Christine R. Yano & Neal K. Adolph Akatsuka, EDITORS

in collaboration with the

ASIAN AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

in Their Own Words

STRAIGHT A's

CHRISTINE R. YANO AND

NEAL K. ADOLPH AKATSUKA, EDITORS

in collaboration with the Asian American Collective (AAC)

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Christine R. Yano

NOTE: The coeditors have decided to donate a portion of the proceeds from sales of this book to the Visiting Faculty Fund in Ethnic Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, which is devoted to bringing visiting professors to increase the number of courses in ethnic studies available to students at Harvard University.

FOREWORD / *Franklin Odo*

In the fall of 2014, Harvard College students embraced a new course on Asian American "representations and realities." Christine Yano, a visiting professor of anthropology, sponsored by the Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, was teaching this undergraduate seminar and discovered an enthusiastic class. The result is a fascinating series of narratives of a niche segment from arguably the premier, elite spectrum of America's "model minority." Indeed, reflexive considerations of this concept, as experienced by and applied to hyper-achieving Asian Americans, runs through their autobiographical ruminations. As Yano indicates in her introduction, "The model minority stereotype of Asian Americans suggests a group that may or may not be extraordinarily 'smart,' but certainly is extraordinarily hardworking, diligent, obedient, conscientious, quiet, modest, and docile." It may be useful to recall that the model minority trope, often referred to as a "myth," was officially created in 1966. Widely adopted during an age of minority unrest, the attribution was clearly a backhanded rebuke to rabble-rousing protestors, via a glorification of purportedly positive attributes—obedient, modest, and docile—providing an assimilationist pathway toward attainment of the "American Dream."

Largely because of this book's laserlike focus, it will be important to note its limitations as well as its potential insights. They are forthrightly

acknowledged by Yano: this is not an ethnographic study; nor does it pretend to be longitudinal, although the latter may yet become a possibility if she maintains contact with these students. And because the students had so little background knowledge of themselves or their "racialized" group, their discoveries became revelations ungrounded in studies already available in the literature. On the other hand, these insights were serious and meaningful to their young lives and the experience surely served them well. One of the clearest and most pressing challenges that young, hardworking, talented, and driven Asian American youth face today is the pressure to succeed, sometimes inflicted by well-meaning immigrant parents who let them know just how much they have sacrificed for their children. In some (many? most?) of these families, the upwardly mobile students understand that the sacrifices have been all too real: typical parents worked desperate hours in America in jobs unrelated to professional careers left behind in Asia, all to provide educational opportunities in the United States for their children. These students understood well and were reminded often about the extraordinary competition for entry into selective universities in countries like South Korea, Japan, China, and India—competition that dwarfs the intense process to gain entry to equivalent institutions like the Ivies or MIT or Stanford or Caltech in America. The United States thus continues to be a mecca for talented and/or hardworking families who seek better odds for their children in the global educational battleground.

One consequence for these college students: pursuing intensely personal career choices that fall outside those considered "safe" and secure, in the arts, for example, did not simply subject them to criticism from parents who were counting on them for financial support in later life; students genuinely feel the pull of fields like medicine, engineering, business, and the like because there is real filial piety at work, not merely theoretical recourse to textbook Confucianism. There are now sufficient studies of anxiety and depression among high-achieving Asian Americans to indicate that there is a significant if indeterminate public health concern. Sometimes these issues emerge as rebuttals to those who celebrate the success of "Tiger Moms" and their parenting rigors. One recent issue of the *Asian American Literary Review* is entitled "Open in Emergency: A Special Issue on Asian American Mental Health" (Khuc 2017). The review notes that there is now consensus about a crisis in Asian American

mental health, citing reports from the Centers for Disease Control that note relatively high incidences of suicides and suicidal ideation among Asian American and Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander youth. This special issue asserts that, while the issue and parameters of this crisis are not well understood, the urgency of the problem is not in question. The Harvard student narratives in *Straight A's* provide considerable grist for the mental health mill.

Model minority aspirations, pressures, and stereotypes are too easily paired with mental health concerns at the individual, family, and ethnic community levels. But these Harvard students touch upon other societal issues embedded within their families, ethnic groups, and transnational relationships. Some of the students understand that "Asian American" as a racial rubric needs considerable disaggregation. When that large and unwieldy umbrella term is broken down into its several dozen components, we find not only successful ethnic/nationality groups but others like Southeast Asian refugee communities mired in generations of poverty. Not only that: closer examination of all "successful" ethnic groups reveals large segments of coethnics who are profoundly different from the Harvard undergrads. Think, for example, of the large numbers of Chinese garment or restaurant workers in inexpensive restaurants, or Indian Americans who drive taxicabs and toil in the myriad newsstands underground and that dot the urban landscapes of major American cities. Or consider the thousands of Korean and Vietnamese nail-salon workers who created an entirely new industry. Perhaps a few of the Harvard students come from such backgrounds but they will be a distinct minority within the Asian American students on elite college campuses.

And what happens when successful, high-achieving Asian Americans graduate and encounter the backlash of the workplace where entrenched white privilege continues to impose and implement glass ceilings? And for those Asian Americans who sense that their encounters with racism make a mockery of fair play and justice, they face the stark truth that the ecological reality of the moment has used them to keep the society divided and ruled. As the "good" and "assimilated" (not altogether and not really) minorities, they have been manipulated to justify the oppression of other peoples of color, including their own.

These particular thoughts and conclusions are not part of the narratives in this volume; there will be some pushback, perhaps. But *Straight*

A's is a much-needed resource for society today to explore the future these students wish to envision, one that demands the hard work, stamina, intelligence, and conscientious discipline that secured their entry to Harvard. They will certainly find that those qualities will continue to be in demand; but they may also find that traits once considered to be virtues—"obedient, conscientious, quiet, modest, and docile"—will be a tad more problematic.

INTRODUCTION / *Christine R. Yano*

Tiger Tales and Their Tellings

In the fall of 2014 I joined Harvard University as a visiting professor of anthropology at the invitation of the Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, taking a leave from my position as a professor of anthropology at the University of Hawai'i. The course I taught during the fall semester was a first for Harvard and a first for me: Anth 1606, "Being Asian American: Representations and Realities." Although a course such as this might have been commonplace at many other universities, especially on the West Coast, where fields such as ethnic studies and the Asian American political movement of the 1970s were born, at Harvard it was unique. In fact, from 1999 to 2011 there had only been sixteen courses offered at Harvard specifically on Asian Americans, and most of these were taught by visiting professors like myself. In many of those years, there were no Asian American courses. (This changed in 2011 with the tenure-track hire of Ju Yon Kim in the English department.) The curious thing was how many Asian American students there were at this elite institution, at the same time as how few courses were offered that might be directly relevant to their experiences. Perhaps it was a backhanded compliment to the students' assimilation that they were overlooked in this particular way (Ahmed 2012).

FIGURE I.1 The Asian American Collective. Photo courtesy of Winnie Wu and Alex Pong.

At the time I was hired, I could not have known where the course would lead and the impact it might have along with unfolding events. But over the span of the semester, it occurred to me that here were personal stories worth telling, beginning with the safe space of the classroom, and—if framed carefully—extending to the general public. True, college years are filled with personal coming-of-age stories, but these had a particular poignancy, in part because of the status of the institution, in part because of the intensity of the path that these students had taken to get here, in part because of the relationship of these stories to Asian American model minority stereotypes. This book is the result of that process.

The aim of this book is rather simple, straightforward, and delimited: give voice to the experiences of Asian American undergraduate students at an elite institution. Let them tell their stories, and in doing so provide comment on young lives that have been bound by and to achievement. If these students represent some of the highest levels of academic achievement in the United States for their age group, and if Asian Americans as a demographic have been scrutinized exactly for this kind of "overachievement," then these stories grapple with the stereotype. The stories provide

a living stamp on the experience of growing up Asian American and "successful" (i.e., as evidenced by entrance to an elite university).

But let me be clear: this is *not* a classic ethnography of Asian American undergraduates at Harvard University, *nor* is it a longitudinal study of those students, tracing their pathways approaching and eventually graduating from an elite institution. Both of these approaches situate those students firmly within the paradigm of research, framing them as objects of study from which we may draw timely conclusions. Our (the editors' and students') goal here is far humbler, delimited to the voices the students in the class have managed to capture. Although these may be narrowly circumscribed voices (Asian American, undergraduates, Harvard), I feel that they may be heard more broadly, especially as living the ethnic minority goal of achievement. What is it like to be scrutinized on a pedestal held high by families, communities, even diasporic kin groups? It is exactly through the personal tellings that the broader frames may be more critically understood. The approach of this volume is intensely personal, some may say intimate. Here is a collection of stories of Asian American undergraduates at Harvard College (the undergraduate institution within the larger university), typically written in the first person. What began as a class project in the fall semester, expanded to a larger effort in the spring of 2015, led by eight students who thus formed the Asian American Collective (AAC). Some of the stories were written as personal narratives by members of the AAC. Other stories were gathered and edited as a result of a call for papers among current undergraduates. And other narratives are the results of interviews conducted by members of the AAC. In each case our goal was fairly simple: to capture a slice of Asian American experiences at Harvard. But to what purpose?

Asian Americans constitute 5.6 percent of the U.S. population (Humes et al. 2011), yet their representation at Ivy League institutions stands disproportionately high at 12 to 18 percent (Chen 2012). At Harvard College, for example, Asian American students comprise 21 percent of the population. The class of 2019, according to Harvard's admission statistics, also includes 11 percent African Americans, 13 percent Latinx (a gender-neutral term to refer to individuals of Latin American descent), and 1.5 percent Native Americans or Pacific Islanders. A certain degree of controversy shadows these numbers: in 2014, Harvard faced a lawsuit that challenged racial quotas in admissions that purposely deny entrance to well-qualified—but

overrepresented—applicants from this demographic; in 2015 more than sixty campus organizations filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education and the Justice Department with the same charge, citing Asian American applicants as holding the lowest acceptance rate to Harvard College in spite of high test scores and other evidence of academic achievement (Cava 2015; Delwiche 2014; cf. Espenshade and Radford 2009; S. Lee 2006; Woo 1997). In short, educational achievement of Asian Americans has gained the public spotlight with headlines such as "Asians: Too Smart for Their Own Good?" (Chen 2012); an op-ed piece by Nicholas Kristof entitled "The Asian Advantage" that begins with the question "Why are Asian Americans so successful in America?" (Kristof 2015: 1); and the uproar over Yale law professor Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011).

Note that here, as elsewhere, including within student narratives, "Asian" is used when the actual reference is to Asian Americans. The same holds true in student narratives that indicate specific ethnicities, such as "South Asian" or "Korean," for example, when referencing those groups in Asia as well as their American counterparts. In other words, the conflation of "Asian" and "Asian American" (or that of specific groups) reflects the discursive and performative contexts of student lives. And yet it is clear that vast differences of histories, political positionings, national affiliations, and personal expectations necessarily separate these two groups. In fact, at some universities, some students from Asia may be sought-after sources of revenue, even as Asian American students may find their numbers calibrated for "overrepresentation." Even as scholars, interest groups, and individuals themselves may make these distinctions clear, everyday experiences may continue to blur the boundaries for several reasons. First and most important, the blurring reflects processes of racialization, stereotyping, and the continual characterization of this group as "forever foreigners" (to be discussed in greater detail). Tying Asian Americans to Asia is race work. Second, some Asian American families, particularly those of more recent immigration, may choose to emphasize and reference their not-so-distant kin and cultural ties to Asia. In short, the race work may be both external as well as internal. Third, certain cultural organizations on campus emphasize Asian traditions and include membership of both Asians and Asian Americans. This commingling of people, bodies, and cultural expressions suggests a performance that may deliberately blur

any distinction between Asians and Asian Americans. The point on the public stage of, for example, Chinese dance, is to *not* be able to pick out the Asian-born from the American-born.

Another kind of conflating needs to be disentangled as well. Inasmuch as Tiger Mom looms large in our discussion, this is to both acknowledge and disclaim any East Asian bias from which the concept stems. Here the differences between groups included in the package called Asian America need to be picked apart. The students themselves make clear both their overlapping experiences and family differences. Indeed, harping on Tiger Mom and tales of her offspring lays bare some of the hegemony of East Asia (even as huge differences, and even political conflicts, between the countries therein loom large) in the construct of Asian America, reflecting early immigration patterns to the United States. The cultural differences among students of East Asian, Southeast Asian (including Filipinos, Thai, Cambodians, Burmese, Indonesians, and Vietnamese), and South Asian origins are undeniable. And our classroom discussions were greatly enriched by the multiple cultural perspectives that students brought, including that of mixed-race, sometimes mixed-Asian, origins. But what got students even more excited than discussing differences was affirming their commonalities—in effect, discovering Tiger Moms within South Asian families. These "Oh, you too?!" moments brought this book together.

The stakes here are high, whether it is because media discussions inevitably racialize the demographic, shine a spotlight on stereotypes, or assert racial, cultural, and environmental factors that explain and justify overrepresentation at elite institutions. Indeed, issues surrounding affirmative action and admissions highlight the raw nerves bared by race in its structuring of purported meritocracies, legacies, and gateways to elite institutions. Herein lies the inherent critique by which "achievement" becomes "overachievement." Even if actual levels of attainment may be mixed within the Asian American demographic, education remains a broadly acknowledged stereotype and expectation of the group. *Straight A's* takes these elements as a starting point and examines issues of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, culture, mental health, and subjectivity surrounding Asian American educational achievement. Structured around personal narratives, the book places these individual stories within a historicized framework of identity politics and subjectivity. In doing so, *Straight A's* takes multiple microlooks at macro-societal processes, addressing the

personal dimensions of achievement within the framework of overlapping structures of power.

The title of the book references not only the level of achievement of individuals (i.e., GPA 4.0+; extracurricular excellence signified by awards, often at the national level), but also the image of the group as one that toes the line with that achievement (i.e., the "straightness" of people's lives). In short, the title encapsulates the model minority myth of overachievement—rewarding good behavior as much as good grades, while not making waves—that haunts as well as enables this group. The model minority stereotype of Asian Americans suggests a group that may or may not be extraordinarily "smart," but certainly is extraordinarily hardworking, diligent, obedient, conscientious, quiet, modest, and docile. Many students whose stories we gather here recoil at the stereotype, even as some of them recognize parts of themselves in it. Some of them deliberately structure their story against type, pointing out ways in which they are not "the typical Asian American," and it works if only because the stereotype is so well known. Indeed, the stereotype positions the straightness of lives and the straight-A GPA as going hand in hand, especially as they link to a group larger than Harvard undergraduates. The "good student" and the "good Asian American" thus overlap in ways that normalize their high numbers on the Harvard campus. Furthermore, *Straight A's* addresses not only achievement, but also the notion of "overachievement" that is part of the group stereotype, asking what assumptions the concept incorporates, including race and culture in its construction. What does it mean to be dubbed as not simply an "achiever," but an "overachiever"? What does an "overachiever" status both signify and negate? (I return to this in the concluding sections of the book.)

Amid the spate of attention of Chua's book and other media spotlights on Asian American educational achievement, this book does not claim to address the question "How do they do it?" Nicholas Kristof cites "hard work, strong families, and passion for education" (2015: 9), to which we don't disagree. The sociologists Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, in the well-researched book *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (2015), cite immigration laws, institutions, and culture to explain high achievement among some Asian immigrant groups. However, that is not the point. I leave it for Chua, Kristof, Lee and Zhou, and others to provide the purported golden key (the formula, the recipe, the how-to) that unlocks

the door of elite university admissions for Asian Americans and others. Rather, *Straight A's* addresses the consequences and meanings of doing it, of attaining such a lofty goal. Those consequences include personal and family pride, high levels of social responsibility, empathic leadership, and community engagement. Those consequences also include the personal toll of trying to "do it all," as evidenced in eating disorders, substance abuse, addictive behaviors, self-injury, and even suicide. All students included here know one or more Asian American undergraduates at Harvard who have faced these dark consequences; some whose stories are included have suffered themselves. Yet other consequences include access to higher status circles for themselves and their families, and a sense of familiarity with broader elite strata of American society. That elite milieu is clearly a world of making and maintaining connections that will help an individual gain access and ultimately climb the rungs of public and private "success." *Straight A's* anticipates that process for these Asian American students as a complex mechanism that begins on the college campus, and extends beyond, incurring both costs and benefits along the way.

This book is not meant to be a sensationalist exposé, prying open the model minority door of achievement in search of rattling skeletons. Our aim is not to focus solely on the personal costs or hidden ills—although these are undoubtedly part of the collective story. Indeed, naysayers love lurid details that attack or expose those on top, or at least question the very processes of achievement, the means to the end. This is part of the terrain of elite institutions, which these students know well. Neither is this book meant to be a paean to their accomplishments—the chief of which, so far in many of their lives, has been getting into an elite institution in the first place.

Rather, this book looks at these and other issues through the lens of socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes, as well as highly personal experiences. By juxtaposing the structural practices with personal experiences amid a cultural milieu of achievement, *Straight A's* contributes to a general conversation about contemporary American society against a backdrop of immigrant histories, racial/ethnic stereotypes, and multicultural mixings. And lastly, on an even broader scale, this book thinks through the American Dream itself—a national ethos of achievement, success, and upward mobility as the rewards of hard work. That dream takes on a particular trajectory for offspring of immigrants, especially

in the context of college life, as the anthropologist Nancy Abelmann explains: "The American University . . . stands as the sine qua non of the fulfillment of that American dream, for it is there that the immigrant's children will enter as equals, equally poised to grow into that dream" (2009: 7). Or at least that is the stereotypical ideal, the stuff of immigrant hopes (including that of Asian Americans), and the purported pathway to success. Thus, the American Dream for these Asian American families is not a hyphenated one, but a singular aspirational vision of assimilationist success. Here are achievements and sociabilities historically attributed to the privileges of whiteness laid at the feet of these Asian American offspring. Examining what might be taken as the pathway and milieu of "success" from among the most "successful," this book queries the stakes involved, asking what might this "pursuit of happiness" look and feel like, on the ground, for a racialized group with a long complex history of immigration and minority relations?

Taking a close look at minority student life at elite college and universities holds great fascination for the general public and scholars. For example, a study by a psychology professor, Elizabeth Aries, of black and white students at Amherst College is laudable for its carefully controlled research conditions; the study included interviews of fifty-eight undergraduates from their freshman to senior years (2008; Aries and Berman 2012). Structured along bifurcated racial lines, Aries's research takes diversity as a social and educational experiment, and it asks the extent to which learning from diversity takes place, as well as the challenges of the student experience. Admittedly, there are many other student experiences of diversity to be had, especially with forty-five entering Amherst freshmen self-identifying as Asian or Asian American; however, Aries's study provides valuable insights from the structural and individual perspectives.

Closer to the topic of *Straight A's,* in 2004 the editors Arar Han and John Y. Hsu published a collection of thirty-five Asian American coming-of-age stories entitled *Asian American X: An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices* (2004). Their project began in reaction to a March 2001 satirical op-ed in *The Harvard Crimson* (a student newspaper) by an Asian American student and *Crimson* staff writer, Justin Fong (class of 2003), entitled "The Invasian," in which Fong accuses Harvard Asian Americans of perpetuating racially based stereotypes, including self-segregation. Incurring strong reactions not only at Harvard but also from

other parts of the country, Fong's article incited Han and Hsu to collect personal stories from Asian American college students nationwide, with the primary aim to display the diversity of college-age Asian American experiences. The goal of *Straight A's* is more focused, placing student stories at one elite institution within the framework of model minority stereotypes, academic achievement, and even the American Dream. We give voice more specifically to those who have achieved what every Tiger Mom (and Dad) wants: literal and figurative straight A's.

The Model Minority Myth: The Racialized Good Child

Part and parcel of the straight-A's achievement is the model minority myth. Although the phrase seems to capture a commonplace element of immigrant populations, its history goes back only so far as December 1966, when it was coined by the sociologist William Peterson in an essay, "Success Story: Japanese American Style," published in the *New York Times Magazine*. In his essay, Peterson cited elements of Japanese American culture—strong work ethic and family values—that make the Japanese American a "model minority" in contrast with a "problem minority" (Peterson 1966b: 20–21). (In a later article in *U.S. News and World Report* in December 1966, Peterson extended his comments to Chinese Americans as well, thus providing a more inclusive "Asian American" umbrella for the model minority characterization.) As Peterson was writing during a time of African American racial unrest, Asian Americans provided an exemplary assimilationist model of citizenship in contrast to the delinquent, criminal model of disruption (the "problem minority"). The components of the model minority stereotype rest exactly in achievement, but are done within parameters aligned with assimilation: (1) middle class, with an emphasis on white-collar middle-management professions that reinforce what has been called a "bamboo ceiling" of limitations; (2) a strong work ethic, resulting in achievement distributed by effort in a true meritocracy, rather than differentially attributed to innate talent; (3) ties to family, sometimes as the fount of motivation and rewards; (4) rationality over emotionality, resulting in even temperament and stability (i.e., dependability, reliability) as evidenced in low rates of mental illness and crime; (5) education, particularly achievement in math and science; and

(6) acceptance of authority, resulting in overall compliance and docility, accepting tasks and situations, rather than resisting, complaining, or rebelling (Wu 2014). The Asian American functions as the diligent, hard-working "good" minority, thus supporting existing societal structures and values—the American Dream—with a focus on education that provides a smoothly functional social uplift.

Note that although the parameters may be derived from an assimilationist perspective, part of the model minority status of Asian Americans lies in what is perceived to be limits to their assimilation. Those limits may be laid at the feet of their historically racialized status as the "forever foreigner," "fresh off the boat" ("FOB") no matter how many generations of lives in America have elapsed (including "ABC"—American-born Chinese, and other multigenerational Asian Americans), always tied to Asia and thus the immigration process (Tuan 1998). This positioning is not only historical but also contemporary as exemplified by a 2017 provocative exhibition of art by Asian Americans (versus "Asian American art") in Oakland, California, intended to defy racialized forever-foreigner stereotypes, entitled *Excuse Me, Can I See Your ID?* (Frank 2017). The model minority myth provides a doubled move, focused on that ID: first, drawing Asian Americans in close as a model of good behavior; and, second, keeping them at bay as the forever foreigners, the "almost-but-not-quite white," the outsiders who must continually show their IDs (implicit by their race).

But there is a third move involved here as well. What lies as the backdrop to the model minority stereotype is always the implicit "problem minority"—in the 1960s, primarily African Americans—whose members seemingly do things "wrong" and thereby fall short. Thus, both the model minority and its implicit "problem minority" frame the racialization of the groups, their relative place in American society, and the whiteness of their backdrop. Racialization—the practice of creating, buttressing, and hierarchizing marked categories of human bodies and groups—permeates the structuring of this minority status (Rodriguez 2015: 21; cf. Omi and Winant 1986). And for every minority, there is not only a majority, but, more important, other minorities with which to parry or be parried. Asian Americans provide the ultimate contrastive, "safe," even exemplary non-whites who quietly take their place in American society through close-knit families, relatively small numbers concentrated in ethnic enclaves, and modestly successful small businesses (Chow 2017). The stereotype of

Asian American exceptionalism suggests that nearly all other nonwhite minorities—but especially blacks—are both the norm and the problem. Here is where the racialized parrying comes in.

The model minority stereotype thus builds upon as well as challenges the historical bifurcation of race in America into black and white categories, even as Asian Americans (and other nonwhites) push thinking into racial triangulations or more. As Claire Jean Kim makes clear, "Asian Americans have been racialized relative to and through interaction with Whites and Blacks. As such, the respective racialization trajectories of these groups are profoundly interrelated" (1999: 106). In this way, creating, conceptualizing, and performing race in part through shifting juxtapositions of various groups—that is, interrelated racializations—underpin minority status, model or otherwise. Furthermore, racial triangulation occurs exactly when one dominant group (here, whites) pits one group (Asian Americans) over another (blacks) through relative positions of valorization, such as a model minority status (Kim 1999: 107). As the author and provocateur Frank Chin famously wrote in 1974, "Whites love us [Asian Americans] because we're not black" (Chin 1974: iv). The resulting racialized hierarchies build on what George Lipsitz (1998) calls a "possessive investment in whiteness"—that is, a privileged position of whites based in a concept and enactment of race that controls resources, prestige, and opportunity, even while demanding its continual investment by stakeholders.

The model minority stereotype of Asian Americans may be most succinctly characterized by its passive conformism, which is keeping quiet, playing it safe, and thus being "good." These are lives stereotypically built upon straightness. Asian Americans typically fill middle-management positions, rather than top leadership; this cap of achievement is often referred to as the "bamboo ceiling" from a 2005 book by Jane Hyun, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians.* The stereotype within education in particular focuses on elite institutions. For example, in 1998, *Black Issues in Higher Education* identified the institutions that granted the most baccalaureate degrees to Asian Americans in 1996: Stanford University (433, constituting 25 percent of graduating seniors), Massachusetts Institute of Technology ([MIT] 376; 30.7 percent), Harvard (330; 18.3 percent), and Columbia University (280; 20.2 percent) (Chang and Kiang 2002: 144). In spite of these numbers that seem to confirm the stereotype,

what is missing are the many Asian Americans who attend a wide variety of higher education schools, from two-year to four-year schools, public and private, and at different levels of prestige (Chang and Kiang 2002: 144). The stereotype suggests excelling at STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering, math—the foundations of the industrial and corporate world, more than literature, history, psychology, or art. However, the stereotype ignores the numbers of Asian American students who need remedial work once they enter college (Chang and Kiang 2002: 144).

The stereotype strongly follows middle-class norms, including childhood lessons and excellence in Western classical music, but even the instruments typically played are the ones with higher prestige—piano and violin—rather than clarinet, saxophone, tuba, or percussion (Yoshihara 2007). The stereotype includes a future orientation, toeing the line in the present for the incipient rewards of a high-paying job, respectable career, and solid family life. This is a life of playing it safe, straight down the middle. The stereotype also includes a certain degree of interacting within an ethnic enclave, socializing primarily with other Asian Americans, even at a highly cosmopolitan university. These elements compose a snapshot stereotype of the "good child" Asian American undergraduate at Harvard, often reaping the benefits of his or her positioning as the model minority. As one Chinese American student told me after class one day, "I was startled to realize that my life has followed the stereotype so exactly."

Of course many undergraduates of various ethnicities at Harvard (and other elite institutions) have quite likely led similar lives; but not all of them have done so amid a stereotype that precedes them. Even if individual Asian American students have been aware of the stereotype to greater or lesser degrees, being part of a model minority grouping invariably frames lives. And it is this very frame and its consequences that form the subject here.

So why is the model minority stereotype considered a myth and a burden? Undeniably, this stereotype, like all others, has some founding in fact. But the problem lies in whom it excludes, such as the poor, the socially disenfranchised (including LGBTQ individuals), the criminal, the mentally ill, the rebellious, maybe even the assertive. The stereotype creates expectations laid upon individuals, groups, and whole communities—assimilationist rather than assertive, doing well rather than struggling. When those expectations are met—for example, when someone of Ko-

rean descent scores well on a math test—the achievement may be either downplayed ("but of course") or attributed to racialized and thus natural "abilities" (a combination of proclivity and hard work). By contrast, when the expectations are not fulfilled—for example, when someone of Chinese descent suffers from depression—the condition may be ignored or viewed as aberrational. The stereotype thus acts as a straitjacket of expectations, overlooking or ostracizing those who do not quite fit, in whole or parts.

Furthermore, the stereotype pits minority groups against each other and implies a level playing field in which one group or individual can merely choose by one's actions whether to be "good" or "bad," whether to be a model or a problem child. This assumption ignores structural inequalities and racialized barriers thrown up around stereotypes. As Kinohi Nishikawa, an African American studies professor at Princeton University (himself, Asian American), puts it, "I want to show my Asian American students that it is an unfortunate burden to live up to the model-minority myth that was set up to prop up inequalities in America. It's a burden on us because these ideals are both impossible to meet and because they are ideals premised on the continued exploitation of other minorities. . . . But more profoundly, they are ideals premised on the continued minoritization of Asians and the continued patronizing of Asians as the silent, docile Americans in the American polity" (quoted in Cheng 2015).

Some might question the validity of speaking critically about a stereotype that holds such positive values: middle-class lifestyle, education, family values, strong work ethic, overall achievement. What is so wrong with that? In the face of ongoing racialized violence in the United States and elsewhere, including by police, this may seem relatively trivial. And yet I would argue that stereotypes perform their own kind of violence, whether physical, psychological, or emotional. They disable even as they enable, internalized within "good-child," racialized selves. Here are some of the more pernicious effects of the field of racial power in which model minority tropes operate. The dazzling whiteness of what has been called "color-blind racism"—structures of privilege that hide behind putative meritocracies—finds its most dire home within, particularly for the highest achievers, model minorities. Interestingly, in October 2015, the *New York Times* published an electronic debate, "The Effects of Seeing Asian

Americans as a Model Minority," with contributing authors including a Harvard undergraduate senior, Bernadette Lim ("'Model Minority' Seems Like a Compliment, but It Does Great Harm"). Lim earlier contributed a piece to the *Harvard Crimson* entitled "I Am Not a Model Minority" in which she wrote, "In grouping all Asian Americans as high achievers, avid students, and career climbers, society fails to acknowledge the nuance and disparity. 'Asian American' encompasses a diverse range of dialects and ethnicities. . . . I am not a model minority and never will be. No such thing exists" (Lim 2014).

Critiquing the model minority stereotype is not to weigh one group's woes against another's, but it does suggest the importance of rallying around each other's plights, of recognizing the structural violence that takes place in ways that harm us all, including those who would identify themselves as part of the majority, and to acknowledge the perniciousness of racially based microaggressions—that is, "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental . . . slights and insults" (Sue 2010: 5; Vega 2014). *Straight A's* asserts the significance of examining closely the myths of achievement itself, including the young lives of those at the center of many people's dreams. The model minority stereotype may have long been undermined and overturned in some parts of the United States, and yet the myth continues to play a role in controversies, such as the possibility of racial quotas at elite institutions. And most perniciously, the myth plays a role in shaping people's lives, including their own expectations of themselves. The Asian American model minority myth helps define the racialized "good child": the goal of this book is to query that goodness.

The Harvard Context, Race, and Critical University Studies

This is a story of not only the "good child," but also, in many ways, the "best child," achieving the pinnacle of success for many eighteen-year-olds and their families—entrance to Harvard College. I write this introduction against the backdrop of American elite institutions with their own histories of overt discrimination and foundational stories built in imperialism, slavery, and exploitation, and the din of recent attempts to decolonize these campuses (cf. Sinclair 1923; Viswanathan 1993). In 2015 and 2016 at Harvard Law School, for example, student protestors orga-

nized under the rubric "Reclaim Harvard Law" in order to force the removal of the family seal of a brutal slaveholder, Isaac Royall Jr., whose endowment founded the school in 1817 (Lartey 2016). The emerging field of critical university studies begins with these histories and incorporates them in examining labor practices, admissions policies, minority faculty hiring and retainment, the corporatization of higher education, and student debt, albeit with an emphasis on public institutions (Williams 2012). Critical university studies provides an important framework for these student stories, identifying ways by which racialized practices and experiences occur within the context of intellectualism, history, demographics, and social exclusivity in higher education. These factors become the components that help construct the rarefied atmosphere of elitism itself, particularly at those bastions of privilege known as the Ivy League institutions. Indeed, many parallels exist at elite universities between the Asian Americans of today and the Jews of yesterday, who were also subject to stereotypes of overachievement and admissions quotas (Karabel 2005). The structures of long-standing privilege have a habit of returning, sometimes in not so thinly veiled guises.

Diversity (including affirmative action) is a constant goal and skeleton rattling in the closets of elite universities. Notably, much is made of incoming classes. The *Harvard Crimson*, for example, annually conducts what is known as the freshman survey among those admitted and publishes the results, which includes details on demographics, geography, and employment. The class of 2017, for example, holds a predictable majority of 55.9 percent whites, 19.9 percent Asian American, 11.5 percent African American, 11.5 percent Latino, 2.2 percent Native American, and 0.5 percent Native Hawaiian, with foreign students making up 10.3 percent of admitted students (*Harvard Crimson* 2013). Part of what makes diversity recruitment possible is generous financial aid. Like most elite institutions, admissions is not contingent on ability to pay; thus, the amount that a family does pay for tuition exists on a sliding scale based on need, with the rest made up for by the institution. According to the Griffin Financial Aid Office at Harvard, 55 percent of undergraduates receive Harvard scholarships; 20 percent of families have total incomes less than $65,000 and thus are not expected to contribute anything toward tuition (Harvard College Griffin Financial Aid Office n.d.).

Thus, diversity in terms of enrollment hits its goals, albeit with room

for improvement. However, other structural institutional issues pose continuing challenges: for our purposes, the ones most pertinent include historically canonical approaches to scholarship and other intellectual pursuits that have previously made it difficult to recognize and create new disciplinary tracks. Thus, fields such as ethnic studies (including Asian American studies), originating in the late 1960s with student strikes in the San Francisco Bay area, and established at both San Francisco State University and University of California, Berkeley, in 1969, have met with resistance at many Ivy League institutions, including Harvard. This is not just a matter of public versus private institutions—although sources of funding certainly play a role in approaches to elitism. Here, we must also take into account a certain degree of regionalism, both in the demographics of populations (e.g., there are higher concentrations of Asian Americans on the West Coast, and they were politically active in the 1970s), as well as approaches to scholarship (e.g., higher investment in older, established fields of learning in prestigious East Coast Ivy League institutions). For example, the Association for Asian American Studies compiled a directory of institutionalized Asian American studies programs in the United States in 2007. Among the thirty-two institutions with such programs, eighteen were on the West Coast (including Stanford University and five University of California campuses), four were in the Midwest, and ten were on the East Coast (including Columbia University, Cornell University, and the University of Pennsylvania). Among the twenty institutions with Asian American programs within departments, thirteen were on the West Coast, four were in the Midwest, and three were on the East Coast (including Brown University). And among institutions that offered Asian American courses, one was on the West Coast, three were in the Midwest, and fourteen were on the East Coast (including Harvard, Princeton University, and Yale University; since this list was compiled, Dartmouth should be added to institutions with Asian American courses). A list such as this gives no indication of the history behind institutional investment in Asian American studies, including combining preexisting Asian studies (long legitimized as a field of scholarship) with Asian American studies (borne out of the identity politics of the 1970s), or the impetus of a campus racial incident and resulting student protest (including Harvard's very own, discussed later in this book).

Institutional support is not only about courses, concentrations (ma-

jors), and departments; it is also about faculty hiring and retention. Student and alumni activism surrounding Asian American and other minority hires firmly recognizes the significance of full-time tenure-track positions, subsequent tenure decisions, and even favorable conditions of pay, intellectual community, and collegiality that would make minority faculty want to stay. This fully acknowledges the exceptions to these regional generalizations, as well as the historically shifting nature of the issues, especially in more recent high-profile hires of esteemed scholars of color at Harvard: Henry Louis Gates Jr., Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research (since 1991); Cornel West, Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy, Harvard Divinity School, and Department of African and African-American Studies (in an on-again, off-again relationship with the institution, 2001–2002, and scheduled, as of this writing, in 2017); and Homi Bhabha, Professor of English and American Literature and Language, and Director of the Mahindra Center for the Humanities (since 2001). Perhaps more significantly, issues of race on the East Coast tend to dwell in the binary of black versus white, with an emergent consciousness of Latinx. In short, Asian Americans—and thus Asian American studies—find little place within this conceptual racial landscape, prevalent in the Northeast, but generalized to an extent throughout the United States.

Harvard is not alone, of course. And one could go through comparable Asian American curricula and faculty hires and minority retention (or lack thereof) at other Ivy League institutions—with the notable exceptions of Cornell University, which pioneered Asian American studies on the East Coast and with Ivy League institutions since 1987, the University of Pennsylvania since 1996, and Columbia University since 1998. The far more typical treatment lies in the relative paucity of attention paid to this demographic as a field of study. The message this sends to students is clear: at some of the most prestigious bastions of higher learning in the United States, especially within the particularized East Coast enclave constituted by Ivy League schools, talk and legitimized study of critical issues of race in America are both late to the table and focused on blacks, whites, and more recently browns, while overlooking Native Americans and Asian Americans, including those of mixed race.

Notably since my time at Harvard, student agitation at campuses across the United States, including elite East Coast schools such as Har-

vard, Princeton, Brown, Columbia, Yale, and Amherst, about this and other critical race issues has made for public discussion and calls for intervention (Hartocollis and Bidgood 2015; Wong and Greene 2016). The *Harvard Gazette* took a curiously passive position in its headline article of November 22, 2015: "A National Wave Hits Harvard" (Mineo 2015). The Harvard version of that "national wave" included a new college report on campus racial politics by a newly convened Working Group on Diversity and Inclusion; a racial incident at Harvard Law School involving the defacement of portraits of African American professors; and campus demonstrations in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Harvard's president, Drew Faust, responded as follows: "We have much work to do to make certain that Harvard belongs to every one of us. . . . We must create the conditions in which each one of us feels confident in declaring, 'I, too, am Harvard' " (quoted in Mineo 2015). Faust references the "I, Too, Am Harvard" project begun by a biracial (Asian American, black, from Hawai'i) student, Kimiko Matsuda-Lawrence, who interviewed and photographed black undergraduates about their experiences at Harvard, posting broadly through social media with the hashtag #itooamharvard and culminating in a play in the spring of 2014 (http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/). "I, Too, Am Harvard" gave critical voice to minority experiences at the prestigious, historically white institution, not unlike the impulse to gather the stories of *Straight A's*.

The protests at Harvard have produced some results regarding Asian Americans (Karr 2016a, 2016b). For example, as of 2016, an Asian American Studies Working Group (AASWG) has been formed under the umbrella of the preexisting Harvard Committee on Ethnicity, Migration, Rights. The AASWG lists two faculty affiliates, both females, one Korean American and one Filipina American, one an associate professor and one an assistant professor. Within the hierarchy of positions and structures at universities, this faculty demographic (junior, females of color) and institutional status ("working group," not a department or concentration) illustrate the newness of Asian American studies at Harvard. This newness includes ongoing movement—particularly with pressure placed by the Harvard Asian American Alumni Alliance—toward establishing a fully institutionalized ethnic studies program that would include Asian American studies. These baby steps illustrate the uphill battle for recognition and legitimacy within places of privilege, but they are steps nonetheless.

Privilege has a home at Harvard, as at other elite institutions of higher learning. However, this is more than a story of undergraduate life at Harvard. Clearly, Harvard is exceptional among universities in the United States and in the larger world. Of all U.S. educational institutions, Harvard holds a position of not only excellence, but also renown and status. There are others, of course, duly listed in annual rankings of top educational institutions in the United States. But the Harvard name imparts far-reaching global prestige—call it brand-name recognition. This holds particularly true in East Asia, where hierarchy and status are ongoing components of daily life. Moreover, luminary figures tie Harvard to East Asia—most notably the contemporaries John K. Fairbank (1907–1991), a scholar of China, and Edwin O. Reischauer (1910–1990), a scholar of Japan. A professor of Chinese history at Harvard, Fairbank held degrees from Harvard and Oxford. He helped establish the field of Chinese studies in 1955 as a founding member and director of the Center for East Asian Research at Harvard, which was renamed the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies upon his retirement in 1977. Reischauer was born in Tokyo and graduated from high school there, subsequently earning his PhD at Harvard University. He championed the promotion of Asia in the United States, served as the U.S. ambassador to Japan (1961–1966), and taught at Harvard for four decades. In 1973 he became the founding director of the Japan Institute, which was renamed the Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies upon his seventy-fifth birthday in 1985. High-profile figures such as Fairbank and Reischauer tie Asia to Harvard indelibly with the greatest respect.

Harvard thus holds a unique position in East Asia, in part through its long-standing association with Fairbank and Reischauer and the many scholars who have followed them. As a result, when I lived in a rural village in northeastern Japan briefly in 1997, mention of my Harvard affiliation as a postdoctoral fellow meant that I became a minor *gaijin* (foreigner) celebrity, giving speeches at the local junior high school and at community events. Widespread recognition of Harvard as a global brand can be seen in the groups of Asian tourists who flock to Harvard Yard on any given day, crowding around the statue of John Harvard (1607–1638) (an early benefactor for whom the institution was named) or shopping in earnest at the Harvard Co-op for souvenirs.

Because Harvard holds such high status, including in Asia, this means

that the stakes are considerably higher than the norm for Asian Americans. Getting into Harvard means the highest achievement not only for an individual, but also for rippling circles of affiliation: immediate and extended families that can go all the way back to Asia, schools and school districts, hometowns and counties, even friends and acquaintances. These circles hold bragging rights centered upon the Harvard student, even if the students themselves, by unspoken Harvard code, are not allowed to do the bragging. In Harvard-speak, bragging suggests that one is exceptional in overreaching; rather, the "true" Harvard student—one who belongs most by birthright—need not brag because he or she simply is. (This is not unlike the critique made of the so-called crassness and showiness of the nouveau riche.) Thus the proud circles of families (including in Asia) and friends only demonstrate their lack of birthright by bragging: crowing is the mark of the minority. Furthermore, even within Harvard University, there is widespread acknowledgment that undergraduates (that is, students of Harvard College) represent the elite of the elite. More than one faculty member and administrator I spoke with admitted that he or she could not have gotten into Harvard as an undergraduate; I include myself among them.

What these high stakes mean most directly is that there is high pressure. The atmosphere is intense with higher highs and lower lows. There is pressure to do well, to continue one's reputation as the "good child," to live up to expectations from those circles of pride, to continue the upward trajectory of one's life. There is constant pressure to take one's place in the world—or, better yet, to carve it for and by oneself. High status means high responsibility. Merely going to graduate school upon attaining a bachelor's degree may not be quite notable enough. Rather, many undergraduates I spoke with had bigger plans, including independent ventures, Washington, DC, internships, and prestigious fellowships abroad. These notable ambitions may go well beyond the stereotype of just-so achievement, but Asian Americans, too, get caught up in the Harvard whirlwind of above-and-beyond activities. Classes are only the start of what keeps them busy; rather, many are involved in numerous extracurricular organizations that hone leadership and initiative, laying the groundwork for their future lives (see chapters 6 and 7). The Harvard College experience actively develops a corps of leaders, on both large and small scales. Even if the individual student does not expect to take the world by storm, he or

she is surrounded by people who don this mantle eagerly. Leadership is in the air. And Harvard College serves as the training ground to look and act the part, where one should be comfortable in coat and tie or tasteful high heels, become well versed in small-talk chatter that strikes the right balance of social grace and levity appropriate to receptions with dignitaries, and steadily build a résumé of contacts (including each other) and accomplishments. Even the shy are well practiced, if not entirely comfortable. Some students spoke to me of learning to dress to a certain expected level, even for daily shuttling between classes; although there is certainly no dress code and "business" or "business casual" is not the norm, one student whom I met in a social setting and allowed to visit my classroom had arrived bright and early the next day in coat and tie. All students may not agree with these practices, some may even actively resist them, but most would recognize this milieu as part of the Harvard experience.

My point here is both to recognize the exceptionalism that is Harvard, as well as to proffer the Cambridge campus as a microcosm of Asian American achievement at an elite institution, and thus useful for the larger discussion that frames this book. If only a fraction of Asian Americans actually attend Harvard, the institution in which Asian Americans are deemed overrepresented refracts the larger ethnic experience in important ways. I argue that examining the lives of those who live the goal allows us to critically consider the goal itself, the pathways to achievement, and the experiences of the pedestal. Harvard-isms aside, this is a story far more about Asian Americans than it is about one institution that represents many of their dreams (or that of their parents). *Straight A's* tells the stories about the path that allowed many of these students to enter this elite realm, as well as what they did once they got there. But it also tells these stories as reflections upon a particular version of the American Dream of achievement and assimilation that is Harvard.

In short, the stories gathered here are undeniably Harvard stories, but the focus is more on the students and their lives than on the institution. At the same time, Harvard looms large as a dream that has and will shape these lives: first as an aspiration, then as a lived reality, and finally as a source of careers, networks, friends, and perhaps spouses, personal identities, and reflections. Even after matriculation, these students will forever be known as "Harvard graduates." The institution is thus indelibly a part of them.

Backstory: A Personal Note on the Biography of This Book

Before turning to this book's contribution to the Asian American conversation, I think it is important to understand a bit more of the backstory, hinted at in Franklin Odo's foreword. Nineteen students enrolled in Anth 1606, "Being Asian American," of whom all but two were Asian American with ancestry linking them to South Asia, China, Korea, and the Philippines. We had fifteen females and four males. For most, this was the first Harvard course on Asian Americans they had taken, and many of these students were seniors. What I heard from them repeatedly was deep appreciation that there was such a course on campus dedicated to people like themselves. However in the status-conscious realm that is Harvard, the fact that this was a newly proposed, onetime course by a visiting professor could only reaffirm the relatively low level of commitment of the institution to the subject matter.

Harvard is not alone, of course, among elite institutions in its tendency to ignore Asian Americans. Especially on the East Coast, the institutional recognition of Asian American studies as an important field remains nascent. This holds true even as the study of Asia remains a historically vibrant source of intellectual inquiry. The Fairbank and Reischauer centers and the richly endowed libraries pay tribute to the deep and lasting commitment of the university to the study of Asia, past and present. Thus, the institutional disparity between "Asia" as a legitimate field of study contrasts sharply with the relatively dismissive handling of "Asian America." This is worth mentioning not only for the hand-wringing that it calls forth, but also as an important backdrop to the experiences of Asian American students. At places such as these, Asian America and its various populations have only just begun to warrant a modicum of recognition as a legitimate field of study and research. This, then, is part of the Asian American student experience.

Our class read histories and ethnographies. We watched films, including one in the process of being made by a Filipino adoptee whose own personal quest for identity became the subject of intense classroom discussion and an email exchange with the filmmaker (*Binitay: Journey of a Filipino Adoptee* [2014] by James Beni Wilson). We drummed: the renowned taiko drummer Kenny Endo and his son Miles gave a lecture and demonstration during which all members of the class learned and

performed a short drum sequence. We ate: the class took a fieldtrip to Chinatown co-led by a Boston University food anthropologist, Dr. Merry White, during which we shared plates of dim sum. We reached out to others: each student interviewed another Harvard Asian American undergraduate and wrote a final paper based upon the interview in conjunction with readings.

Mostly we engaged in what in Hawai'i is called "talk story"—interacting with each other on the basis of people's stories. This is what the students found most moving. Many of the stories produced "aha" moments of connection as mothers, fathers, favorite dishes, campus tensions, and mental health issues were found to be shared experiences, rather than isolated events. Even the students who were not of Asian American ancestry could draw upon their own experiences, sometimes of immigrant family backgrounds, to connect with the spontaneous and guided "identity work" of the classroom. The stories tied the students one to another through their very familiarity.

However, there is yet another critical element to the semester that galvanized the class. On Friday, October 3, 2014, an email death threat was sent to approximately three hundred individuals connected with Harvard, the primary target of which were female undergraduates with Asian surnames. The sender threatened to come to campus and shoot people, and with a particular target: "slit-eyes." With that, the class—and particularly the three students among them who received this initial death threat, as well as other students who received the follow-up email threats—spiraled into a race- and gender-based tailspin. One of the students chose to write about her experiences (see chapter 3's narrative entitled "#UNAPOLOGETIC" by Emily Woo), for which I am most grateful as part of the documentation of this book. But in truth, all of us were horrified by the incident, especially as it extended to more than a single emailed message, but connected with previous and ongoing Facebook friend requests (something that many of the students found even creepier than the email message) and other communications that continued into December 2014. The topics of race, gender, sexuality, and identity politics became etched with razor-sharp focus as far more than words on a page or topics of intellectual discussion, but cause for pain, anger, fear, and indignation. I quickly called a panel discussion together, and five representatives of Asian American groups, support staff, and administration discussed is-

sues, but understandably with little resolution. The upshot of this incident was superficially benign—the purported perpetrator was a Vietnamese man living in Germany who subsequently apologized—but indelibly etched, especially for Asian American students. It left them feeling violated and vulnerable—and angry. And for some Asian American students on campus, it became a catalyst for thinking through and about race.

What infuriated students was not only the emailed threats and Facebook incursions, but also the tepid institutional response and lack of media coverage (Conway and Lee 2014; Lee 2014). In short, it was the relative silence that followed the threat that students found unnerving. When I mentioned the incident to some faculty and students at nearby MIT, many had not heard of it. I was stunned. I would have expected such a racial incident—especially at a high-profile institution—to have made the national news, much less traveled the few blocks between these two campuses. But in many ways that was exactly the point, both racially and institutionally. In our class we asked, would the response have been the same if this were another racialized group that was targeted? Would so few people know? This includes growing concentric circles of ignorance: other members of the Harvard community, neighboring institutions such as MIT, regional communities in and around Boston, national media, and beyond. The dismay was profound and, as one of the students writes, isolating. That isolation, confirmed by silence, only hammered home their model minority position. For many student observers, it seemed as if only the voices from the Harvard Asian American Alumni Alliance, alumni with clout, some wealth, and a vested interest in the case, could command the direct attention of top administration. The relative lack of a timely, unified, and thereby galvanizing response shrouds this incident in the kind of silence that some students accept amidst their busy-ness, while others find it stultifying.

Here is "An Open Letter to Harvard," dated October 9, 2014, signed "Concerned members of the Harvard Asian-American community," and published in the student newsletter *The Harvard Independent,* as well as in the Harvard-based feminist publication *Manifesta Magazine:*

> We have been disappointed in the official response to this incident. In the four emails [to the Harvard community] sent by HUPD [Harvard University Police Department] Public Information Officer Ste-

> phen Catalano, none mentioned the anti-Asian sentiment of the emails or that they had primarily been sent to Asian and Asian American women. In fact, the administration edited an email from the organizers of Perspectives, the pan-Asian American and Pacific Islander town hall that was postponed due to the threats. In forwarding the message to the Harvard community, the administration purposefully cut out the organizers' reference to the specifically racist and misogynist nature of the emails. By not including this essential information, HUPD and the university minimized our community's horror and confusion at receiving these messages, and put Asian and Asian American students in danger by withholding the knowledge that the threat had been directed at them. . . . We, as Asian Americans, refuse to apologize for who we are or for our existence. . . . We are unapologetic for being afraid, for being angry, for feeling resentful, for being at Harvard, and most of all—for demanding better. (*Harvard Independent* 2014; *Manifesta Magazine* 2014)

Pushed to the limit, the writers boldly proclaim: no model minority here. A letter such as this vividly voices the emotional, even defiant, response of these Asian American students, not only to the email itself, but also to the perceived attempt to deemphasize first the racist, then the misogynist, nature of the email threat.

On November 4, 2014, one month after the initial incident, at a meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Faust made this statement regarding the email threats: "Any form of aggression, and any targeting of members of our community based on ethnicity, is a threat to our commitment to a safe, inclusive environment in which every individual of every background feels a sense of safety and belonging, in which every individual has the opportunity to thrive" (Office of the President 2014).

The emailed racist, sexist death threat was not the only thing that happened during the fall of 2014, and the class finished out the term with all the assignments, readings, and papers as laid out so tidily in the syllabus that I had concocted. But the email incident—including the silences of its aftermath—crystallized some of the conditions and dilemmas faced by Asian American students. If membership in an elite institution places someone upon a pedestal, that pedestal may come with its own dangers. In part it is the public nature of achievement that places the sometimes

fraught frame around Asian Americans (and other Harvard underclassmen). It also suggests some of the dangers of that public pedestal. These dangers paint the tenuous terrain of being on top, of the weight of responsibility that elite institutions engender, of the jealousy of others, of the impossibly high expectations laid upon the backs of one's future. And for Asian Americans these dangers often come framed within terms laid out by intimates near and far—families, communities, even diasporic homelands (see the interview with Diane Lau in chapter 2). In sum, achievement weighs heavily, broadly, and emotionally.

Moved by the students' stories myself and by the conditions of their lives and achievements, I offered students the opportunity to continue our conversations, possibly leading to a publication based upon their stories. I suggested that their stories could be a commentary upon the Tiger Mom headlines and Asian American model minority myth. It could be a contribution to the conversation surrounding ethnic minority groups and differential achievement in the United States. In the spring of 2015 we developed stories further, even while adding new ones, in part through interviews. We dubbed the group the Asian American Collective (AAC) and met weekly, planning the book. AAC existed for the sole purpose of this book, and the members used their social networks to write and gather the stories. Potential contributors were not given specific guidelines (except for length) or topics other than their own experiences. In this way, the open-ended call for contributions yielded topics that students themselves considered important. Each member of AAC headed up a subject area, gathering and organizing relevant stories, although some of these subject areas were shuffled differently during the organization of this book. The final organization into chapters more closely reflected students' concerns and priorities, rather than, say, a researcher's (mine). For example, I felt that social class would be an important and separate chapter; however, the issue and topicality of social class did not resonate with students as much as it did with me. Part of the reason may be the unspoken taboo against talking specifically of social class, especially at a place like Harvard, which promotes an official policy of downplaying differential family resources. This holds true even while acknowledging the institution's heavy reliance on those resources, resulting in the largest endowment ($37.6 billion) of any institution of higher learning in the United States (Kowarski 2016). Social class thus becomes both the un-

spoken as well as the constant hum of these students' milieu. As a result, issues of social class got folded into the chapter on family (chapter 1), as well as sprinkled throughout the book. Thus, the organization of student stories into themed chapters—chapter 2 on race; chapter 3 on sexuality and gender; chapter 4 on intimacy; chapter 5 on mental health; chapter 6 on organizations; and chapter 7 on extracurricular activities—were more theirs than mine, reflecting the categories of student lives and concerns.

The students decided early on to maintain the anonymity of the storytellers through the use of pseudonyms and only a few identifiers, in the hopes that this would protect and allow them to tell their stories more freely. Interviewers are only identified by "AAC," although it is clear that each of these conversations represents a particular relationship between individuals. The editors also decided to eliminate some identifying markers in interviews for the sake of anonymity. The group and individual portraits of AAC members taken in April 2015—courtesy of the photographers Winnie Wu and Alex Pong—and brief contributor biographies at the end of the book are the only places of frontal reveal, and some students have taken the opportunity to speak directly to their processes of personal discovery through this project.

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction written by my coeditor, Neal A. Adolph Akatsuka, and me, providing a framing context for the issues at hand. An interview conversation between one of the AAC members and another Harvard Asian American undergraduate gives a more sprawling look at those issues. And last, but certainly not least, student narratives form the bulk of the chapters. Note that by design, the collective asked that the student narratives be kept short, so that a reader might easily browse between them, sampling by their individual interests.

Quite clearly, this is not my book, but one built upon the experiences, research, and writings of these undergraduates who have found in this project validation for their stories and for their place at this institution. This book represents only a small portion of Asian Americans at Harvard. But in their stories you can find yearnings, celebrations, and sincere concern for their place at the table of social responsibility. The stories understandably represent a certain uneven development of self-awareness of themselves in a broader world. They provide "raw material" for discussion rather than definitive statements, even in their unevenness, reflecting the reality of Asian American youth. Some of the stories may even end up

reinforcing some of the stereotypes or racialized frames, but this, too, is part of their lived reality and perception.

These are not stories of super humans, but of hardworking individuals who have spent their lives in pursuit of awards and achievement. Excellence has become their habitus. This book represents a brief moment of pause and self-reflection before they move on with their careers and future lives. But, importantly, this book also represents some of the structural conditions that have made these lives of achievement possible (as well as sometimes problematic). Much rests on the shoulders of these individuals and, for some, that weight sits uncomfortably. All of these storytellers recognize the burden of high expectation echoed in families, communities, institutions, and, most of all, themselves. They understand that eyes are upon them as they peek through their individual stories. Let us call these stories "Tiger tales"—appropriating Chua's moniker and referencing Asian ancestry, but for our own purposes of agency, individuality, and a certain strength, even fierceness. *Straight A's* examines and participates in that gaze as we consider the tales, their tellers, and the conditions of telling.

Those conditions are constantly changing. Together, all participants hope that this volume contributes in some small way to the conversation about minorities in the United States—specifically Asian Americans here, but more generally as well. Although the editors and contributors could not have foreseen the results of the U.S. presidential election of 2016, the new-old era brings to the forefront ongoing threats to immigrant lives and debates about their futures. Given this context—new conditions of these tales being told and read—the minority-focused discussion of *Straight A's* takes on greater significance within national and global debates of uncertainty and unease. Discrimination based upon race, religion, and immigrant status rears its ugly head yet again in highly public ways amid these troubling conditions.

We also anticipate that this book contributes to the conversation on higher education in the United States, with a focus here on elite institutions in terms of access, gateways, and structural conditions. In relative terms, this is a muted conversation, far overshadowed by almost daily reports of racialized violence in the United States. And yet this is a conversation worth probing in order to examine the full and interconnected spectrum of minority experience in the United States, not sitting smugly

within the confines of ivy-draped classrooms, but using those classrooms as a platform to examine structural violence and microaggressions amid practices of uplift, even privilege. How do we position the pot of gold of the American Dream of which academic achievement is a part? How do we make that pot part of the process, rather than a mere trophy at the end? We have to question the goals and paths, the ongoing dialogues around race, the experiences of stereotypes and their effects, and the very notions of achievement. We have to recognize, restructure, and reorder achievement itself—small and large, individual and group, within and between ethnic boundaries—as validating and bolstering the human condition. We hope that these stories may provide springboards for thoughts and actions. Perhaps these stories can act as prompts for self-reflection, conversations between generations, dialogues with friends. These stories were not always easy to write or sometimes even to read, and I personally thank the students for their candor, humility, and articulateness. *Straight A's* is meant to consider their place within the American fabric as they tell their own tales of lives whose achievements have been woven into the very fiber of their beings.