogic spaces as students passively consume pre-packaged textbooks and videos which reflect intentional silences as omissions of information. This type of reliance on media in curriculum does not critically interrogate how society views sex but rather supplies technical, removed overviews of reproduction. In addition to exhibiting these selected media artifacts as another means to instill fear and perpetuate dominant narratives, the lack of discussion and minimal classroom engagement disempower students by suppressing sexual literacy.

Rachel described “the only thing [she] remember[ed]” as being an “anatomy diagram” and her only Asian friend being “appalled.” Instead of giving “explicit recommendation[s]” on how to proceed, the teacher was fixated on “how impregnation happens” and warning against it for the girls. She distinctly recalled being shown 16 and Pregnant videos as a “you-don’t-want-to-become-like-this kind of thing.” Some pop culture examples make it into the classroom as long as they fit the established narrative of fear-based sex ed. Angela received a lot of “informational video” around puberty, pregnancy, and embryo development alongside a video on saying no to drugs and sex but a lack of anything a teenager would “actually use...in practice.” While Rachel’s curriculum explicitly painted pregnancy as a poor outcome that would derail futures, Angela’s sex ed implicitly presented “a pretty big focus on the whole pregnancy process.” Though not necessarily “anti-pregnancy,” Angela noted that the focus was “a little strange” for thirteen-year-olds. As such, the objectivity of scientific media suffers when deployed within a preventionist framework and banking educational model.
Similar to Asian mothers using books as a means for transmitting sexual communications while maintaining silence, some interviewees reported textbooks as their school’s means of avoiding sexual discussions in class. Other than watching videos on menstruation and HIV/AIDS in her sex ed, Natsume filled in blanks as she was instructed to go through the textbook on her own and determine which symptoms matched which STD on a worksheet. Lucy also mentioned the use of text to teach “the psychology of sex” as just “a brief mention” to read the chapter at home without any follow-up discussion in class which she thought was “bizarre.” These media examples illustrate minimal, obligatory deposits of information. In conjunction with the passive consumption of information, banking education relies on a simultaneous lack of discussion or questioning of the presented information. Angela reported “very little discussion-based material” in her sex ed curriculum with talk about basic consent but no further nuance on “how to communicate your needs or how to communicate things you like, things you don’t like, [and] things you want.” Banking methods limit the potential of sex education by reproducing sexual silence.

Most interviewees did not express any opportunities to contribute to their sex ed curriculum, but those who did described limited participation. Olivia’s experience being part of their school’s Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) highlighted the burdens of marginality of having to teach about gender, sexuality, and different sexual orientations. Based on student volunteers, they would “go in and do a whole lecture in the freshmen health classes.” Olivia “appreciate[d the school] outsourcing” queer sex ed to “people who were more knowledgeable,” but at the same time wished that the faculty were not “so ignorant” about LGBTQ+ issues. They felt that like with any diversity issue, “the group that [did not] have visibility [had] to take the initiative” to be seen, and in their case, the want for education about the LGBT community ended up being
the responsibility of “sixteen-year-olds in high school.” Bailey felt that their sex ed teacher “really did try her best” even if she did not fully comprehend information on the LGBT community or “how same sex intercourse happens.” They remembered the availability of an anonymous questions box which contributed to the class being “a very safe space.” The teacher answered all of the students’ questions including the nonserious questions from “boys fucking around” and not taking the lessons seriously. These instances show some straying from traditional banking methods through student involvement but generally stick to an educational model in which teachers are primary authority figures.

**Adult Discomfort**

“I remember the teacher was like ‘Okay, close the blinds. Someone walking by can see this.’” (Rachel)

In banking education, teachers hold most (if not all) of the authority, and my participants indicated the adverse consequences of adult discomfort in teaching sex education. Such a discomfort results from generational shame preserved by conservative attitudes surrounding sex in schools and communities. While adult discomfort in both Asian elders and predominantly white school settings share prohibitive attitudes, adult discomfort in sex ed curriculum manifests less so as complete avoidance of the topic in verbal silence but more so as information with deliberate silences built in. These deliberate gaps are then exacerbated by teacher instruction and implicit (sometimes explicit) negative attitudes.

Intergenerational silence appeared in a multitude of ways for my interviewees. In the assigning of the psychology of sex chapter as homework, Lucy observed that it seemed like the teacher “was not allowed to talk about it in class.” She thought it was “weird” because the teacher would generally do things “thoroughly,” but sex ed “felt very purposefully glazed over.” This slight behavioral change in her instructor allowed Lucy to pick up cues that sex was an
uncomfortable subject in the classroom. Natsume remembered having a substitute teacher and that her teacher was “never absent except for that one day” of sex ed. The discomfort was significant enough to where the teacher opted out of supervising students fill out a worksheet on STDs. Natsume also recounted an instance of her high school health teacher ranting about how “expecting [birth control] to be covered by insurance was irresponsible and unethical.” In place of teaching contraceptive methods or safe sex, this explicit negative attitude perpetuated individual responsibility to prevent pregnancy by simply not having sex. Sex education teaches silence by teaching a singular fearful perspective on sex reliant on individual responsibility, especially for young women.

A shortage in knowledge coupled with discomfort in exploring a topic makes problem-posing sex education nearly impossible. Problem-posing education is a tool of liberation as it enables students to see reality as in the process of transformation rather than static through dialogic teaching (Freire et al., 1993). Some of my interviewees indicated that even when they had questions, teachers did not know how or did not want to answer. Rachel remembered a student in her Christian private school asking where the first sexually transmitted disease came from and where Adam and Eve got it from if they were the first humans. The teacher did not have an answer. Olivia had a similar curiosity and asked whether two virgins could contract an STD if neither partner had engaged in sex before. The sex educators just answered, “Yes, you can get STDs from having sex,” which did not make sense to Olivia. “One of the main things” they remembered from their sex ed was that “the teachers just didn’t seem that knowledgeable about it.” Sex education does not invite critical thinking or questioning of the material as students are supposed to take the curriculum and their teachers’ delivery at face value.
Some interviewees expressed little faith in sex education curriculum changes to unpack and resist silence. Nina acknowledged the influences of parents and community members to shape school curriculum and did not think that most parents “would appreciate their children being educated on there being more than just two genders…[or] on how sex can actually be pleasurable.” Notably, Nina also described her neighborhood as “mostly Democratic” where even if community members verbally endorsed the belief that “children should have adequate sex education,” the threat of teaching “more than two genders” was too far and disrupted upheld binaries. Rachel could not “picture” a different type of sex ed at her old high school in anticipation that the “Catholic church” or “Christians in general would be so against it” as an encouragement for teens to have sex. She observed the legacy of “deficient sex ed” in the “older generation of these Catholic school teachers” that “just continues to [her] generation.” The cycle of silence moves from elders to parents to children and if not disrupted, likely their children, which includes the Asian American children growing up in these environments.

My participants’ Asian parents generally entrusted or at least expected schools to teach sex ed curriculum with the exception of Em’s mother. Parents had the option to opt out of sex ed if they did not want their children to participate, which is how Em skipped their middle school lecture because their mother did not support the “abstinence only platform” and did not want her daughter “to be taught [that] propaganda weird shit.” The firm rejection of the curriculum from Em’s mother was atypical as a vocal Asian parent who sought to shelter her daughter from the preventionist agenda. Em thought the experience “felt super isolating” since they were the only kid who did not attend and convinced their mother to let them take part in the high school curriculum. This instance demonstrates student pressure to participate in sex ed curriculum and resistance to the curriculum made possible through active parental advocacy. However, Em’s
mother represented an exception as a highly acculturated Asian American parent who was against the problematic politics in school curriculum which was not the case for Asian immigrant parents who were less fluent in English and less active in American politics. Furthermore, Em described their mother as having “pretty open and lenient” attitudes about dating and sex which contrasted the more prohibitive attitudes my other interviewees’ parents expressed. More traditionalist Asian parents have little impetus to resist American sex ed as the conservatism in the curriculum aligns with their own attitudes.

**The School Panopticon**

In the discussion of sex education curriculum, the social atmosphere of schools functions to regulate student behavior through panopticism. For my participants, adults in their schools surveilled students by separating the sexes for puberty talks and policing bodies (notably female students) through dress codes. In addition to the curriculum’s emphasis on female responsibility to avoid pregnancy, dress codes similarly sent messages of avoiding sexual attention and that young girls’ bodies were inherently sexual. As students, my interviewees in turn self-surveilled their behavior through gossip cultures to shame sexually active students having learned from the adults around them that sex is shameful. This self-surveillance became integral to student peer cultures as routine in their adolescent school lives.

**Preservation of the Gender Binary**

“They did the split up the class into girls and boys and then talk about each respective reproductive system...But we didn’t learn about each other’s. Like we learned about our own reproductive organs. We didn’t learn about each other’s.” (Olivia)

Most of my interviewees reported the separation of boys and girls for at least part of their sex education curriculum, typically during discussions of respective biological organs and development. Bailey, Lucy, Natsume, Em, Angela, Rachel, and Olivia recalled separation in fifth
grade or middle school. Only Nina’s class was not separated by assigned sex at birth. Rachel had “no idea what they talked about” in the boys’ class but remembered them coming out of class like “eww gross” and saying, “It’s a secret.” The argument that boys and girls should only learn about their own reproductive systems and not each other’s or any non-binary bodies (such as intersex people) preserves essentialist narratives through deliberate silence. Segregating boys and girls simultaneously communicates that people do not have anything to gain by learning about bodies other than their own or that this information is irrelevant. This separation is hardly innocent, especially when paired together with sexist comments and body policing.

Though dress codes had limited degrees of importance for my interviewees’ schools, the tendency for girls to be dress coded more often once again illustrates the responsibility of young women to be conservative with their dress and expression so as to not invite trouble. Rachel wore uniforms all throughout her schooling experience from kindergarten to high school, but most brought up the same common rules. Many of my interviewees cited the same regulations such as the fingertip rule in which skirts and shorts had to be below where their fingertips touched when reaching down to their thighs and the tank top rule in which straps had to be at least two or three fingers across. Natsume illustrated the potential influence of the “pretty large Mormon population” in her conservative hometown with the teachings of LDS21 in which shoulders must be covered and bottoms cannot go above the knees. Lucy described “the basic public school regulations” around skirt length, “shoulder stuff,” and bare midriffs as “nothing incredibly strict but also not super loose.” Angela did have a dress code but it “wasn’t very strictly adhered to” or “a big deal at [her] school.” Nina listed off the three B’s: “no butts, no boobs, no belly.” Regardless of how strict their schools were, these examples indicate disciplinary power to surveil female bodies.

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21 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the LDS Church/Mormon Church
Some interviewees reported school employees specifically reprimanding girls for their dress. Em mentioned “weird sexist shit” while making the observation that a lot of the dress coded people tended to be “white girls who were on sports teams” because they had “certain sports uniforms that didn’t fit into the general dress code.” Though it did not feel “super strictly enforced” to Em, it “didn’t make a lot of sense” to them that school-distributed costumes did not adhere to established rules. Bailey noted that people at their school would get dress coded “all the time” and that they “have literally never seen a male student get dress coded.” Olivia qualified their high school as “much more relaxed” than their middle school but recalled being angered by an instance in which the principal “pulled a bunch of girls from [their] grade” for a talk which Olivia was excluded from. They were unsure as to how this group of people was singled out, but the girls were “essentially [given] a lecture about how they were dressed like sluts.” Em, Bailey, and Olivia pointed to an illusory threat associated with women showing bare skin and an eagerness to discipline female students.

**Gossip Cultures and Self-surveillance**

“If you’re doing PDA, everyone would like tease you or gossip about you.” (Rachel)

Administrators were not the only actors enabling sexism within the school sphere; students self-surveilled their own behavior and their peers’ behavior as well. While the gossip of Asian aunties also carries a certain air of scandal and disdain, gossip cultures in schools more directly impact adolescents as immediate influencers when whites serve as the reference group. White homophobic school environments forced Rachel and Bailey to self-regulate their dating behaviors. Rachel talked about the role of gossip about a “[girl] dating another girl” as an inhibitor to being out about her sexuality as it communicated that nonheterosexual relationships were “not allowed.” The culmination of the Eurocentric frame of homosexuality and religiosity at Rachel’s school discouraged nonheterosexual expression. Despite the neutral, comprehensive
approach of their sex education, Bailey described “sneaking around” in their gay relationship and “a lot of guilty feelings” surrounding kissing/sex. Even if their sex ed teacher had acknowledged queer relationships, their homophobic high school peer environment and Chinese parents’ conservatism contributed to internalized homophobia as their relationship deviated from both white peer and family reference group expectations. The surveillance of white peer gossip upheld compulsory heterosexuality and gender role stereotypes.

Those engaging in heterosexual relationships detailed the coexistence of shame/status and a double standard between men/women. Natsume felt that a “contradicting culture” existed where the perception was that the “cool kids” were having sex, but sex was also “a really shameful thing” that should not be talked about. Sexual activity was simultaneously flaunted as a status symbol but also shrouded in secrecy as boys typically reaped status and girls reaped shame. Natsume thought high school was “a very confusing environment” to be in and “definitely experienced some anxieties” about whether all of her peers were having sex or what it said about her “as a person” if she were having sex. Olivia recounted the gossip culture mainly circulating rumors about “the most popular kids” and listed some examples such as people getting caught making out in empty classrooms or “giving blowjobs in the stairwells.” Their peers “loved spreading it around.” Nina described how it was “mostly a taboo to find out that someone was engaging in sexual activity.” The rumors at her school “would center mostly on slut shaming a girl or foster[ing] toxic masculinity in the boys” with topics such as comparing penis sizes, sending nudes, or having multiple sexual partners. Nina considered how her younger self “was being a huge hypocrite” and “contributing to the entire problem” in high school because she was engaging in sex with her boyfriend but somehow at the time felt that her relationship was “so passionate” and “righteous” in comparison to her classmates who were
having casual sex with multiple people. Nina worried about others thinking she was “a slut” and social scrutiny not only from her friends and peers but also adults like the school nurse and “did not feel comfortable talking with them at all.” School gossip culture incubates and perpetuates the shame taught in sex ed curriculum through students policing one another and themselves.

Within such a social scene, interviewees discussed how their relationship status correlated with their self-esteem and feelings of attractiveness. Em illustrated how their first formal relationship “affected [their] self-esteem in a certain way.” Their self-image improved in the first month before they realized that a boyfriend was not “actually what [they wanted].” They recognized that they “certainly felt some pressure just from watching [their] peers enter relationships” while also noting a time of confusion and struggling to tell whether their feelings for their boyfriend were platonic or romantic. Olivia discussed feeling self-conscious about not being “pretty enough” and felt “more confident” when they initiated and got into a relationship. Angela did not think her sense of self-worth was tied to being a relationship, but she “always enjoyed dabbling and romantic connections one way or another” to search for a sense of belonging “in an environment where there weren’t a lot of people like [her]” who had a “50-50” experience between Asian culture and American culture. Rachel described peers thinking she was “cool” because she had “rejected so many guys” and how being asked out was an indication of being “wanted.” Lucy did not share the same positive feelings around their relationship status because she did not participate in dating norms. She felt “incredibly flustered” and “not sure footed” when asked to a dance and felt more comfortable not having a relationship status or being in the “weird courtship in between dating status” stage, qualifying the dating culture as “very superficial and shallow.” School gossip cultures on sex and relationships create the incentive to date and be sexually active in ways that are acceptable by adhering to the normative.
Some interviewees recounted how the affections of white male peers specifically impacted them. Nina thought she was “so ugly” in the first two years of high school because the guys she liked “always liked all of the other white girls,” making her wish that she “was not born Asian.” She felt “a little bit more attractive” in her high school relationship “just because [she] had the attention of a white boy that [she] thought was cute.” Nina elaborated on how her boyfriend’s complimenting of her “flat nose bridge” and her eyes led to more of “an acceptance” of her features instead of “a pure hatred” for them. Natsume “hate[d] to admit it,” but felt that her relationship status did affect how she viewed herself in her predominantly white high school “especially as an East Asian person.” She still struggles to “picture someone who’s not a white cis het man being attracted to [her]” and has a “contentious” and “very racialized” relationship with feeling attractive or desirable. Asian American adolescents are subjected to the same peer pressures to have sex, but their racialization warps their relationship to attractiveness and experiences. Being a woman or gender non-binary person further complicates this relationship when female value significantly relates to beauty and attracting white men due to patriarchal norms. I will discuss this idea further in my analysis chapter.

Open Sexual Dialogues on Liberal Arts College Campuses

“I never really like experienced speaking to anyone about [sex] and it was never really something that interested me...because the environment I came from was just so different and people didn’t really talk super openly about it” (Em)

In comparison to the peer cultures of shame in their adolescent schooling settings, all of my interviewees detailed more open sexual environments at their liberal arts colleges through dialogue. Bailey qualified their historically women’s college as “very sexually free.” Natsume contrasted how no one “is trying to find out” information about her sexual life at college but if she wants to share, “people are happy to talk about it.” Being sexually active is not “a weird
status symbol,” and the culture has normalized that “some people have sex, other people don’t want to, and none of those things are bad.” Natsume appreciates these discussions about sex and sexuality that are “more authentic and vulnerable.” Em added that their college culture taught them that “it’s okay” to have mixed feelings or “sometimes even contradictory feelings” about sex by “just being able to speak freely about emotions and boundaries.” The LGBTQ Center on campus was helpful for their experience to meet other queer people and facilitate an identification as “both an ace person and a polyamorous person” which they never anticipated to happen prior to college. Nina reported a “safe space for people that are queer, for people that are transgender, nonbinary individuals” and the adoption of a relaxed mindset around sex. The openness to talk about “sexual advice and sexual experiences” rather than quickly labeling sexually active women as “slutty” or men as “playboys” fostered Nina’s increased comfort with her sexuality. The liberal arts college setting accelerated sexual literacy for my participants by doing away with the culture of shame to destigmatize and critically consider sex as part of their lives and society broadly.

Though all of my interviewees characterized their college settings as more open, some indicated difficulties adjusting to such environments. Rachel said she “still feel[s] foolish” if people are having conversations about sex, attributing this feeling to “lack of experience” and “lack of comfortability with the subject” rather than a “lack of vocabulary.” She explained that her college was the first non-religious school she has attended and does not feel ready to be vulnerable about sexual topics yet. Angela described the culture shock as “like a slap in the face” when she first arrived at college “because everyone there was so open and...willing to talk about [sex].” Although, she also noted the manifestation of pressures to have sex in the form of “sex and hookup culture” where students who did not actively engage in hookup culture regularly
“almost felt like prudes.” Her school overall felt “more receptive to conversation” and did well in providing resources and safe spaces for coming out about sexual assault but described “an ongoing process...even in an ultra liberal school” where there are “always more conversations that should be had.” Older interviewees who were recent graduates, seniors, and juniors in college (Angela, Nina, Olivia, Em, Natsume, Bailey) generally expressed more comfort with sexual topics while the sophomores (Rachel, Lucy) still indicated room for growth in sexual literacy through dialogues. As students go through college, the liberal arts campus provides ample opportunities to challenge their earlier sexual socializations and to grow into their own sexual identities as they enter adulthood. Schooling environments are formative for adolescents’ and early adults’ sexual identity development as primary social contexts for the formation of peer relationships and first sexual and/or romantic relationships.

Summary

This chapter has dissected the school as a host of sex ed curriculum and peer cultures in which White Identification shapes Asian American sexual literacies in regulating dating behavior to be in accordance with the dominant culture. While the formal curriculum presents minimally useful information, students pick up on adults’ discomfort engaging with sex ed material, and the lack of sexual dialogues is perpetuated by banking education. Schools communicate a double standard in which female students are shamed for their dress and having sex while their male peers are not. The next chapter will discuss how media inculcates pressures to date, how adolescents use media as a sexual literacy tool, and how Asian American (in)visibility impacts relationships.
Chapter Five: Media Sex Education

This chapter will examine the development of Asian American sexual literacies within media landscapes. If family and schooling share the commonality of seeking to suppress sexuality in young people, media might normalize sexual desire from a young age. Although media permeates other spheres through sex educators using informational videos and Asian mothers giving their daughters puberty books, this section will examine media culture at large to contemplate the presence (or absence) of Asian visibility. Both active and passive media consumption will be covered in my participants’ diets to distinguish between deliberate attempts to increase personal sexual literacy and implicit messages absorbed from media portrayals. The discourse that occurs in media may be less direct than family and schooling as the messages are not necessarily from one person to another, but adolescents nonetheless derive meaning from media figures or their peers’ opinions on media. Media can serve as a space to selectively preserve certain silences around sex while offering dialogic spaces of counterdiscourse in online communities. I will expand on Kim (2001)’s Social Political Consciousness and Asian American Consciousness stages to consider how Asian American women and gender non-binary people move from, to, and between these stages by identifying with representations of other.

Sex in Media: Everywhere and Nowhere

“But [sex is] also everywhere in media and entertainment or like in advertising. It’s always kind of being shoved down your throat” (Natsume)

Media portrayals of sex and romance can enable sexual desire in audiences as they emulate such relationships in their personal lives. This desire is also normative, dictating which relationships are appropriate and acceptable, who is desirable, and through what means the desire can be fulfilled. Asian American adolescents are not exempt from mainstream desire and the social capital that accompanies desirability even if they cannot racially identify with media
figures. As the media diets of my interviewees included both American-produced and Asian-produced content, observations about the portrayals of sex and relationships from both media contexts will be made. Youthfulness, compulsory heterosexuality, and male pleasure were consistent themes, while sex scenes revealed deliberate, built-in silences by the content creators. In this way, sex manages to be everywhere and nowhere at once in media as a constant undercurrent of desire latticed within media censorship that dictates sexually (in)appropriate content.

**Young Sexual Desire in American Media**

“Most of the songs that you’ll hear on the radio are about love and romance or sex, a lot of romance comes up in TV shows, things that kids see pretty early on and internalize.” (Olivia)

“I feel like even American childish romance is so hypersexualized and hyper romanticized...Very much pushing romantic relationships as normal in middle school and elementary school, which they definitely can be, but they’re taken so seriously. At least when I remember in second grade, people were already dating...you don’t even understand what the concept of love is [yet].” (Bailey)

Olivia, Bailey, and Natsume made observations about how the looming presence of sex and romance in American media created pressure to date or make sexual debuts from a young age. Early sexual indoctrination was characterized by a hyperawareness of sex in youth and aspirations to engage without necessarily understanding sex/sexuality. Olivia described being “very conscious of [sex]” and “already trying to interpret signals as romantic or not,” expressing the early desire to be desirable to their peers. Bailey was critical about their own premature eagerness to date as they recalled spending substantial amounts of time glamorizing their prospective first romantic relationship as some “huge goal” to reach. Elaborating on a “hyper focus” on romance starting in youth, they internalized the message “If you’re not dating, then you’re not desirable.” Olivia and Bailey’s comments exemplify media’s role in planting seeds of
sexual desirability before young people have had the chance to grapple with or explore what attraction, love, or sex signify between people. Natsume noted the skewed misrepresentations of relationships in which the media asserts that one cannot be happy without a boyfriend or that people in relationships are “just doing a little bit better than people who aren’t.” Similar to Bailey’s comments on the correlation between dating and desirability, Natsume distinctly remembered a period of time in her youth where her “self-esteem was very contingent” on whether other people found her attractive or desirable. These comments reveal a certain value intrinsic in desirability as a form of social capital. While Natsume now finds just as much (if not more) value in platonic or alternative connections as opposed to romantic relationships, this acknowledgement came from increasing sexual literacy with age and dialogues with others to push back against the messages she received in childhood and adolescence. The early promotion of sex and/or romance compels American youth to self-surveil and pursue sexual relationships in order to fit in with the crowd, regardless of how sexually active the crowd as a whole might be in actuality. While seeking romantic connections with other people is a normal aspect of human sociability, my interviewees point to a particular toxicity in media portrayals to maintain a social pressure to desire sex before they might be ready.

**Subdued Sexual Desire in Asian Media**

The messages that my interviewees interpreted from Asian media presented a conflicting narrative from the prevalence of sex in American media. Angela, Nina, and Natsume observed a tendency to favor sexual silences and conservative dating norms mirrored within their Asian immigrant households. Sex in the cited Asian media was implied rather than choreographed in a scene. Natsume observed that Korean dramas were “a lot less sexually explicit” as opposed to American movies in which sex scenes are commonplace. Angela noted a similar contrast in
which Asian media will “hint at” sex before cutting the scene whereas sex is “very ingrained” in
American media to conflate romantic and sexual attraction. With “much less of a sex-oriented
focus” in an Asian romance, Angela illustrated that the scenes focus more on components of
emotional reliance, friendship, or rivalry. Nina similarly observed that Korean movies were “a lot
more toned down, a lot more subtle, [and] a lot more aesthetically driven” and focused on “the
emotions.” The greater emphasis on emotionality over sex acknowledges sex as part of
relationships in relation to having children with a spouse but differs from the American
necessitation of sexual attraction in courtship. Natsume observed how less sexually explicit
Asian media contributed to not talking or thinking about sex when it came to relationships,
which was a “kind of energy” that already existed in her immigrant household. The absence of
sex in media strengthened the sense of sex as taboo. Despite this cultural awareness and
recognition of such differences in Asian media, my interviewees demonstrated that the
immersion in American schooling environments and communities prioritized the pressures to
start dating and having sex at a young age to fit in with white peer cultures. The presentation of a
contradictory relationship schema in Asian media and their immigrant households was
outweighed by American media sources and their adolescent social contexts.

Compulsory Heterosexuality and Male Pleasure

Though both mainstream Asian and American media tip toe around sex to a certain
degree, the Internet reserves channels for sexual voyeurism. With intentional silences built into
movie sex scenes to imply sexuality, Nina highlighted the extremes of sexual portrayals in both
American and Asian porn. She remembered being shocked by her first encounter with porn
having become accustomed to movie scenes depicting sex as “always silent…very passionate,
[and] slow.” Upon discovering that sex was not “a quiet endeavor,” Nina became exposed to the
intense, bordering-on-violent content in American porn. Nina found Japanese hentai\textsuperscript{22} to be similarly disturbing where the women were “unrealistically depicted” with “huge breasts,” “a tiny little waist,” and “voluptuous hips,” and the men were “power tripping so hard.” These storylines “played into the male fantasy” where a cute girl with a “bangin’ body would somehow start being penetrated by [a] kind of average-looking dude.” Fulfillment of the male fantasy through porn predicates on compulsory heterosexuality and men overpowering women. Nina also examined how these scenes perpetuated rape culture by communicating that women will “eventually end up enjoying it” after being raped multiple times. These instances demonstrate the consequences of sexual censorship in mainstream media to protect the innocence of young viewers, which then results in darker corners of the Internet hosting harmful portrayals and discourses of women catered to male pleasure in which women are constantly dominated by men and are pleasured through such dominance. The three emphases on youth, heterosexuality, and male gratification characterize the misogynistic Asian and American media landscapes which Asian American women/GNBs navigate between while their lived experiences are further complicated by racialized sexism in American society.

**Awakening to Social Political Consciousness**

“One of the people I do currently look up to is Alok Vaid-Menon. They’re a poet and activist. And I first heard about their work in one of the queer studies classes I took...And they’re just like a really cool person who speaks out against Westernized beauty standards and how this specifically targets queer people of color and gender non-conforming people” (Em)

If Kim (2001)’s Awakening to Social Political Consciousness in racial identity development is characterized by a shift in Asian Americans’ worldview to recognize that their experiences with racism are not their fault, a similar parallel can be drawn for sexual identity to

\textsuperscript{22} A genre of Japanese manga/anime with overtly sexualized characters and sexually explicit images
recognize oppressive structures of compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy. Sexually curious adolescents fill in gaps of sexual silence from their households and school curriculum, finding validation through conducting personal research and following media figures they identify with in terms of race, gender, and/or sexuality.

**Filling in the Gaps of Sex Education with Media**

“[I used] the Internet. Definitely the Internet, I googled a lot of things.” (Bailey)

With little practically useful information in the school curriculum, adolescents naturally seek out other sources for sex ed. The virtual space can host an arena for social experience to learn about sexuality without stigma either as a removed viewer or an anonymous online identity (Ross, 2005). Internet culture enabled my interviewees to immerse themselves in various media platforms to gain additional sexual insight beyond their peers and partners.

**Individual Research**

In the active consumption of sex in media, my interviewees demonstrated using online resources to increase sexual literacy in metrics of both technical knowledge surrounding sex and critical awareness around the role of sex in society. Rachel did “a bunch of research” after finding out about sex through one particular meme depicting “a banana and a fruit loop.” Alongside looking up things on her own through basic googling, Rachel’s first boyfriend acted as a more knowledgeable informant. Although she communicated that she did not want to do anything sexual with him, Rachel’s boyfriend also acted as a source of pressure to engage in sex by asserting that Rachel should demonstrate her love for him through sex. While she described the pressure from her past boyfriend as “toxic” in retrospect, Rachel’s experience highlights the culmination of not learning about consent in sex ed and peer pressures in teen dating culture. Not wanting to be clueless and being too shy to openly ask about sex, Nina satisfied her sexual curiosity by seeking out information in sources such as porn websites and graphic movie scenes,
she cited the influence of more sexually active friends. Nina used her friends as a social barometer to determine what behaviors were normal to discuss hookups and see how they interacted with their partners. By asking close friends about masturbation and other topics, she found validation in not being “the only weird one” for pleasuring herself or feeling horny. For Rachel and Nina, their research was spurred by an initial spark of curiosity but maintained by a need to acquire more extensive knowledge in their personal lives to satisfy partners or peers.

As dating was not a priority for Lucy in secondary school, her research illustrated wanting to know more about sex just to increase awareness about her own body and other people. Lucy preferred content that was more “educational based” in which someone lectured about sexual topics rather than watching performers demonstrate how sex works. Feeling like she needed “some kind of sex education,” Lucy binge-watched all of sexologist Lindsey Doe’s sexplanations videos on YouTube at some point. She initially felt “kind of overwhelmed” but ultimately grateful because she felt that she gained “a better understanding of sex” and more comfort talking about the subject. As a straight, cisgender woman, Lindsey Doe covers a breadth of content by having guests of different sexualities and identities to come on her channel to speak, and Lucy was appreciative of this approach to have people speak from their own experiences and provide options. Doe’s brand “to always stay curious” also appealed to Lucy to learn from a sex educator whose enthusiasm was “infectious” in stark contrast to the obvious avoidance in her teacher’s assigning of a chapter to read at home. These instances illustrate sexual curiosity, individual preferences as to the model or format of presented information, and particular motivations for becoming knowledgeable about sex to engage in dialogues or sexual activity.

*Online Queer and BIPOC Communities*
“I follow people that I know in real life [on Instagram]...whereas on Tumblr, it kind of feels more common to have an anonymous blog that’s dedicated to such and such thing. So I think it was easier to share about sexuality. So I definitely think that Tumblr is good for...all things queer.” (Natsume)

Some interviewees highlighted the power of online connections to be in community with other LGBTQ+ and BIPOC media figures. Tumblr was an especially salient dialogic space for Bailey, Olivia, and Natsume. Bailey described the platform as “the only place [they] could get same-sex education” where people would circulate long posts that they thought were helpful. They also made the distinction that while they had a lot of celebrity crushes, Bailey felt that they looked up to famous people on Tumblr. Olivia observed that the “vulgarity” of Tumblr and certain places on the Internet “opened up the conversation for things that [they] had not learned in sex ed that [they] could then do more research on.” Natsume sought out Tumblr blogs and feminist Instagram accounts, noting that there are “a lot of really helpful things online” today that “people are putting up from their own experiences.” She has also recently started following accounts that specialize in sex therapy to diversify her feed with “Black sex therapists, fat sex therapists,” and “people who engage in sex education that aren’t really represented in mainstream media or typical sex ed.” These accounts facilitate positive sexual identity development through engagement with inclusive online sex education that subverts racist, misogynistic assumptions about sex.

Bailey, Olivia, and Natsume all acknowledged that Tumblr and other platforms were not perfect, but they managed to provide spaces for them to explore queer sexuality. Natsume mentioned the “problematic aspects” of Tumblr initially not having a ban on adult content with sometimes “extremely unethical” posts being circulated, but she also felt that the lack of blanket bans enabled anonymous safe spaces that the censorship of other platforms disallowed and could provide information that was “a lot better than what sex ed currently [offers].” Like Natsume,
Em followed a lot of different feminist and queer accounts with helpful infographics and general posts about taking care of oneself, asking for consent, and claiming certain labels that feel comfortable at the time. They felt validated by queer internet culture and being able to learn from peers who were either their age or older “who also had qualms with how sex ed was being taught” in the American public school system. Em also read a lot of fanfiction which “helped [them] understand things.” Students explore online forums not only for the “mechanics of sex (the ‘how to’)” but also for the “intersections among sex, discourse, culture, and politics” (Alexander, 2008, p. 206). Media platforms like Tumblr can host counterdiscourse by circumventing dominant pedagogies in school sex ed curriculum through community support and the sharing of lived experiences.

Queer content proved to beneficial for Lucy as well even though she identified as straight because she felt that “being able to understand other people better [was] really important.” Lucy pointed out that “a lot of fear could come from...not knowing about something” and expressed her desire to be “a little bit more knowledgeable” to help her empathize with “someone else’s experiences.” She follows Watts The Safeword, a podcast channel that focuses on BDSM, kink relationships, and sex, and mentioned that they hosted “at least two people of color recently on their content to talk about Asians and...the sex industry” which she found “super fascinating.” Following our conversation, Lucy sent me episode 51 on “Race and Representation in Kink” in which Preston Wex talks extensively about the racism he has faced in the kink community and the specific struggles Asian Americans face with normalized fetish on dating apps and other media platforms. Lucy demonstrated an eagerness to learn about the sexual experiences of others and to share her findings with others like myself. Online communities foster awakenings to social political consciousness through the congregation of people with shared experiences around

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23 Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism
their identities and the seeking out of “individuals with similar social political philosophy” (Kim, 2001, p. 78). These spaces resist the sexual silences common in the family and schooling contexts through open dialogues around sex, sexuality, and identity to develop sexual literacy. However, the catch is that adolescents have to actively seek out these spaces and, as some of my interviewees indicated, not every corner of the Internet is safe and positive.

**Redirection to an Asian American Consciousness**

“In more recent years...starting around high school, I started actively seeking out media...with Asian representation and like Asian cultures that I felt were represented well” (Em)

Kim (2001)’s Redirection to Asian American Consciousness marks a stage in racial identification to affiliate more closely with other Asian Americans as opposed to other racial minorities in general. Sexual identity development entails seeking out Asian media figures or peers who model portrayals of sex and relationships Asian Americans can identify with by recognizing the particular racializations and sexualizations Asian Americans face. Finding resonances with Asian American sexuality as a bicultural, fluid, and intersectional experience sparks distinct resistance to the ways in which white cishetero patriarchy arrests Asian Americans as (un)desirable sexual beings.

**Piecemeal Representation**

“Even now I think I’m drawn to Asian media in addition to American media. So I think growing up, I watched a lot of Asian TV shows, Asian movies, Asian television programs. And I think in that sense I did see a lot of Asians on screen. But in terms of Asian American representation, I would say it was really little to none.” (Angela)

With the inability to identify with white media figures in American media racially and the inability to identify with Asian media figures in Asian media culturally, my interviewees looked for pieces of themselves in the media they consumed. Em elaborated on how their subjectivity as a mixed-race person complicated their self-view by not fitting into the standards of neither
Western countries nor East Asian countries which made them “feel like [they] didn’t really belong anywhere for a long time.” The inability to see the whole self culminates in a mismatched identity or Asian Americans. Natsume described the “isolating” experience of seeing herself partially represented in anime/manga with the disconnect of seeing “Japanese media of Japanese people in Japan” as the portrayals did not encapsulate the Asian American experience or the Asian diaspora. In terms of sexuality, queer representation “was often white” and Asian media was “very heteronormative,” so she “felt at a crossroads,” finding parts of herself in various media artifacts as “very much like piecemeal representation from different things.” In the Redirection to an Asian American Consciousness for racial-sexual identity, I will consider Asian representation in American media, Asian media, and Asian American media and the impacts of (not) seeing the self in these sources.

**Asians in American Media**

“It’s sad that I have to think about it” (Olivia trying to recall whether they looked up to any Asian media figures when they were young)

When asking my interviewees in what capacities they saw Asians in mainstream American media growing up, the responses unsurprisingly reflected either a complete lack of representation or only stereotype-confirming images. Despite the fact that Asian Americans are American, the lack of authentic representation in mainstream media functions to perpetuate foreignness and assert that Asians do not belong in American society. Although the “racial and political implications” in these portrayals of Asian Americans might not, as Bailey put it, “sink in” until later on in adulthood, the inability to identify with media figures impacted my interviewees’ early sense of (or separation from) self.

Interview responses reflected the persistence of certain stereotypes around Asians in American media. Bailey barely saw Asians in the media growing up “besides that one girl on
They talked about how Asian women on screen like Lucy Liu were “seriously hypersexualized” and observed two distinct stereotypes that were discussed in their Asian American pop culture class. Bailey observed how the lotus blossom stereotype where women were “very submissive or...hyper feminized” and the dragon lady stereotype where women were “sexy but violent and dangerous” have “evolved” into the “nerdy Asian girl” as seen on Glee or Pitch Perfect. Similarly, Nina recalled seeing the “very nerdy, type A student,” “a dumb Asian...that was...super airheaded,” or a “sexual temptress of an Asian woman.” Lucy mentioned “the nerdy Asian character” as well. Nina and Lucy also noted the normalization of these portrayals. Nina “didn’t even question” representations like Cho Chang from Harry Potter in her youth because she “wanted to assimilate and fit into American culture so badly” to accept whatever portrayals American media had to offer, but she wished she had “pushed back a little bit” on the stereotypes “forced onto Asian students.” Lucy mirrored some of this sentiment and was unsure as to whether she felt image dysphoria because “that’s just how it was” in terms of “not being able to see people like [her] on screen.” These responses reflect normalized invisibility and stereotype hypervisibility of Asian women in American media.

In addition to the nerdy Asian girl, interviewees described other invisibilizing portrayals in media. Rachel detailed a recent video game release of a “half Chinese character” who “looks like a basic white girl with pink hair” and “blue eyes.” She felt that “what they call their Asian representation” was just a money grab without “actual effort put into it” as a tactic “to sell more.” Rachel captured the exploitative tendencies to market tokenized and inaccurate representations to marginalized groups hungry for representation in media. The whitewashing where a supposedly Asian character “looks very white” and “super skinny” sends the message that Asian representations are only welcome if they fit into narrow Eurocentric beauty standards.
Having a physical build that conforms to the conventionally attractive metrics of slimness and petiteness heightens sexual desirability for the white patriarchal male gaze (Besana et al., 2019). For my interviewees, Asian women in mainstream American media only perpetuated invisibility and an estrangement of self through one-dimensional caricatures.

**Asians in Asian Media**

“I think [Japanese] culture around dating and romance is very different than in the U.S. And even pretty different from like Chinese or Vietnamese, which is where my family is from.” (Olivia)

Seeking out Asian visibility through consuming media produced by Asian countries had a cultural disconnect for my interviewees. Bailey grew up watching Chinese dramas with their family which they described as “so super cheesy and misogynistic but in the way that Korean dramas are misogynistic” with certain patriarchal tropes such as the woman being “an object to be won but she’s cute and tiny and perky.” Now, they still watch some Chinese dramas “over [their] sister’s shoulder” to find that even in a C-drama where the woman is “a CEO, super smart, and perfect in every way,” she “still needs a man.” In comparison, Bailey felt that American media had a little more complexity and less hesitancy to “explore different identities or intersecting identities.” Nina observed that while women in Korean media were not portrayed as “a sexual temptress,” they instead took on the opposite extreme as an “innocent, just plain Jane girl...damsel in distress” who “for some reason” still managed to pick up “a really hot, rich, handsome CEO.” Women in Asian media for Bailey and Nina were limited to the role of the pretty love interest. Depictions in Asian media reflect traditional gender roles in which women are expected to “be submissive” and defer to their roles as “daughters, wives, and eventually mothers” to preserve the family structure (Durell et al., 2007, p. 303). While my interviewees
may be able to racially identify with the Asian women on screen, the context entrenches the representations with culturally specific gender expectations.

While Em and Rachel had positive things to say about queer Asian shows, they also had their criticisms about the emphasis on themes of possession and jealousy. Em appreciated how more Asian shows like *The Untamed* have been made increasingly available on streaming platforms like Netflix. They felt that despite Chinese censorship laws and the prohibition of “explicit romance or sex,” *The Untamed* still went to “great lengths” to portray a queer relationship even if the explicit queerness from the source material was “definitely something that was eliminated.” Em felt that possessive relationships in Asian media were “typically viewed as...having a very deep emotional connection” and “oftentimes viewed in a very positive light.” Clear communication and “healthy ways to deal with jealousy” are largely absent. Rachel recently watched a gay Filipino drama about “two guys that start dating during COVID” who meet through video games and thought it was “cute” but not very good because of constant arguments and jealousy. She observed that “Filipino dramas deal a lot with adultery” and “a lot [with] jealousy.” Both Em and Rachel felt that this theme of jealousy might similarly occur in American media due to a lack of conversations about healthy relationships. Whether my interviewees sought out racial identification or racial-sexual identification through Asian media, the consumed content had limited potential for fulfillment as content curated for Asian viewers, not Asian American.

*Asians in Asian American Media*

“Because I know there are these experiences that I can’t explain and feel too tired to explain. Hopefully, hopefully there’ll be more Asian media. Then I can just show them a movie and they’ll be educated.” (Rachel)
Living in an era of increasing Asian American representation, my interviewees had hesitant celebrations about recent releases in the romance genre such as *Crazy Rich Asians, To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before, The Half of It,* and *Always Be My Maybe.* Each individual had different critiques or praises for these films. Angela recognized the increase in Asian American representation in recent years while highlighting that continuing to work on Asian representation not only on screen but also “in the writing rooms” is an area that still has room for growth. This point is evident when my interviewees indicate feeling more seen by some Asian American content and not others depending on their personal positionality as viewers.

As a media artifact that symbolizes Asian centrality in mainstream American media, responses to *Crazy Rich Asians* are worth examining first. After growing up with so little representation and normalized Asian in/visibility, some representation proved to be better than none at all. Lucy thought that the full-Asian cast in *Crazy Rich Asians* was “really fun to watch” while also acknowledging the “issues of colorism” she had read about in critiques after. The casting of Nick Young, a half-white actor, embodies the elevation of lighter skin in the Asian community as more attractive and high class (Besana et al., 2019). Lucy thought “great points” were made while at the same time feeling that the movie was “a step in the right direction.” While Natsume asserted that she was not “blown away” by the story and recognized the movie as “not without its flaws,” she described certain feelings of being overwhelmed emotionally from never having seen so many Asians on the American screen and crying “during the whole thing.” Although Em could not really relate to the characters, they recalled feeling excitement when *Crazy Rich Asians* came out. Rachel similarly thought it was nice to see Asians on screen but was unsure if she saw herself represented in the film when she is not “a crazy rich Asian.” While
interviewees had their reservations about the blockbuster romantic comedy, the high Asian
visibility of *Crazy Rich Asians* had an undeniable emotional impact for them.

Rachel and Nina had concerns about how Asian Americans might be culturally
misrepresented by Lara Jean’s love story in *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*. Rachel recalled a
sequence in *To All the Boys* when the white male lead is “trying to understand [the Asian female
lead’s] culture,” but that part “just [felt] sad” to her, knowing that there are these experiences that
are too “exhausting” for her to explain to her white boyfriend as he will never fully understand
her Asian side. Even so, Rachel hopes that there will be more Asian media to alleviate Asian
emotional labor and function as an educational tool for non-Asians even if they cannot fully
empathize with it. Nina felt that *To All the Boys* did an “okay job” in its depictions but observed
how the character of Lara Jean was “still very Americanized” and “living in a very American
household.” Nina contrasted how her “Chinese friend’s house” looks and smells completely
different on the inside than the “homes of [her] white friends.” While Nina appreciated seeing an
Asian female protagonist, she simultaneously felt misrepresented by the Asian girl with a white
father in a white house that sometimes practices Korean traditions.

*The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* garnered more praise from my interviewees.

Lucy loved seeing an Asian and queer protagonist in *The Half of It* who did not match
“stereotypical beauty standards.” Rachel thought “the religious aspect” with one of the last
scenes being in the church and the fact that “neither [love interest] end[s] up with the girl” were
interesting creative directions. She also made note of the part where the white male lead was
“getting to explore [the protagonist’s] Asian side, learning about her culture.” These aspects
stood out to Rachel in her lived experience as a Christian, queer Asian American woman. Rachel
was hesitant to “critique representation too much,” knowing that there are expectations for
representation to be “perfect.” Nina “actually really, really enjoyed” *The Half of It* and felt that it had a “somewhat better depiction” but pointed out how Ellie Chu was still doing other people’s homework and “being that smart Asian kid.” Though “a better job,” Nina thought there were still improvements to be made in encompassing the “American Asian lifestyle without being racist.” Olivia found that they could relate to *Always Be My Maybe*, the only movie they could think of with two Asian leads in a romance movie, as “another second generation immigrant.” My interviewees expressed a shared combination of mixed feelings about Asian American representation with an overall hopeful undertone for the future to see themselves represented in multifaceted and authentic ways not only for the Asian American community but also for non-Asians to see.

**Media Images and Relationships**

“I would much rather have someone be like ‘Yeah, I don’t get what it’s like to grow up Asian American. Like I’m sure it’s tough, but I just like you for you. I just want to hang out because I think you’re a cool person.’ Not because ‘You remind me of this anime girl or you look like a Kpop star.’” (Nina)

With such eagerness in the modern era for news articles to blame degradable behaviors on “the media,” making assertions such as violent video games fostering aggression in young boys, the impact of media images on real-life is an essential connection to make. For Asian American women, media portrayals have traditionally perpetuated the same stereotypes circling exoticism and submissiveness which my interviewees indicate result in the want to be (un)seen and (un)desirable. These representations have precipitated into unwanted expectations from non-Asian men, making Asian American women uncomfortable with a desire to be unseen and undesirable as lotus blossoms, dragon ladies, and nerdy girls and instead seen and desirable for their authentic, nuanced selves. Rachel described her wariness when a white guy gives her a compliment because she then has to wonder if he likes her or is “just..into Asians” and has some
sort of “preconceived notion” about her. She illustrated an example of a half-white guy who she is “cautiously friends with” who has an Asian fetish but “of course wouldn't describe it like that.” While she enjoyed having philosophy conversations with him, his fixation on an idea of romance with “usually an Asian person” made Rachel feel “bummed out” with not knowing what his “true feelings” were. Rachel’s uneasiness exemplifies the all-too-common symptoms of being a victim of fetishization to suspect interpersonal relationships as disingenuous.

Stereotypes about Asian women create a constant uphill battle for Asian American women in prospective relationships. Bailey conveyed that Asian American women “have to get used to being sexualized from a young age.” Although they have not personally been on dating sites where they believe Asian fetishism is “most prevalent,” they have “swiped on [their Asian] friends’ Tinders” and recalled “the shit they get.” Bailey did not think that “the idea that Asian women can be gay is something that crosses most [(cis) men’s] minds” as they see Asian women as “objects for [them] to hit on.” Nina also mentioned dating apps as being especially terrible as guys will “try to be subtle” about their Asian fetish and “start telling [her] about [her] own culture” to try to gain proximity by showing an affinity for Korean food, music, and culture. Someone asserted to Nina that they were Asian in their “past life.” She felt that people can appreciate Asian culture without pretending as though they are Asian and projecting images of innocent anime girls onto her. The idea of “taking away someone’s innocence or having ownership over someone’s innocence” as an appealing pursuit for men has always made Nina very uncomfortable. Natsume remarked that a white cis het man finding her attractive is “contingent on resigning [herself] to being fetishized.” Angela has “come to kind of feel sorry” for these men because they are drawn to a “stereotype of what an Asian woman represents” and has learned “not to take it personally.” Regardless of what coping mechanisms my interviewees
use in response to fetish from evasion to humor, most of them recognized being fetishized as a normalized part in the lived experience of being an Asian American woman or gender non-binary person.

Summary

This chapter has considered various media platforms as modes to increase sexual literacy as my interviewees moved between social political and Asian American consciousness in both their active and passive media consumption. Certain themes were found to be consistent across both American and Asian media content such as youthfulness, heterosexuality, male pleasure, and possessiveness, but the tactics of representation were culturally specific to gender expectations. Piecemeal representation was significant for my interviewees to seek out different components of themselves in regards to their race, gender, sexuality, and culture in media as these aspects rarely intersected as nuanced, Asian American portrayals. While media can act as an accessible sex educator, my interviewees described the normalization of Asian American sexuality and how it manifested in their interpersonal relationships. In the next chapter, I will use a Critical Discourse Analysis to draw connections between family, schooling, and media to summarize the most salient messages in the development of Asian American sexual literacies.
Chapter Six: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Family, Schooling, and Media

In the last three data chapters, I have reported findings in the spheres of family, schooling, and media while following and adapting Kim (2001)’s Asian American Identity Development framework to integrate sexual identity. This analysis chapter will interrogate power and normativity in race, gender, and sexuality through a critical lens in conversation with the final stage of AAID: Incorporation. I will break down how the prominent discourse themes I coded for manifest in each sphere and the ways in which these sexual messages converge or diverge. Here, I will synthesize the data and put the findings in conversation with each other to elaborate on Asian American sexual literacies and sexual agency.

Incorporation

Incorporation is characterized by “confidence in one’s own Asian American Identity” which enables Asian Americans to interact and relate to people in general without losing their sense of self (Kim, 2001, p. 80). Racial identity is blended with other social identities as Asian Americans recognize that while race is an important aspect of their sense of self, race is not the only social identity of importance. When incorporating gender identity and sexuality, adolescents, therefore, become comfortable with themselves not only as sexual beings but also as racialized sexual beings. Such incorporation lends itself well to parsing out the sexual socializations received from different reference groups (family members, white people, queer communities, Asian Americans, etc.) and how Asian American individuals have stitched these different influences onto their sexual expressions and identities.

Sexual Silence

Sexual silence was consistently present in the Asian immigrant household, sex education curriculum, and censored media. Silence can manifest in different forms such as a lack of open,
verbal discourse, deliberate silences built into presented curriculum or broadcasted media, secret relationships, and closeted sexuality, to name a few examples. These silences result in perpetual silences in spaces and between people in the form of surveillance as individuals self-surveil their own behavior and that of others. Yet, sexual knowledge is still transmitted between generations, so the normativity around sexual silence naturally constructs alternative spaces for sexual dialogues to either define parameters around appropriateness (i.e. gossiping about the sexual activity of other people) or subvert norms (i.e. open discourse on liberal arts college campuses or in online platforms).

**Within the Asian Household**

The thread of sexual silence in Asian households was consistent with previous literature. Rachel indicated an understanding of her parents’ feelings surrounding sex from observing mostly silence supplemented by prohibitive attitudes. The clarification that her family is not “an open sex-positive family” speaks volumes as to how Rachel might characterize a sex-positive family as one that openly talks about sexual topics or at least does not judge harshly about sexual activity as she feared silent judgement or lectures from her mother. A cultural taboo around sex still persists for more traditionalist Asian parents who consider sex to be an inappropriate topic of conversation and condemn premarital sex (Kim & Ward, 2007). Natsume reported less explicit shame around sex in her household, but her parents’ consistent silence still communicated that sex is not something to be talked about. The inclusion of phrases such as “I guess” and “I feel” in Rachel’s and Natsume’s comments also illuminate that their families might not have ever explicitly stated that sex was not to be discussed, but they nonetheless picked up cues from the lack of dialogue in their homes (and being told to look away during movie sex scenes) to avoid sex as a conversation topic. While “each Asian culture’s degree of openness surrounding sexual
“discourse” might vary, sexuality expressions outside of marriage are generally considered highly inappropriate as part of collectivist and patriarchal structures (Okazaki, 2002, p. 34). Restrained sexuality maintains the interdependent social order which relies on the primacy of family over individual desires.

As such, my interviewees naturally developed strategies of silence for themselves to hide relationships, sexual healthcare, or queer identities from their parents’ knowledge to avoid conflict. While some interviewees reported the inevitability of their parents finding out about their middle and high school relationships from living in the same household, many reported concealing relationships for various reasons. Bisexual participants carried out intentional silences to pass as straight in their parents’ eyes. While Natsume, Olivia, and Rachel expressed a “probably would be fine” mentality if they were to come out to their parents, Bailey had never talked to their parents about queer relationships due to apparent homophobia. None of them seemed to anticipate touching the topic anytime soon. LGBTQ+ Asian Americans find it difficult to express their full identities to their families because of “conservative or traditional family culture” (Kuo et al., 2020, p. 10). Homosexuality is not accepted in most Asian cultures as it threatens the family system by rejecting gender roles (Durell et al., 2007). Even for Em who had the most progressive mother, they also pointed to intergenerational discrepancies in sexuality literacy and described LGBTQ+ discussions as a “headache.” Some interviewees recalled discreet sexual activity to still seek out the healthcare they needed while circumventing conversations of approval with their parents. Bailey acquired birth control “under the table,” knowing that it would be too late for their mother to rip the Nexplanon out of their arm. So, parents are not the only ones perpetuating sexual silence in the Asian home as their daughters respond with silences.
These examples demonstrate how parents act as their children’s “earliest socializing agents” and ground their understanding of sexuality through a combination of silences and attitudes which in turn influence their children’s sexual decision making to preserve and repeat silences (Kim & Ward, 2007, p. 23). Asian parents do not favor directly providing sexual facts but rather indirect modes to make their values clear which their children are sensitive to. Sexual silences were also reinforced by Asian communities and extended family as adults embedded judgement in gossip about other community members. Angela described her mother’s horror stories as a “passive aggressive” method to deter sexual activity. Spreading gossip served as additional means to promote parents’ prohibitive attitudes and children’s strategies of silence to avoid being the subject of gossip. Sexual silences in the Asian household are characterized by dialogue evasion, discretion, and shame.

**Within the Predominantly White High School**

In contrast to the expectation of sex ed teachers giving students “the talk,” schools demonstrate that sexual silence is not a phenomenon exclusive to the Asian household. Asian immigrant parents often expect schools to cover sex education, but they have little knowledge about the covered content (Lee et al., 2012). The curriculum is not neutral in its prioritization of prevention over sexual health. Sexual silences in my interviewees’ predominantly white high schools presented as gaps in the sex ed curriculum and in peer gossip cultures. These silences preserve hegemonic discourses in gender roles and sexuality. Asian American students have to make sense of these assumptions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality which may be contradictory to that of their Asian heritage while adapting to assimilate into white peer cultures (Hahm et al., 2006). The sexual silences in the home and the school necessitate the ability for adolescents to switch between two distinct cultural frames in Asian American sexual literacies.
Deliberate silences in the curriculum appear as intentionally leaving out information about non-normative relationships through a Western clinical paradigm. Silences deter talking openly about sex and create “damaging norms about sex and gender” that limit sexual possibilities (Alexander, 2007, p. 177). Banking methodology disallows critical thinking on sex and dialogic spaces, strengthening the assumption that all bodies fall under two possibilities of white cis heterosexual man or woman. The submersion of critical awareness and lack of application to students’ concrete realities maintains a “culture of silence” in sex ed curriculum (Freire et al., 1993, p. 30). Abstinence-only agendas fail to provide students with the tools necessary to perceive their social and sexual realities as well as the contradictions within them. Responses from my participants demonstrate the harms of a singular perspective in sex education curriculum, leaving students unprepared to communicate in relationships and care for their sexual health and well-being as a whole. Instead, the curriculum functions to instill fear in adolescents about their changing bodies, estrange sex from the self, and denounce alternative forms of sexual expression. Preventionist sex ed curriculum teaches sexual silence by silencing students, and students in turn self-silence out of habit.

Adult silence to avoid sexual topics only contributed to the lack of safe spaces for open sex talk, which the students themselves perpetuated. Lucy observed that her psychology of sex reading felt “very purposefully glazed over” as if her teacher was not allowed to talk about it in class, indicating a degree of school censorship in sex ed curriculum. Assigning the chapter as an at-home assignment without follow-up symbolizes a literal removal of sex and sexual dialogues from the classroom space itself. Even discussions of sex within the classroom are kept under wraps as Rachel observed that her teacher asked a student to “close the blinds,” communicating that sex is not to be talked about openly. Silences between educators and students translated into
silences between students to perpetuate secrecy and shame in dating/hookup culture in order to avoid being the subject of peer gossip. My interviewees illustrated the existence of a double standard in the policing of female students’ bodies. Young girls are especially taught that they are supposed to be silent about sex and “keep a lid on the sexual desire of boys” while silencing their own sexual feelings and desires (Chou, 2012, p. 86). Olivia’s principal slut-shamed girls for their dress, and Nina feared being labeled as a slut by her peers. Asian American students using whites as a reference group experience conflict as they simultaneously receive messages to suppress their sexual desires while being stereotyped as sexually available objects in media. Sexual silences in schools are characterized by fear, shame, and indoctrination.

**Within Media**

While media seems to be the most overtly sexual literacy sphere when compared with family and schooling, some censorship tactics are present as well to define what content is appropriate for younger viewers. Nina’s expectation for sex to be “a quiet endeavor” based on movie scenes was shattered upon encountering porn. Sexual silence in media discourses cannot be measured by simply making note of whether on-screen characters talk about sex but rather looking at how these personas interact with each other in relationships. These interactions exhibit that sexual silences in media are gendered in the sense that female sexuality is suppressed for narratives of male dominance. The observations Nina made about the ways in which women are treated in porn reflect discourses that normalize misogyny and gender-based violence against women. Exhibiting rape culture silences the voice of those affected by such violence by normalizing the brutality of their experiences and “the lack of accountability imposed upon perpetrators” (Buiten, 2007, p. 121). Sexual stereotypes establish normative behaviors when women on-screen are portrayed as mere objects for a male partner’s pleasure (Ward et al., 2018).
Nina’s commentary on Japanese hentai points to a cross cultural similarity between American and Asian porn that preserves and perpetuates discourses of cis heteropatriarchy. The lack of cultural dissonance on this aspect confirms for Asian American women and gender non-binary people that female pleasure is insignificant unless it increases male pleasure. Silence manifests in the media to only address or display sexual pleasure in normative, gendered ways. To make matters worse, sexual silences in media are racialized in addition to being gendered, which I will explore further in the next section.

**Intergenerational Sexual Illiteracy**

My use of the term sexual illiteracy borrows from Alexander to reveal how people are in “comparably disempowered positions” in terms of being able (or unable) to “name their own bodies, their experiences, their relationships, their connections through relationships and intimacies to the larger social order” (Alexander, 2008, p. 63). Rather than perpetuating deficit language around certain groups, I point to how sexual illiteracy is an intergenerational, intercultural, and international issue as patterns in sexual discomfort occur across cultures in both Asian and white societies. This section will cover how different contexts discourage sexual literacy such as Asian mothers passing on period shame to their daughters, educators teaching fear in sex ed curriculum to students, and repetitive tropes in media preserving patriarchy and heteronormativity. These modes of sexual communication transmit not only sexual silences but also misinformation to fill these silences, resulting in intergenerational sexual illiteracy.

**Between Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters**

For my interviewees, their mothers were prominent socializing agents during puberty. My interviewees indicated their fathers’ low involvement in family sex education and reliance on their mothers, particularly for menstrual talks. Menstruation was one of the few sexual topics that
Asian mothers did feel compelled to prepare their daughters for in practical and discreet ways.\textsuperscript{24} Nina identified a burden that women carry and pass on to their daughters and their granddaughters to conceal their periods and internalize their suffering. The intergenerational gender strategy presented as one of “silent suppression” over vocal expression (Nemoto, 2006, p. 46). Nina described feeling dread and shame when her first period came and not wanting to “become a woman,” but her mother eventually found out through her underwear. The response to hide the blood reflects embedded shame and individual responsibility for menstruators in traditional Asian cultures to “manage it” by themselves. Bailey’s mother believed in a “Chinese old wise tale” about period health and judged their friends’ early periods, but also showed excitement about her daughter’s menarche. Although Chinese society has undergone a variety of social changes, women may still adopt cultural misconceptions and stigma about menstruation from their elders (Yeung et al., 2005). Natsume did not think her menarche felt “super taboo” while Angela described it as “so embarrassing.” While the degree of shame and preparedness around their periods varied, my participants demonstrated an underlying thread of discretion as their mothers provided bare minimum overviews for using menstrual products but no extensive discussions about the role of periods in their lived experience. Menarche embodied particular intergenerational persistences of shame, discomfort, and embarrassment associated with a natural feminine process. The emphasis on secrecy and hygiene paints menstruation as negative and inappropriate for open discourse.

The consequences of internalizing silence and shame bled into how some Asian mothers passed on intergenerational misinformation in their daughters’ sexual socialization. Omission of substantial information in their own sexual histories contributed to my interviewees being hesitant to share aspects of their sexual experiences. Nina indicated that she might have been

\textsuperscript{24} Literature on menstrual attitudes in Asian/Asian American cultures is sparse and may warrant future research.
more comfortable discussing sexual topics with her parents if they had been more open about their own adolescent experiences, but her mother’s default response was to shut down the dialogue. For the most part, my interviewees were so accustomed to sexual silences that when their parents did provide insight as to their sexual experiences, they were unsure how to respond to the novel information. Rachel was surprised to learn that her mother had gone through an abortion before marrying her father, oblivious to this particular chapter in her mother’s sexual history. Her mother’s secrecy reflects her sexual socialization in Filipino culture and the influence of Catholicism to scorn premarital sex, contraceptive use, and abortion (Okazaki, 2002). Her practice of Filipino Catholic conservatism translated into prohibiting Rachel from dating too young or having sex before marriage even if there were inconsistencies in her own sexual history. While diagnosing the exact reasons for this behavior is difficult, Rachel acknowledged that her mother’s “standards of bad things” reflected divergent cultural expectations and sexual socializations. Gaps created by intergenerational and intercultural distance demonstrate obstacles for sexual dialogues between Asian mothers and their Asian American daughters.

Intergenerational sexual illiteracy also resulted in my interviewees having little reliance on or faith in their parents to give proper sex education or advice. Many touched on intergenerational resistance in sexual debuts with wanting to engage in American dating culture against their parents’ wishes and sought out other sources such as peers or online platforms to gain sexual literacy. The recognition that the expectations and pressures in their American dating landscapes diverged from that of their parents compelled them to uphold sexual silences in their Asian households. Not wanting to be judged by their Asian mothers, some interviewees opted to continue the practice of secrecy about their own relationships. The Asian American daughters
inherited sexual secrecy and discomfort from their mothers, who inherited these instincts from their mothers.

**Between Educators and Students**

Asian American women and gender non-binary people not only grapple with the intergenerational sexual illiteracy passed down by their Asian elders but also the sexual misinformation circulated by their American educators and peers at school. As I discussed earlier with sexual silence in the predominantly white school, open and honest sexual dialogues are not encouraged in these institutions either. Rachel reflected on how she did not even consider emotional well-being as a component that could be possibly incorporated into sex ed curriculum as she poignantly observed how intergenerational sexual illiteracy would function as a major inhibitor for her Catholic school teachers who also had never “done anything outside of marriage” and would be “lost because of their deficient sex ed.” The only forms of sexual literacy that students can consequently learn from are what sexual literacies were available to their sex ed teachers. Banking education exacerbates this issue as the inherent hierarchical dynamic positions teachers as all-knowing experts and students as clueless, empty vessels. As Rachel’s comments illustrate, this relationship inhibits the nurturing of sexual literacies as the teachers themselves lack the necessary tools to facilitate discussions on sexuality, emotional well-being, and health, having been taught by elders who also lacked these tools. When dealing with the “highly personal material” of sex and sexuality, students and instructors should explore the complicated subject matter together as co-learners (Alexander, 2008, p. 180). Without this collaboration to disrupt cycles of intergenerational sexual illiteracy, the potential of sex ed is limited to reproducing dominant pedagogies.
Perhaps, the biggest issue lies in that school sex educators feel obligated to deliver sex education but are largely uncomfortable and unenthusiastic. Many of my interviewees described not feeling as though their teachers were very knowledgeable about sex or prepared to answer student questions. Intergenerational sexual illiteracy perpetuates itself without interruption because the onus often falls on the students to first recognize the ways in which their sex ed is failing them while advocating for a better curriculum that has not been envisioned before. Olivia’s experiences teaching queer sex education to freshmen classes because their health teachers did not know enough to teach about LGBTQ+ identities demonstrate a burden that marginalized students carry to fight for their own visibility in the curriculum. This instance represents both a disruption in the cycle of intergenerational sexual illiteracy when students are empowered to actively participate in sex ed and a continuation of educators circumventing the process of improving their own sexual literacy. The necessity of the oppressed naming their oppression marks a pedagogical necessity in order to “imagine alternative subject positions and divergent social designs” (Freire et al., 1993, p. 24). However, if the oppressed take up the practices of the oppressor, in this case being sexual illiteracy, students will inevitably maintain the status quo through sexual silence and shame across generations and oppress others.

**Between On-Screen Characters and Audiences**

While elders are the agents passing on intergenerational sexual illiteracy in family and schooling contexts, audiences do not have personal, real-life relationships with the characters they observe on screen. Rather, mass media can act as a sexual “super peer” or substitute source of information for young people to model sexual behavior from (Brown et al., 2005, p. 421). Olivia noted how younger people identify with the characters they see in TV shows and cartoons to “use what they have,” being “mostly white characters, to build up identity.” Yet, media is not
an unbiased informant as representations of sexual behavior carry misinformation as well. Bailey made observations about how media pushes young romantic relationships as normal when elementary school viewers might not even understand the implications in the media discourses being fed to them. The sexual scripts presented in media create a heightened consciousness in adolescents’ awareness of sex and relationships. Many interviewees recalled being fed false or misleading ideas about sex or romance in media that shaped their own desires and behaviors to enter relationships or become sexually active. With each activation of a particular schema, that way of viewing the world becomes more readily accessible and valid for viewers (Ward & Friedman, 2006). Although schemas can adapt to accommodate new information, repetitive tropes communicate certain norms about sexual behavior, and as Olivia noted, these norms are typically modeled by white actors.

The intergenerational component in media illiteracy is also cyclical as content producers and consumers struggle to critique the messages they have been indoctrinated with. Asian American women and GNBs must simultaneously consume hypersexualized messages of youth, women, and Asian women all at once. While the role of media as a super peer can facilitate acculturation to learn about American dating expectations, the lack of nuanced Asian representation normalizes particular stereotype-confirming portrayals, affecting how Asian American women and GNBs view themselves and their relationship to others. The consumed media images construct and define “who Asian Americans are supposed to be” (Chou, 2012, p. 71). Lucy and Nina described how they did not question stereotypical portrayals of Asian women when they were younger because they perceived these representations to be normal. Asian American women adopting distorted images of themselves is “a by-product of pervasive hegemony, a white racial framing” (Chou, 2012, p. 90). Bailey consistently saw and recognized
the nerdy Asian girl character as a pattern but did not unpack the political implications of the trope until they were older. So, even though young Asian American viewers may not have the critical literacy tools to name their discomfort with solely seeing themselves represented in this capacity, they develop a certain awareness of these portrayals’ existence from a young age and regulate their behavior accordingly. Sexual illiteracy in media for Asian American women materializes as an inability to name themselves as sexual beings without buying into generational scripts that hypersexualize them.

**Reliance on Media as a Sex Educator**

Given the reluctance to provide accurate and extensive sex education in the Asian household and American school setting, adolescents looking to media as a seemingly neutral sex educator is unsurprising. But my research has shown that adolescents are not the only ones relying on media to get points about sex across to young people as family members and teachers use different media artifacts in attempts to develop (or impede) sexual literacy. My interviewees reported Asian mothers using puberty books as an educational method and sex ed teachers using informational text as part of scare tactics to discourage sexual activity. In addition, they also conducted their own personal research and engaged with online communities when their home and school contexts failed to satisfy their sexual curiosities.

**Media as a Subtle Educator**

Asian parents may favor specific types of media as a subtle educator in which verbal sexual silence can be maintained while Asian mothers can still pass on sexual knowledge to their daughters via books. Four of my interviewees reported receiving puberty books from their Asian mothers. But similar to how Asian parents might assume reliability in school sex education, the books they provide are not necessarily neutral either with implicit biases built in. The use of
American puberty books exemplifies a literal bringing in of non-Asian artifacts as educational tools. These books convey heteronormative American ideas of girlhood in which desire centers on compulsory heterosexuality and female purity or “a gendered pedagogy of consumption rather than any lessons about empowerment or U.S. history” (Marshall, 2009, p. 95). Furthermore, the American Girl series may at first glance seem relatively diverse, but the representations are stereotype-confirming and often construct nonwhite characters as perpetually foreign and “never mix and blend [cultural heritage] with American style and objects” (Acosta-Alzuru & Lester Roushanzamir, 2003, p. 57). American Girl essentializes nonwhite characters while continuing to recenter white stories in hierarchical social relations to communicate the American norm. The employment of American Girl and other puberty books by Asian mothers demonstrates the seeping into and incorporation of white mainstream sex education into the Asian immigrant household. Reliance on locally available media enables the early entry of Asian in/visibility even within the confines of the Asian home.

**Media as a Scary Educator**

The use of media in schools is anything but subtle as informational video, pop culture references, graphics, and textbooks are deployed as deliberate scare tactics. Abstinence-only textbooks emphasize marriage unions only between cisgender men/women while omitting information related to contraception to “limit education and knowledge about sex and sexuality” (Alexander, 2008, p. 3). Natsume’s sex education day was spent filling in STD symptoms on a worksheet based on a textbook reading. Em recalled graphic images of STIs. Angela reported an odd fixation on pregnancy. These media artifacts aim to be demonstrative of all the “bad things” that will happen if teenagers have sex. The clips from *16 and Pregnant* that Rachel watched have little practical value in “an anti-teen childbearing campaign” other than to scare students into not
throwing their lives away because of unplanned pregnancies (Kearney & Levine, 2015, p. 3626). Depicting the difficulties of being a teen mom with strained relationships and potential health problems intend to provide motivation for avoiding premarital sex. Exposing teenagers to these media pieces hopes to mitigate negative consequences at the expense of potential positive outcomes toward sexual agency. These formats rely on fear appeals to uphold stigma around sex and sexuality rather than stimulating dialogue and critical literacies.

**Media as a Straightforward Educator**

While the media landscape more holistically is not necessarily the most accurate sex educator (as demonstrated by Nina’s experiences with porn), it can act as a more straightforward one in comparison to the subtleness of the puberty book or the fearfulness of STI warts. Whether my interviewees sought out the how-to’s of sex, queer communities, or social critiques, their online findings tended to be more honest than what they received from their parents or school teachers. The open market of the Internet served as a place for unfiltered sex education. As Olivia discussed with the “vulgarity” on Tumblr, the de-emphasis on prim and proper depictions of sex proved to be helpful for my interviewees to learn about sex without judgement from adults. Olivia, Natsume, Em, and Bailey all found comfort and affirmations in online queer communities. The “counterpublic spaces for marginalized millennial communities and progressives” have found a home in Tumblr and similar platforms (Mccracken, 2017, p. 151). Users speak from their own lived experiences and shared popular discourses, topics ranging from antiracism to feminism to postcolonialism. For many youth like my interviewees, Tumblr functions as an alternative classroom and site for “media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness” which other spaces do not readily facilitate (Mccracken, 2017, p. 152). Internet sexuality reflects a change in the locus of power as spaces like Tumblr allow for sexual
exchanges with “minimal control and regulation,” a lack of censorship that my interviewees appreciated (Ross, 2005, p. 343). While their Asian parents and school sex ed teachers may hesitate to share about their sexual histories, online users speak from personal experience to share insights with their peers. As such, media can also act as a subversive educator to counter gender binaries and sexual norms.

**White Centrality | Asian In/visibility**

While I coded white centrality and Asian in/visibility separately, a discussion of the intertwined relationship between the two will reveal legacies of systemic racism, imperialism, and colonialism. The “inherent binarism of visuality” makes the structural visibility of white subjects contingent on “the ideological invisibility of their raciosity” (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 53). This section will demonstrate how whiteness centralizes itself in a variety of literacy contexts to render Asianness invisible. In some cases, whiteness acts as the default and part of the normative such as in mainstream American society and media. In others, whiteness manages to maintain a privileged status even in predominantly Asian communities.

**In Asian Communities and Asian Media**

Whiteness maintains an elevated status in Asian communities, achieved through imperialistic standards that Asians feel compelled to adhere or become more proximate to. Globalized racial framing and white hegemonic ideology positions white masculinity as superior (Chou, 2012). Angela’s discussion of her Asian friends (and Asian Americans more broadly) associating with white men gets at the complicated nature of whiteness being “implicitly a sign of status” which extends beyond economic power whether people “explicitly admit it.” Her mention of “the whole beauty standard, cultural aspect” embodies an awareness that many of my interviewees expressed in regards to white desirability. While not explored at length in this
thesis, Eurocentrism was a recurring theme as participants grappled with ideas of beauty and romance. Rachel noted how Filipino and Korean beauty standards shared the commonality of “whitened” skin. Nina observed that Asian faces in Korean media had “Anglo Saxon features” that would also be accepted into “Western standards.” The global capital of whiteness is pervasive and highly regulated by “local and global discourses of romantic love” as well as “neo-colonial hierarchies of race” (Nemoto, 2006, p. 49). Bailey reckoned with the fact that regardless of whether an individual actively idolizes white people, Eurocentric standards “are always going to seep into [their] understanding” of a good image. The “conflation of Euro/Anglo features with Americanness” marks Asianness as perpetually foreign and invisible outside the national (and global) imaginary (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 54). My interviewees highlighted how the social currency of whiteness shaped and continues to shape their lived experiences as a normalizing gaze, even from other Asians/Asian Americans.

This perception of whiteness in Asian communities bleeds into Asian parents’ (and their children’s) heteronormative preferences for white partners for their children over other non-Asian groups. While Asian parents would prefer that their daughters bring home an Asian son-in-law who is more culturally similar to their family, a white in-law is the next best thing. Close association with status relates to the assumption that white partners might more readily “make good money” and be able to “take care of” their children (Bailey). An aspirational class element grounds these preferences in American meritocracy and the view that white masculinity is synonymous with material security and middle-class American status (Nemoto, 2006). The combination of hypersexualized stereotypes of Asian women and “the actual desires that Asian American women have for white hegemonic masculinity” results in a sort of mutual attraction (Nemoto, 2006, p. 50). But this attraction is toxic and relies on Asian in/visibility to preserve the
centrality of white desire. Desiring and consuming whiteness in Asian cultures is symptomatic of asymmetrical global relations in which whiteness is at the center.

*In American Schooling Systems*

White hegemony in American schooling is preserved through repetitive disciplinary practices that reproduce particular social constructions of gender and sexuality. While a majority white student body is not a necessity to promote white norms, all of my interviewees attended predominantly white high school settings with very few students of color. White centrality in school sex education maintains the status quo through dominant discourse as white parents dictate appropriate sex ed curriculum. My interviewees highlighted the consequences of sexual silence and intergenerational sexual illiteracy as the adults in their local communities held onto traditionalist beliefs grounded by religion and/or political affiliation when it came to curriculum. Em’s mother’s response proved to be anomalous in my participant sample as the only Asian mother who firmly opposed the established curriculum and abstinence-only “propaganda.” Her reaction might be attributable to her Brazilian sexual socialization and marriage to a white man in which she had the social tools to resist the dominant pedagogy. However, for the most part, my interviewees’ Asian parents entrusted their daughters’ sex education to their teachers. My interviewees recalled having only white sex educators in school discuss heterosexual intercourse, having to seek out BIPOC and queer sex educators in alternative online spaces (i.e. Natsume diversifying her Instagram feed by following Black and fat sex therapists). If they wanted to learn about sexual relationships that did not center a white cisgender heterosexual couple, they had to actively seek out those sources themselves as the adults around them did not advocate for such content.
Dating norms pressured my interviewees to fit in via white peer cultures. Nina, Natsume, and Em reported wanting to be more proximate to white peers to assimilate and resultantly felt more attractive or desirable. Even though Angela did not actively subscribe to white ideals, she admitted that she was attracted to the status that came from dating white men when she was younger. The predominantly white school setting accelerates the process of the Asian American body becoming “another site of colonization” through normalized white ideology (Chou, 2012, p. 40). Asian American students internalize values of white supremacy and maintain their oppression by self-surveilling their own sexual behavior to be in adherence with white hegemony. The white racial frame defined ideals of beauty and desirability for my interviewees in adolescence, often obtaining white approval at the cost of suppressing their Asianness.

**In White Mainstream Society & Media**

The centrality of white desire feeds into Asian in/visibility or the hypervisibility of Asian stereotypes, which as my interviewees indicated has real consequences on their interpersonal relationships. The promotion of Asian American women’s “availability to white men” makes them vulnerable to a gaze that deprives them of their personhood (Nemoto, 2006, p. 50). Nina’s want to be seen as a person rather than an anime girl or Kpop star demonstrates how media images are not merely harmless abstractions but inflict tangible harms by reducing Asian women to objects of fetish. Constructions of the orientalized other in which Asian women are portrayed as infantile and hyper-feminine reassert the “primacy of the Western subject” (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 52). The appeal of taking away Asian innocence (as Nina mentioned) reflects discourses of white dominance and conquest. Their “visibility as sexually exotic objects” ensures that Asian American women “remain invisible as subjects” in dominant discourse (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 52). My interviewees’ observations about how the white men they encounter would not explicitly
describe their sexualized racism as fetish alludes to an awareness of the unacceptability of overt racism in a seemingly post-racial world. Rather, sexual “preferences” are a reconfiguration of racism in complimentary pretty packaging. The hypersexualization of the Asian American female body as a commodified “object of spectacle” has become a “thoroughly naturalized” convention in America, making racial fetishes commonplace (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 51). Asian in/visibility in American media contributes to societal perceptions of Asian sexuality and consequently restricts the movement of Asian American women/GNBs as sexual beings.

Given the long tradition of American media products to construct Asian American women as hypersexual beings, the need for stereotype-resisting portrayals is evident to deconstruct Asian in/visibility. Piecemeal representation is a typical part of the Asian American media diet with issues of “whitewashing, queerbaiting, and stereotypical portrayals of [their] identities” (Kuo et al., 2020, p. 10). Many interviewees expressed the difficulties of being both Asian and queer and the struggles of finding nuanced, intersectional representation. While Asian representation has improved incrementally in recent years, my interviewees still indicated room for growth in the future in Asian American representation. Their comments about recent releases point to an awareness of misrepresentation even amid feelings of high positive emotionality.

*Crazy Rich Asians* favors “the notion of Asian Americans as a self-made minority” when following Rachel Chu’s family history as her mother went from a poor Chinese migrant to a top real estate agent, enabling her daughter to become a successful game theory professor at a predominantly white institution (Chen, 2019). Though Asian visibility is worthy of celebration, critical readings of media artifacts are still necessary to consider which Asian stories are more acceptable for mainstream American audiences. The different ways in which interviewees felt seen or not by Asian American media further emphasizes the need for authentic stories to “depict
the rich diversity of Asian American life” (Besana et al., 2019, p. 222). Asian in/visibility in media restricts Asian American women and gender non-binary people to the role of the (sexual) model minority within Western consciousness.

Summary

Asian American sexual literacies develop by making sense of and incorporating various discourses in family, schooling, and media. These messages sometimes converge, sometimes diverge, and sometimes contradict themselves. The goals of sexual suppression in the Asian household and predominantly white schools strengthen each other through shame, fear, and intergenerational sexual illiteracy. White mainstream media is simultaneously prudish and overtly sexual to perpetuate heteronormative desire and hypersexualize Asian femininity while alternative community platforms counteract these discourses. The centrality of whiteness relies on panoptic silences in all of these spaces as people self-surveil their desires to adhere to dominant discourses of white masculinity. After analyzing these patterns, the final section of this thesis will explore what specific steps can be taken to promote the sexual health and emotional well-being of Asian American women and gender non-binary people in school curriculum by deploying problem-posing pedagogy and AsianCrit.
Conclusion

The findings in my eight qualitative interviews have determined that Asian American sexual literacies are multi-faceted and especially complicated for women and gender non-binary people. I have covered a range of topics in the areas of family, schooling, and media in an attempt to understand what distinct discourses Asian Americans grapple with in each sphere. I will conclude by making recommendations for sex education curriculum through a critical lens and by providing directions for future research to better support Asian American sexual health.

Recommendations for Sex Education

Rather than providing suggestions on a timeline for when students should learn about biological developments or how to use contraceptives, I will emphasize the importance of critical sexual literacy through a feminist, anti-racist lens to prioritize sexual communications as a skillset. When I asked my interviewees what they wish their sex ed had taught them, the topics did not center on the mechanics of sex but rather on the practical information relevant to being in relationships (sexual or not) with other people. Consent, communicating needs, and empathy came to the forefront. Intergenerational sexual illiteracy has established sex as an uncomfortable topic of conversation, so how can curriculum reframe sexual narratives in a positive light so that students nurture healthy relationships?

Let's Talk About Sex

Banking methods in sex education reproduce sexual silences and intergenerational discomfort with sexual discourse by perpetuating fear and shame in students. Problem-posing pedagogy can disrupt this cycle by establishing that correct answers do not exist when it comes to human sexuality and open up spaces for productive dialogues. Dialogue becomes “a way of knowing” rather than “a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task” (Freire et al., 1993,
Dialogical teaching takes the lived experience of students into account as an entry point for unveiling new knowledge and frames knowledge acquisition as a social process. Learning how to talk about sex fluently and how to address issues of sexuality “intelligently, critically, and even comfortably” are vital to prepare students for navigating sex in media and society (Alexander, 2008, p. 2). As Natsume expressed in her interview, sex is “everywhere in media and entertainment” and is “always kind of being shoved down your throat.” So, regardless of what efforts adults make to avoid talking about sex, young people are constantly bombarded with sexual messages that are unavoidable. Talking about sex destigmatizes the subject and challenges the constructs of normalcy and appropriateness around sex derived from strictly teaching sex in “certain prescribed ways” (Alexander, 2008, p. 37). Based on feedback from my interviewees’ experiences with sex education, these suggestions for sexual dialogue might begin to do this work. The following suggestions do not necessitate a linear implementation but rather serve as possibilities for sexual dialogues.

**Work towards “sex neutrality” when talking about sex.** While moving towards sex positivity should be a long-term goal to encourage body positivity and healthy relationships, first working towards sex neutrality provides a more feasible goal when working with families and teachers in conservative communities. Bailey’s “sex neutral” curriculum was relatively thorough in comparison to my other interviewees in addressing a plethora of topics without embedding attitudes of shame. Most students will have sex or participate in intimate relationships at some point in their lives, and sex education should prepare them for safe, healthy interactions through a sex neutral to positive lens.

**Teach the do’s of sex rather than the don’ts.** Along with sexual neutrality, teaching the do’s of sex over the don’ts favors an active approach to reducing risk. Rather than using
scare tactics and conveying the message of “Don’t let this happen to you,” providing guidance on what to do if students find themselves in particular situations empowers them through decision making. Examples of this include but are not limited to informing students on how to establish emotional, social, and physical boundaries in interpersonal relationships; how to properly use a condom; and how to intervene or be an active bystander in potentially harmful situations. This approach also reduces the onus on the individual, especially on female-identifying students who are burdened with the responsibility of preventing their own rape or unplanned pregnancies. By teaching the do’s, sex education curriculum has the potential to emphasize lifetime sexual health and sexual agency over risk, fear, and shame.

**Teach about consent beyond “no means no.”** Many of my interviewees pointed out consent as a topic of importance either from not learning about it in any capacity or learning it in a one-dimensional “no means no” way. Em made the poignant observation that consent is important in general, not just “confined to the sphere of sex or romance.” Teaching consent as an eager “yes” and continual process with varying degrees rather than a singular “no” event extends beyond sexual encounters for students to learn how to assert their needs and personal boundaries. Angela observed that “there was very little discussion-based material” and teaching about communicating needs in her sex ed curriculum. What does consent mean and what does it look like? Teachers could model active consent in scenarios that are not restricted to sex. For example, wanting a cup of tea does not equate to wanting sugar, honey, and milk in the tea as well. While not directly related, this simple example could easily translate into a conversation about consenting to different levels of sex while also putting into perspective the cruciality of
consent in something as intimate as sex. If the goal is to prevent teen pregnancy and STI transmission, consent cannot be absent in conversations about sex for participants to understand both how to consent and how to withdraw consent.

**Model positive partner sexual communications.** Roleplay learning could serve as an effective, experiential tool in classroom teaching for modeling positive sexual communications between partners. Acting out hypothetical scenarios provides scaffolding for real-life situations (ex. What do you do if your significant other wants to have sex but you do not feel ready?).

**Hold spaces for anonymous questions.** Normalize sexual curiosity. Holding spaces for anonymous questions (like the box mentioned in Bailey’s curriculum) would validate sexual curiosity and promote dialogues in the classroom. This helps alleviate the pressure of asking embarrassing or personal questions by not attaching specific students to their questions.

**Promote personal body awareness.** Along with sexual curiosity about sex and relationships in general, promoting personal body awareness is beneficial to move beyond acknowledging that all individual bodies are unique. Small considerations such as recommending that menstruators download a period tracker app can go a long way for students to begin the process of understanding how their bodies behave. Olivia recalled having one helpful teacher who was “very candid about sex” and told the students that “It’s okay to explore [your body].” While she did not extensively discuss masturbation, even the validation functioned to reduce fear. Normalizing practices of sexual curiosity and body awareness would also support LGBTQ+ students by challenging ideas around normativity in sex, sexuality, and identity.
**Emphasize healthcare literacy and sexual agency.** As an extension of body awareness, sex ed curriculum should emphasize healthcare literacy as a part of sexual agency to make students aware of what services and resources are available to them. While the comfort levels of my interviewees in seeking out sexual healthcare services varied, most demonstrated a pattern of becoming more comfortable with age by seeking out resources on their own to figure it out. Lucy described feeling timid and recognized that she still had room for growth in “learning to break free of that burden of tabooness.” Olivia stated that while they were emotionally comfortable, they were unsure about insurance coverage for STD testing and felt that the American healthcare system was largely inaccessible. Em expressed similar emotional comfortability but uncertainty about the location of services, personal fit, and financial management. Sex ed curriculum could better prepare students beyond standard biology by framing sexual knowledge as an ongoing learning process to better understand themselves and advocate for their health.

**Teach about the role of sex in society/media.** My last two suggestions relate to critical sexual literacy to interrogate power. Teaching about the role of sex in society and media primes students to receive and question the messages around them. If students encounter porn, how should they read the misogynistic content? What about media that hypersexualizes certain races and sexualities?

**Teach about anti-racism in intimate relationships.** Teaching students about anti-racism in intimate relationships inspires deeper interpersonal connections by embracing racial identity as part of the whole self. Many of my interviewees expressed the exhaustion of being in interracial relationships in which they often had to educate their partners on issues of race. Natsume recalled having to explain microaggressions and wanting to have
a partner who would more readily “act instead of react” when learning about race. Angela noted that her current partner is an exception as she previously had an “internal rule” to not date white men, having seen it become “so exhausting, so toxic, so fast.” Rachel, Bailey, and Olivia expressed similar sentiments with a resignation that there are some cultural differences that their partners may never understand. Incorporating a critical race lens to sex education asserts that colorblind ideology is detrimental to relationships as a violence against BIPOC to “keep minorities in subordinate positions” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 22). Equity is not treating all students as if they are the same but rather recognizing individual differences and ensuring that everyone is treated justly.

**Applying AsianCrit**

The following are based on ideas from AsianCrit to deconstruct normalized racism, transnationalism, history, and essentialism. A “near-invisibility of Asian Americans” in U.S. history standards applies to how Asian Americans are regarded in the present due to the legacies of immigration control (An, 2016, p. 258). While visibility is essential in all spaces and classroom subjects, I will provide specific actionable items in sex education curriculum to support Asian American adolescents by recognizing that their sexual experiences are gendered and racialized. These suggestions resist the model minority myth to avoid characterizations of Asian Americans as a well-behaved monolith that assumes that they are not at risk for unsafe sexual activity. While specific to Asian Americans, these items could be potentially adapted in the future to tailor to the needs of other marginalized groups.

**Include and center Asian sex educators/therapists, healthcare workers, activists.**

Even if the sex educators in a school are white, inviting and incorporating content from Asian (and other BIPOC) sex educators is essential to challenge white cisgender models
of sexuality and illustrate how race disproportionately impacts certain groups’ access to reproductive/sexual healthcare and sexual assault resources.

**Teach multiple Asian perspectives (queer, dis/abled, low-income, multiethnic).**

Combatting one-dimensional portrayals of Asian Americans necessitates multivocality. With including Asians, curriculum should incorporate multiple, intersectional Asian perspectives to combat essentializing all Asian Americans as the same. What if instead of being assigned the psychology of sex chapter to read at home without follow-up discussion, Lucy had been assigned the “Race and Representation in Kink” podcast episode and discussed it with her classmates? This would lessen the burden of emotional labor from Asian Americans to educate others on harmful sexual fetishes. If a school feared offending more conservative parents, what about simply providing a handout with resources for students to explore on their own? Although critical sexual literacy would hope to have these discussions openly and honestly, intergenerational sexual illiteracy would likely find the approach too radical for formal curriculum. In that case, sex educators could host safe spaces outside of the lesson for Asian students to feel seen and supported.

**Teach Asian American (sexual) histories.** Sex education should take into account the complex histories of racism and xenophobia that infect Asian American lived experiences and relationships. Teach beyond the Chinese Exclusion Act and the consequent gender ratio imbalance to dissect the constructions of Asian femininities and masculinities. One example includes the Page Act of 1875 that restricted the immigration of East Asian women based on the false premise that they would engage in prostitution upon entry to the U.S. (Peffer, 1986). Making connections between events in history and perceptions of
Asian Americans as exotic, perpetual foreigners in modern sexual relationships reckons with the past while supporting students in the present.

Utilize Asian American media with nuance and host dialogues after viewing. Using nuanced Asian American media and hosting dialogues about them can begin processes of cultural exchange over performative cultural nods. These dialogues facilitate a critical consciousness in students’ understanding of the normative by learning how dating and romance might differ for their peers growing up in bicultural or multicultural settings. In doing so, curriculum can appreciate and include diverse cultures without tokenizing them while reducing Asian American students’ feelings of perpetual foreignness.

Consult and involve multilingual/multicultural Asian parents in sex ed curriculum development. Sex education curriculum should consult parents beyond a permission slip. While Asian parents might trust schools to teach about puberty and development, their input should be considered. Multilingual engagement might look like providing mock sex ed lectures with translations. Given the role that family plays in early sexual socialization, schools should collaborate with local Asian American communities to present accurate and helpful information to students. While all parents could use assistance in initiating discussions of sexual subjects with their children, Asian American parents come to the curriculum with divergent cultural expectations. Asian American adolescents need “preventative programs that are culturally sensitive, inclusive of family and gender-specific” (Hahm, 2006, p. 34).

Avoid model minority language at all costs when working with Asian American students. These actions necessitate deconstructing the model minority myth when working with Asian American families to avoid making assumptions about parenting
styles and children’s sexual behavior. The data from my eight interviewees alone saw some drastically different parental responses to school sex education (i.e. Em’s mother’s stern disapproval as opposed to Lucy’s parents’ passive endorsement) and sexual behavior (i.e. delaying dating, experimenting, or being sexually active). As such, anticipating that members of one particular group will behave in singular ways is reductive, unproductive, and harmful.

**Situate Asian American sexual literacies within Asian American Identity Development.** These items will benefit from situating Asian American sexual literacies within Asian American Identity Development Theory. My previous chapters have outlined the importance of each stage in relation to family, schooling, peer cultures, and media in the formation of sexual identity alongside race.

These observations point to the need for not only reframing on a pedagogical level but also on a systemic scale. Facilitating healthy Asian American relationships requires increasing Asian visibility in all spaces: more Asian teachers, Asian sex educators, Asian healthcare workers, Asian media figures, and so forth. Educating students on anti-racism in sex ed curriculum is not enough if media continues to perpetuate images of exoticism. Change needs to happen throughout ecological levels on both the micro and macro scale within communities and on screen.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Throughout the process of my research, I have discovered that there is still much to be written about Asian American sexualities and relationships. Although I caught a glimpse into the consequences of period shame from Nina’s bloodless underwear and Bailey’s Chinese old wise tale, menstruation in Asian cultures and Asian American communities is an under researched
topic. How do the ways in which Asian sexual discourses regulate the behaviors of women compare with Western sexual discourses? How might the menstrual talks that second generation Asian American menstruators give to their daughters differ from the discretionary attitudes their immigrant mothers passed down to them? My interviewees reported on distinct ideals for womanhood and beauty standards in their bicultural sexual socialization that were warped by Eurocentrism and whiteness. Nina mentioned wanting a nose job when she was younger to achieve a taller and skinner look. How do Asian American women negotiate their femininity and body image to become more proximate to Western standards through cosmetic surgery and fashion? How then do they respond when Asian features become the latest racist trend on social media (i.e. the “fox eye” trend)? Within the vein of social media, more studies should investigate specific media platforms as well. How does racism translate to interactions on dating apps as prospective partners either filter out or fetishize people based on the color of their skin? How does the speed of image swiping exacerbate the objectification of BIPOC? As interpersonal communications move to be increasingly online, the reconfigurations of racism, sexism, and xenophobia require a critical lens to make sense of intimate relationships as political sites.

There is still work to be done to diversify literature on Asian American sexualities. I deliberately excluded Asian American masculinities for the purposes of my study, but they provide a direction worthy of more exploration. Asian mothers proved to be significant figures for sexual socialization in the home for my female and AFAB gender non-binary interviewees, so I would anticipate some degree of modeling to occur between Asian fathers and their sons in the passing of patriarchal values. While Asian women are often hypersexualized, Asian men are conversely emasculated and positioned as undesirable, asexual beings. How might this inhibit sexual desire between Asian American women and men? My study also did not address the
sexual literacies of Pacific Islanders or South Asians. How do sexual histories, media artifacts, and forces of colorism shape these experiences? More research needs to center the voices of LGBTQ+ Asian Americans. My participants spoke to some aspects of bisexuality, asexuality, and non-binary Asian American womanhood, but questions remain. How do gay Asian Americans who cannot pass as straight to their Asian traditionalist parents navigate coming out and relationships? How do transgender or intersex Asian Americans who fall outside the gender binary challenge conservative gender role expectations? While my data touched on the dynamics between Asian American women and white men, future research should also consider interracial relationships with nonwhite partners and the sexual literacies of multiracial children. Class is also a dimension I did not consider at length. How does socioeconomic status affect Asian American sexual literacy and the seeking out of sexual healthcare? These are but a few possible directions for future research as research on AAPI sexualities is still a largely untapped area.

**Final Remarks**

> *Your mother wouldn’t approve of how my mother raised me*  
> *But I do, I think I do*  
> *And you’re an all-American boy*  
> *I guess I couldn’t help trying to be your best American girl*

I would like to conclude with these lyrics from Mitski’s “Your Best American Girl” to capture the sentiments of Asian American sexual literacies and femininities. As Mitski sings about how her Japanese mother raised her, I think about how my interviewees’ mothers and my own mother passed on sexual silences and an internal strength within Asian womanhood. I think about the American Girl books Asian mothers give their daughters as a part of their sex education, saturated with white, heteronormative ideals of girlhood. As Mitski sings about desiring an all-American boy, I think of the ways we have been taught from a young age to

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desire white masculinity and to be desirable in the eyes of white masculinity. While we might have spent years in our adolescence unsure of how to be your best American girl (and while we might still struggle with this), we have also come to the realization that your best American girl is an illusion of power and a product of dominant discourse. She does not exist. Caring for Asian American daughters’ sexual well-being necessitates shattering fantasies of Asian femininity and embracing all of the social, cultural, and political complexities that formulate their sexual literacies.
References


Appendix A

Recruitment Survey:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender identity? (select all that apply)
   a. Woman
   b. Man
   c. Transgender
   d. Non-binary/non-conforming
   e. Other
   f. Prefer not to say
3. What is your sexuality? (select all that apply)
   a. Straight/heterosexual
   b. Lesbian/gay
   c. Bisexual/pansexual
   d. Asexual
   e. Other
4. What is your ethnicity? (select all that apply)
   a. Chinese
   b. Japanese
   c. Korean
   d. Mixed/multiple ethnicities
   e. Other
5. What is your generation?
   a. 1.5 (born in another country and moved to the U.S. at a young age with immigrant parent(s))
   b. Second (born in the U.S. to immigrant parent(s))
6. Have you received sex education in an American school setting?
   a. Yes
   b. No
7. In what state did you primarily receive your sex education?
8. In which state do you currently reside?
9. How would you rate the comprehensiveness of your school sex education?
   a. No sex education curriculum presented
   b. Little knowledge
   c. Somewhere in between/Average
   d. Pretty comprehensive
   e. Comprehensive
10. Where was the emphasis in your sex education curriculum?
    a. Abstinence-Only (risk/prevention of STIs/teen pregnancy)
    b. Abstinence-Plus (abstinence stressed but still provided information on contraception/protection)
    c. Comprehensive (focus on lifetime sexual health/well-being, inclusive of sexual diversity)
    d. Not applicable/I don’t remember
11. What topics were covered in your sex education curriculum? (select all that apply).
    a. Growth/development
b. Reproduction/fertilization  
c. Menstruation  
d. Anatomy/physiology  
e. Abstinence  
f. Pregnancy  
g. Contraception  
h. Condom use  
i. Abortion  
j. Masturbation  
k. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)  
l. HIV/AIDS  
m. Consent  
n. Orgasm/pleasure  
o. Sexual agency (assertiveness/communicating needs in sex)  
p. Sexual orientation  
q. Gender identity  
r. Sexual abuse  
s. Relationship communication  
t. Society and Culture (gender roles, sexuality in media)  
u. I don’t remember  

12. Would you be interested in an in-depth 60-90 min. interview with the student investigator to discuss your sex education, media consumption, family attitudes on sex, and experiences pertaining to race? If yes, please provide an email address here.  
a. (*Please note that your information will be kept strictly confidential. Zoom recordings will be stored on the student’s password-protected personal laptop and will be exclusively accessible to the student for analysis. Pseudonyms will be used in the final paper, so your survey/interview responses cannot be linked back to your personal identity. All recorded files will be deleted upon the completion of research. Selected interviewees will be compensated with a small art piece.)

**Qualitative Interview Questionnaire:**

I would like to start this interview by asking about your family/home environment:

1. Where did your parents immigrate from? How did they feel about passing on culture to their children?  
2. What languages do you speak at home with your family? (English, Asian language, mix of both?)  
3. How did your family engage in Asian culture? Did you participate in any local Asian community activities?  
   a. Did your family celebrate any Asian holidays? If so, which ones?  
4. Did you grow up in a religious household? If so, what tradition/religion did you or your family practice?  
5. What attitudes do your parents have around dating and marriage?  
   a. What kind of relationship did they model to you?  
6. Did your parents give you “the sex talk”? If so, what was discussed?  
   a. What attitudes did your parents communicate about sex?
i. Would you say your parents’ attitudes toward sex were more permissive or prohibitive?

b. When watching media together with your parents, what were their reactions when a romantic/sex scene was on screen? Did they have any commentary on it?

7. (If applicable) Can you describe the experience of your first period and if/how your parents responded?

8. Do you feel comfortable asking your parents questions about sex/relationships?

9. Have your parents communicated an ideal partner for you in the future?

10. Did you ever have any relationships growing up without parental knowledge?

Next, I will ask about your schooling environments growing up:

1. What were the student demographics like at your schools? Were there other Asian American students in your grade?
   a. What did your friend group look like?

2. Did your school have dress code regulations?

3. How did your relationship status correlate to how you viewed yourself? (Did you view yourself as more attractive if you were asked to a school dance/on a date, etc.)?

In the next part, we will discuss your experience with sex education curriculum.

1. Could you describe your sex ed experience in school? What were the most salient details?
   a. How old were you when you received sex ed?
   b. Were boys and girls separated?
   c. What was emphasized?

I would like to share a short video clip with you: https://youtu.be/Dm3s3c3qWmw. After watching the video together, I will ask you for your general thoughts about sex education.

2. What are your general reactions to that video? Can you relate to what the featured people were saying?
   a. What was missing in your sex education?

3. To what degree was sexual pleasure mentioned in your sex education curriculum?

4. How did you fill in gaps from your school sex education? What other sources did you seek out for information?

5. Do you feel that your sex education prepared you well for sex/relationships and caring for your sexual health?
   a. How would you describe your facility/comfort in seeking out sexual healthcare services?

6. How does the school culture at your college/university compare to what you experienced in middle or high school when it comes to dating or sex?

Next, I will be asking questions about your media consumption.

1. First, what types of media are you drawn to or what platforms do you engage with the most (movies/TV shows, podcasts, books, comics, video games, social media, etc.)?

2. What was the degree of Asian representation in your consumed media? What roles did Asians play?

3. Did you see Asian characters engaged in sex/romance on screen? What did you make of these relationships?
4. Did you consume any media content produced by Asian countries? How did those portrayals of dating/romance compare to American media?
5. What media figures or celebrities did you look up to?
6. What sources informed your standards of beauty and how did these standards make you feel?
7. Did you experience image dysphoria and if so, in what ways (i.e. how did you feel when your appearance didn’t match standards or individuals like you weren’t represented in media?)
   a. Did you experience conflicting standards from your parents and peers?
8. How did American conceptions about romance impact your teenage years?
   a. How did these popular portrayals of romance compare and contrast from the relationship your parents modeled to you?
9. I would like you to respond to a couple of statements on whether you agree or disagree:
   a. Everyone has a destined partner or soulmate.
   b. I believe in love at first sight.
   c. Love can overcome all obstacles.
   d. True love exists.

For the final part of the interview, I would like to ask you about experiences pertaining to your race.
1. Has a non-Asian person ever attempted to socially engage with you by speaking an Asian language?
2. Has a non-Asian person ever complimented your racial features? (ex. Narrow eyes, petite figure, black hair, etc.) How did this make you feel?
3. Have you ever encountered someone with a preference for/someone who describes their type as “Asian?”
4. Have people ever made assumptions about your sexuality based on your race?
Primary Investigators: Ah-Young Song, Dara Greenwood

Student Researcher(s): Annie Wang

Title of Project: Sex Ed and Emerging Sexualities in Asian American Women/GNBs

I acknowledge that on __________, I was informed by Annie Wang of Vassar College of a research project having to do with the following:

This research project is intended to provide insight into the sex education experiences of 1.5 or second generation Asian American women/gender non-binary people in family, schooling, and media. The nature of questions will include sex education curriculum, schooling environment, media consumption, family attitudes of sex, and race as relevant to sexual experiences. Your information will be confidential and stored on the student’s password-protected personal laptop. Pseudonyms will be used in the final thesis paper. All recorded files will be deleted upon the completion of research. Your participation will entail a 60-90 minute interview over zoom with an optional follow-up review of audio transcriptions. If you have any questions or concerns you may contact the primary investigators Ah-Young Song at asong@vassar.edu or (302)566-5880 or Dara Greenwood at dagreenwood@vassar.edu or (845)437-7377. You will be compensated through a small art piece.

Potential Risks: Risk should be minimal, but you should be aware that sensitive topics such as family, sex, race, and sexuality will be discussed and could cause some discomfort. Please refer to these hotlines for support if needed: SAMHSA’s National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357 or the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673. Though you may not personally benefit from the research, the insight gained will add to growing knowledge to support sexual education and healthcare for Asian American female/gender non-binary adolescents and young adults.

I am aware, to the extent specified above, of the nature of my participation in this project and the possible risks involved or arising from it. I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty of any kind. I hereby agree to participate in the project. (You must be at least 18 years of age to give your consent.)

_____________
Date

_________________________________
(Printed name of Participant)

_________________________________
(Signature of Participant)

_________________________________
(Mailing Address)
As part of this project, I will be making audio/video recordings of you on Zoom during your participation in the research. Please note that Zoom automatically records both video and audio, but only the audio will be used for transcriptions and research. Please indicate what uses of this recording you are willing to permit by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to and signing the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the audio/video in ways that you agree to. In any use of the files, you will not be identified by name. Finally, all recorded files will be deleted upon the completion of research.

1. _______ The audio/video recordings can be studied by the researcher for use in the research project.
2. _______ The audio recording can be transcribed for quotations in the final thesis paper.
3. _______ The audio/video recording may be saved on the student investigator’s password-protected personal laptop.

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the audio/video recordings of me as indicated by my initials above. (You must be at least 18 years old to sign this form for yourself or your child.)

[Printed Name] ______________________________________

Address ____________________________________________

____________________________________________

Signature __________________________________________ Date ___________________
Appendix C

Art and Compensation
When I started the research process, I felt conflicted about the notion of compensation. I wanted to appreciate my participants for being vulnerable and sharing their experiences in my own personal way that did not diminish our conversations into transactions in which I paid them to talk about family, sex, schooling, and media. This series attempted to center Asianness in my own art while capturing a characteristic of each interviewee by matching them with an Asian/Asian American media figure. All pieces are 8x10 in. acrylic on canvas.

Portrait: Tiffany Young
Interviewee Recipient: Nina
Description:
Born and raised in California, Tiffany Young moved to South Korea at 15 to become a member of one of Kpop’s biggest girl groups, Girls’ Generation. With red and green complements, I added the red string of fate and peony to this piece as I began thinking about notions of love in East Asian storytelling. Although many of my interviewees did not subscribe to the idea of soulmates, many (such as Nina) still expressed being entangled in the obligation to desire love.

Portrait: Mitski
Interviewee Recipient: Em
Description:
A music video still from Mitski’s “Your Best American Girl,” this piece captures the estrangement of the woman of color’s desire in white narratives. The added owl butterfly detail attempts to embody the feelings of looking odd and yet simultaneously beautiful. Mitski often incorporates her lack of a sense of belonging due to being mixed in her songs which I thought spoke to Em’s experiences.
Portrait: Amber Liu  
Interviewee Recipient: Bailey  
Description:  
A Taiwanese American musician and member of the Kpop girl group f(x), I chose Amber for Bailey because of her consistent rejections of feminine beauty standards throughout her career. Coincidentally, Bailey was working on a senior thesis on Asian American beauty.

Portrait: Gemma Chan  
Interviewee Recipient: Olivia  
Description:  
Known for her role of Astrid in *Crazy Rich Asians*, I chose Gemma Chan for Olivia. Although Olivia had not seen *Crazy Rich Asians* at the time of our interview, Gemma Chan’s talent and activism drew me to paint her.
Portrait: Ali Wong  
Interviewee Recipient: Lucy  
Description:  
Born to a Vietnamese immigrant mother and Chinese American father, Ali Wong shared this similarity with Lucy.

Portrait: Marie Lu  
Interviewee Recipient: Rachel  
Description:  
I was struck by Rachel’s discussion of creating her own representation through BIPOC female videogame characters, so I decided to paint Marie Lu for her. Lu is a Chinese American sci-fi/fantasy YA fiction writer, and her book *Warcross* features a Chinese American female protagonist in a dystopian story in which a video game takes over the world.
NIKI is an Indonesian singer under the record label 88rising and seeks to empower Asians/Asian Americans through her music. NIKI’s aesthetics reminded me of Angela’s style.

Mentioned in her interview as a celebrity who “makes [her] heart happy,” I painted Rina Sawayama for Natsume. A Japanese-born British singer-songwriter, Sawayama’s music tackles a variety of social issues while meshing Western and Asian influences together.