Beyond the Black, Brown, and White: Locating Self in Third Spaces in Social Justice Education

Lana Kim and Wonyoung Cho

In the United States (U.S.), race is a core organizing construct that impacts our identities, ways of being, experiences, and relationships. As family therapy clinicians, educators, and scholars with an Asian phenotype, we undoubtedly experience the salience of race play out in cross-racial dynamics with clients, colleagues, administrators, and students. Yet conversations about cross-racial relationships tend to center around the racial binary, highlighting racial tensions as existing between Black/Brown (more recently referred to as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; BIPOC) and white communities.

However, this obscures the complex ways in which "racial stains and strains" (Hardy, 2008, p. 81) also play out within cross-racial relationships among communities of color. Hardy's (2008) metaphor of "racial stains'' refers to the way in which racially charged events in history inevitably shape the context in which cross-racial relationships are subsequently formed and negotiated in the present. Thereby, "racial stains'' often undergird "racial strains" that get enacted through "polite, cautious, conflict- and intimacy-avoidant, non-trusting but semi-functional interactions that take place among members of diverse racial groups" (p. 81). It speaks to fragility in relationships and points to the need for acknowledging and working through contextual stains in order to create opportunities for meaningful and authentic cross-racial interactions.

As one and a half and second-generation cis-gender women of East Asian descent, race has been an undeniable direct entry point of our engagement into social justice work and one through which both our personal and professional lives intersect. However, our racialized Asian-American identity as well as our unique sociocultural identity are invisibilized or omitted from the dominant racial discourse

L. Kim (✉) · W. Cho
Lewis & Clark College, Portland, OR, USA
e-mail: lkim@lclark.edu; wonyoungcho@lclark.edu

L. A. Nice, C. Eppler (eds.), *Social Justice and Systemic Family Therapy Training*,
AFTA SpringerBriefs in Family Therapy, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29930-8_3

of the U.S. where the Black/Brown versus white binary prevails. Therefore, we operate from a structural position referred to as Third Space. In this chapter, we will explore the sociocultural and sociopolitical context of Asian-American realities and discuss how we engage in cross-racial work from Third Space.

1 Socioculturally Locating Asian-Americans in the U.S. Racial Discourse

Identity and belonging are complex topics for Asian-Americans, in part because of the racialized lens through which they are seen societally. This tendency to "other" Asian-Americans is attributable to long-standing representation in media and text that paints persons with Asian phenotypes as forever foreigners or honorary whites, regardless of migration status or birthplace (Tuan, 1998). This dominant narrative is deeply rooted in the sociopolitical history of the U.S., as seen through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the internment of Japanese Americans in 1942, discriminatory, pre-1965 immigration policies that placed head taxes and quotas on immigrants from Asian countries (Lee, 2015), the Asian-American Movement following the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s and the 1980s (Takaki, 1998) and again in the early 2000s when South Asian communities were targeted for their phenotypical similarities to the identified terrorists of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

The COVID-19 pandemic and global health crisis in the spring of 2020 speculated to be associated with activities in Wuhan, China, became a catalyst to reignite dormant, racist Yellow Peril (Kawai, 2005) anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. This coincided with the unjust killing of George Floyd, triggering an increase in the nation's racial consciousness in the midst of escalating political tensions around the national strategy to mitigate the pandemic spread. The resulting racial justice uprising that took hold included attention to the exponential increase in Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate crimes. Thus, the racial discourse in the U.S. started to actually include the nuanced AAPI experience.

Emergent sociological phenomena like this new attention to AAPI issues broadens the binary Black/Brown versus white dominant racial discourse. However, the historical tendency to lump Asian-Americans into the general category of BIPOC relates to the systemic effects of white supremacy: when whiteness is centered in systems, the illusion of BIPOC solidarity prevails. This misses the on-going complexities that have to be negotiated in cross-racial interactions. We see this occur at all societal levels including institutions of higher education.

During my first year as a tenure-track faculty at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S., I (WC) saw a flier for an affinity group for students of color with the slogan "is it hard being a Black and Brown face in a white place?" Though this question was meant to foster inclusivity and connection for members of the BIPOC community, it inadvertently invisibilized and excluded the experience and identity of Asian-American persons like me. This assumption of

the racial binary implies that I as an East Asian-American am invisible, which aligns with the strand of racial discrimination that Asian-Americans often face in the U.S. (Kao, 2006). These seemingly small cross-racial microaggressions often go unacknowledged, which contributes further strain to racial stains (Hardy, 2008).

2 Finding Third Space

Knowledge is culturally and historically specific (Burr, 2015). This applies to racial discourse and the way it shapes our personal and professional lives given our social, cultural, and historical locations. Our geographical contexts, the sociopolitical events we have lived through, our sociocultural conditioning, and our personal and familial immigration history shape our distinct experience of race. As Asian-Americans, we (LK and WC) share many phenotypic identity markers as well as our ethnic (Korean) heritage. However, our contextual realities are distinct and these differences have impacted our respective worldviews and experiences.

Third Space is a term from bilingual education that describes a hybrid learning space where multiple languages, knowledges, and sociocultural scripts are "mutually appropriated" for a more expansive and creative learning outside of a binary framework (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 153). We use this construct as a conceptual framework to understand our cultural and racial identity; as East Asian-Americans, we do not have a place in the racial binary that dominates U.S. racial conversations. Being persons outside of this binary, we have had to negotiate our own Third Space in these dialogues.

I (LK) am a Canadian-born, cisgender, Asian woman who moved to the U.S. in my adulthood and, consequently, I often feel like a visitor in this country. Even after having lived in the U.S. for over 15 years, the visceral feeling of being an outsider remains. My formative experiences of race and cross-racial relations took place in the context of contemporary 1980s/1990s Vancouver, British Columbia, during a robust time of immigration for many ethnic and racial groups. The embodied experiences of cross-race relationships I have had as an Asian-Canadian woman in Vancouver include explicitly observed racism toward indigenous communities, discrimination against South and East Asian communities, and cross-racial violence; but also neighborly comradery between prominent ethnic minority groups. This set of experiences serve as a noticeably different reference point to my lived and studied learnings about cross-racial relations in the U.S. I experience racism as real, but with the understanding that it is a much more multicultural and nuanced phenomenon than what the U.S. portrays to be a Black/Brown versus white binary issue.

Given this, it has been a challenge to locate myself in the U.S. racial dialogue. I feel both othered as well as conditionally included in the BIPOC discourse. Therefore, I am constantly exploring the boundaries around where I fit versus where and how I need to stand in allyship to other communities of color. It has been critical for me to deepen my historical understanding of racism in this country to navigate my own privilege and marginalization and the accompanying stains and strains that

exist with racialized others. For me, occupying Third Space happens through straddling many identities as a bicultural person.

Similarly, my (WC) experiences in engaging with racial dialogues accentuates my outsider status to this country's narrative. This is not an inaccurate representation; I am a one and a half generation immigrant, which means that I was born and socialized in my early childhood in another country and immigrated into the U.S. while I was still young enough to be socialized by the culture of my new home. Since moving to the U.S. in the early 1990s, I continue to be asked by various audiences in my personal and professional life to share my Korean culture and speak on behalf of my people. I understand these invitations to be well-intentioned, yet it is both inviting and alienating: I am reminded of and celebrated for where I come from, while simultaneously remaining a foreigner. This sentiment remains now, decades later, even though I have lived longer in the U.S. than any other country in the world.

Very early on in my life, I came to accept and embrace my non-belongingness. I was too Korean for the Asian-Americans, too American for the Koreans, and definitely not American enough for the Americans. The non-belonging to any of these racialized identities may have started from subtle rejections, but I coped by making it an intentional and personal stance. I spent significant portions of my life maintaining my Korean language, learning Korean history, and consuming Korean media such as K-pop, talk shows, dramas, and movies; in other words, intentionally defining my non-belongingness. This was possible in part due to the time in which I grew up. With the rise of the personal computer in the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s, the Internet provided instantaneous global connection. Soon, I found myself in a new learning space, a "Third Space," that connected me to contemporary cultural information of both Korea and the U.S. There I was able to find my audience and community with whom I felt a sense of belonging – a community of transnationals, internationals, and others who did not quite fit in the sociocultural context of their geographical location. Thus, even from thousands of miles away, I was able to keep up relatively well with Korean culture and its evolving language in real time. I was, and am, intentionally and biculturally transnational.

3 Learning to Teach from Third Space

As authors who are explicitly examining the construct of race as it relates to our training and experiences with teaching and clinical work, we are aware that our respective birth places of South Korea (WC) and Canada (LK) and subsequent immigration contexts and timeframes acutely shape our experiences of existing as Asian-Americans in Third Spaces. We also reflect on our formal family therapy education and training in the mid- to late-2000s and notice that we came up in the field during a generation where postmodernism and social constructionism (Gergen, 1999) were privileged and conversations about race were just starting to get broached. As such, social justice terminology and concepts related to racial

diversity were in development as were the ideas about how to engage in these discussions. Our graduate experiences around conversations about race centered around the Black/Brown and white binary or ones where we felt lumped into the category of BIPOC and thus expected to generally speak to it. So, how have these experiences influenced our work around race as Asian-American marriage and family therapy educators learning to teach from Third Space?

My (LK) learning related to engaging in conversations around race and cross-racial differences from Third Space has been experientially driven. For me, these lessons have always occurred spontaneously within the relational context with students. As I continue to navigate and facilitate conversations about race, I am taken back to a formative early experience in my teaching career when I was instructing a course focused specifically on the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in family therapy. At the time, I was a core faculty member teaching in the southeast region of the U.S. among a tight-knit team of colleagues who held intersections of diversity in their social locations and aligned with diversity, equity, and inclusion aims, but who did so from their embodied identities as white people. Thus, in our program with racially diverse students, approximately 50% who identified as white and 50% students of color who predominantly identified as Black or African American, I represented the sole, ethnically diverse faculty presence.

Because of the racial diversity among the student body, when it came to discussing the topic of race and racism, students were able to share from both a personal and theoretical space. However, I quickly learned that in order to create a context for this to happen, I had to lead with carefully planned pedagogical exercises to foster connection. I also needed to intentionally model risk taking and holding tension for different realities. One particular week I decided to assign students to asynchronously watch Lee's (1994) documentary film, *The Color of Fear*, before attending class. This was an assignment that previous instructors of the course had assigned to other cohorts which provided stimulating content for class discussion on race. The 1994 documentary film features eight cisgender men of European, Latino, Asian, and African descent who passionately engage in personal discussions about race relations in the U.S. The class objective that week was to debrief students' thoughts and reflections about the film, examine connections to their own lives, and apply the content to the clinical context.

The in-class conversation started similarly to how it might typically be expected – generalized observations about racism and cross-racial tension that still exist in current day, some statements denouncing racism from white students who were trying to navigate their privileged positionality, white fragility, and demonstrated allyship, and some personal examples from students of color about the relevance of the film's content to their present day lives and society at large. While there was friction around the film's content and topic, I felt cautiously optimistic about the potential for the dialogue process to deepen. At the same time, I noticed the closed-off body posture and demonstrable silence shown by one of the most vocal students in the class, who was also a Black man. Any attempts I made to specifically engage this student's voice were ignored and met with increasing tension.

I was thrown off by this because of the strong rapport I thought this student and I had shared, which contrasted from the rejecting stance he was taking. The student's dismissiveness toward me and the general tension he demonstrated in the conversation was also felt by the other students who kept glancing in his direction throughout the class period. Eventually, I took a risk and publicly acknowledged his silence stating that it seemed meaningful and that I was interested to know what he was thinking and feeling. He took a lingering pause and then stood up and passionately began explaining the pain and rage the film had brought up for him and the irritation and anger he felt toward me for facilitating the conversation in a way that assumed a level of safety that in fact did not exist for him. He proceeded to name the cross-racial stains that existed between Black/African American communities like his and Asian communities like mine. He cited socio-historical events such as the 1992 Rodney King murder and subsequent Los Angeles riots that had left significant stains on the cross-racial dynamics between Black and Asian communities. Finally, he shared personally about the covert and overt racist experiences he had endured throughout his life by Asian identified women who suspiciously tracked him in their stores or restaurants or the way they clutched their purses and tried to avoid walking near him on the streets.

I felt embarrassed, angry, and apologetic for how he had been treated by members of my race. Additionally, a part of me also felt defensive about the discriminatory experiences he was projecting onto me. But ultimately, I appreciated the lesson he was helping me learn about what needs to be brought into conversations about race in order to expand the dominant discourse around the Black and Brown versus white racial binary. This interaction also helped me recognize the effects of the socialization I had received around cross-racial dynamics as a person who operated from Third Space. I realized that as a second-generation Korean-Canadian coming from outside U.S. culture, and seen as such, I tended to enter into cross-racial interactions with an assumption of shared understanding to persons I perceived to also hold marginalized identities when that connection had not been established. I perpetuated the racial binary by assuming that people of color were allies at face value. I had not addressed the racial stains and strains in the cross-racial context surrounding this student and me and took for granted that students like him would feel a sense of safety and trust with instructors like me just by virtue of our shared BIPOC status.

This experience taught me that conversations about race need to be directly contextualized to the persons in it and that the backdrop of experiences we have in relation to one another exist as stains to be discussed. In retrospect, I should have acknowledged that in the U.S., racial discourse often excludes or overlooks the cross-racial tensions that can lie beneath the surface of presumed BIPOC allyship. I would also have discussed how our experience talking about race is not only shaped by the larger context of systemic racism, but also our own histories of cross-racial interactions and relationships as well as the direct and indirect experiences we have had of racism given our unique contexts. Subsequently, I would have described how my upbringing and experiences in Canada as a second generation Korean-Canadian person with a multicultural social network had informed the reactions that came up

for me while watching *The Color of Fear* and the reflections I was bringing into the class conversation. I would have shared that I held an underlying assumption that BIPOC individuals would feel safer to discuss race with other BIPOC individuals, and that I needed to be cognizant of how this false assumption could mislead my facilitation of the conversation. I could have highlighted that while there is a need to explicitly address cross-racial nuances in conversations about racism, we struggle in part because this is often left out and there is no template for how to engage with it. Cross-racial dynamics need to be intentionally broached in conversations about race and race relations to move toward inclusivity and change.

I (WC) "debuted" officially as faculty in the fall semester of 2019 at a Marriage, Couple, and Family Therapy (MCFT) program as the waves of the recent rapid sociocultural and political shifts began. My experiences as a clinical supervisor and adjunct instructor prior to this time provided me with a solid footing of pedagogy and teaching practices, but the onslaught of sociopolitical changes sparked by the global Covid-19 pandemic and the racial justice movements reignited by the tragic murder of George Floyd quickly and dramatically shifted my role as an educator. This role shift was not intentional or internally motivated, and I felt the changes with how students seemed to relate to me as their instructor even before I settled into my first full-time faculty appointment. A significant portion of my challenge as an Asian-American female instructor prior to these changes was to fight the invisibility and be seen, and to prove myself as a knowledgeable and trustworthy authority and evaluator. However, the ground under my feet quickly shifted; I felt hyper-visible as a woman of color (as in not-white) and found myself managing students' desperate and anxious desire to garner my approval.

There were many complicating factors influencing this: navigating the new world of online learning with all of its general uncertainty and conflicting information, a dramatic increase of socioemotional impacts due to physical isolation and "shelter in place" protocols, and the general unrest resulting from breakdown of daily life and an uncertain future. This, in conjunction with the rapid and intense attention to racial justice issues rumbling underneath the American social consciousness, the students, especially those who are or can pass as white, seemed eager to prove to me that they were not "one of those white people" – those who commit racial and social injustice.

In the foundational family therapy theories course, students are evaluated on their mastery of chosen theories through a case conceptualization paper based on a family or relational unit from a movie. I ask students to offer a movie they would like to use for this assignment each year, and the class collectively chooses one from those their peers have suggested. Recently, students have started to volunteer Korean (foreign) and Korean-American made (domestic) movies. Each of these years, at least one class chose the distinctly Korean movies – *Parasite* (Bong, 2019) in 2020 and *Minari* (Chung, 2021) in 2021. Perhaps this is partially due to the increase in accessibility and popularity of South Korean media in recent years, however it strikes me as more than coincidental that students offer and select these films to write their paper with me, and that they intentionally select these because of my Korean-American identity.

Once the students start applying theory and attempt to socioculturally attune to the families in these movies, they inevitably start to ask questions and I find myself in the familiar position of being asked to explain on behalf of my people, who are sometimes Korean, sometimes Korean-American, and sometimes Asian-American. The students start to experience the daunting task of having to learn enough about Korean culture within an academic semester to demonstrate competence in socioculturally attuning their theories and interventions. They start feeling the pressure to prove to me, their evaluator and a perceived insider of these cultures, that they did enough to legitimize themselves as culturally competent. Moreover, they express anxiety in not wanting to offend me as the evaluator but also the insider and a representative of the culture they are attempting to attune to.

I have started to clarify what the students' learning objectives are in these moments, namely, that they are not to learn Korean culture. Rather, the learning objectives are to hold the not-knowing stance that is needed when working with racially and culturally diverse clientele while bearing the tension of wanting to do right by them but knowing that we can never fully know. They are to creatively brainstorm how to move forward competently, ethically, and continuously attuning. Here, I teach from the Third Space both personally and professionally: personally, in that I show up as not quite Korean and not quite American, and facilitate conversations with the students about the complexity of the hyphenated experience of being Asian-American; professionally in that therapists will never quite fully know where their clients come from. I have found that, so far, this Third Space allows me to provide a bit of grace as the white-adjacent to the white students who are anxious to do right by the BIPOC, to empathize with the Black and Brown students as an honorary BIPOC, and to validate those students who do not fit in the racial binary. Inviting the students into this Third Space with me has been instrumental in encouraging them to think about race more expansively, and thus more inclusively.

4 Application to Teaching and Practice

As East Asian-American educators teaching from Third Space, there are several practical applications that we take from our experiences into teaching and clinical contexts. First, it is necessary to help students understand and differentiate both the larger social context of racism as well as the unique ways in which one's racial experiences are socioculturally and locally specific. Zooming in and out from Third Space location can bring forth unique vantage points as well as help counter invisibility and highlight unseen biases in the self-of-the-therapist learning process. It also introduces greater nuance to conversations about race which steers participants away from reifying a static discourse around power and privilege. When instructors who operate from Third Space engage in this practice, they can help students engage with self and others in more meaningful and transformative ways.

For us, a major part of teaching and practicing from Third Space centers around our identity as East Asian-Americans who exist outside of the Black/Brown and

white binary. Part of how we bring our identity forward from Third Space is by resisting the seduction of co-opting the Black/Brown struggle and instead define and speak truth to our own unique experiences as East Asian-Americans in a racially dichotomous society. This requires intentional focus around self-of-the-educator development relative to one's racial history through time, place, and sociocultural context. To this end, we encourage the following points of reflection to facilitate this self-of-the-educator growing edge.

First, we believe it is important to learn about the racial history of East Asian-Americans in the U.S. as well as disentangle it from the larger Asian diaspora. For example, it is important to understand how U.S. immigration policies have created immigration trends for Asian-Americans at large and the attitudes of the American public toward these groups. These experiences are diverse within the Asian-American community as their involuntary/voluntary migration pathways are impacted heavily by social class, education level, and colorism. These attitudes subsequently influence the systemic oppression that our ethnic communities have differentially experienced.

Second, contextualize one's unique family history and journey of immigration within the global and U.S. landscape. For example, families immigrating to the U.S. in the late 1960s and 1970s have vastly different cultural and sociopolitical stories than the families immigrating in the 1990s and early 2000s. The implications of the time and space of entry to the U.S. greatly shapes our positionalities and experiences of power and privilege as members of society.

Third, recognize ways in which one's positionality as an East Asian-American today intersects with the larger BIPOC experience, while acknowledging how the relative levels of privilege and oppression differ in relation to race. It is also important to know and acknowledge nodal events that have shaped cross-racial relations in the U.S.

We anticipate that the evolving racial dialogue in the U.S. will continue to broaden and include focus on intra- and cross-racial dynamics involving various ethnicities and multiethnic identities. This paradigm shift is in motion and educators can fuel the momentum by diversifying the way we facilitate racial justice conversations. One way to do this is by introducing social constructs such as Third Space in conversations about race and identity. Rather than over-identifying with simplified, static, and totalizing racial narratives, racial justice conversations should facilitate deeper examination of how these complex intersections of sociocultural, political, and historical narratives intersect in the lives of the individuals participating in these conversations. Another way is to include content in the curriculum that engages students to reflect upon and examine the ways in which unacknowledged cross-racial stains and strains present in their own lives and communities and the macro sociocultural context. Engaging in conversations such as these can center the non-white experience, introduce nuance to the BIPOC experience, and offer new ground for transformative societal processes to take place from Third Space.

Furthermore, in cross-racial dialogue, showing up authentically requires a willingness to directly bring educator-as-self into the conversation and utilize the dynamics that are created with students in live time given the interplay between the

educator and students' identities. As educators, we need to model what it looks like to courageously and compassionately broach direct dialogue around sociocultural, and perhaps more personal, stains and strains that exist cross-racially. We need to model what it means to acknowledge aspects of our identity that connect to others' privilege as well as their marginalization. We posit that the way toward racial justice comes from honest and personal reckoning with the racial stains and strains, and from deep collective wrestling with the complex reality of how the racial discourses of the U.S. touch each of us. We view this work as continuous and evolving.

References

Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315715421

Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction* (1st ed.). Sage.

Gutiérrez, K. D. (2008). Developing a Sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly, 43*(2), 148–164. https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.43.2.3

Hardy, K. (2008). Race, reality, and relationships: Implications for the re-visioning of family therapy. In M. McGoldrick & K. Hardy (Eds.), *Re-visioning family therapy: Race, culture, and gender in clinical practice* (2nd ed., pp. 76–84). The Guilford Press.

Kao, G. (2006). Where are the Asian and Hispanic victims of Katrina? A metaphor for invisible minorities in contemporary racial discourse. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race, 3*(1), 223–231. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X06060152

Kawai, Y. (2005). Stereotyping Asian Americans: The dialectic of the model minority and the yellow peril. *The Howard Journal of Communication, 16*, 109–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/10646170590948974

Lee, M. (2015). *The making of Asian America: A history*. Simon & Schuster.

Takaki, R. (1998). *A history of Asian Americans: Strangers from a different shore*. Bay Back Books.

Tuan, M. (1998). *Forever foreigners or honorary whites? The Asian ethnic experience today*. Rutgers University Press.