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# King of the Hill's Souphanousiphones, the New Model Minority, and the Subversive Model Minority

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*KING OF THE HILL'S* SOUPHANOUSIPHONES, THE NEW MODEL MINORITY, AND  
THE SUBVERSIVE MODEL MINORITY

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
The University of Mississippi

by

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## ABSTRACT

Though the term “model minority” was only coined in the 1960s to apply to Asian-Americans, in the white imagination, a “model” way to be a minority has always existed. This model has gone through various iterations from the “happy” blacks of the antebellum years to supposedly over-achieving Asian-Americans of the 1960s. I argue that we are witnessing the emergence of a new model minority that includes not only Asian-Americans but other high-achieving minorities as well. This model minority is characterized by economic success, formal education, American values, and conservative racial politics or a complete silence about race. Because an inability to speak up about racial injustice is a dangerous prerequisite for success, I seek to explore ways to subvert this crucial characteristic of the model minority. I use *King of the Hill*'s Souphanousiphones to demonstrate this “subversive model minority” and its consequences.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As cliché as it may sound, the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has indeed been the problem of the color line. The 1900s were characterized by constant social and legal battles for racial equity, from the struggles to end lynching to the breaking the stigma against black quarterbacks in the NFL. Each challenge has been tackled, each with varying degrees of success, and each time with a myriad of new challenges and new evolved forms of racism waiting to take its place. Though formal residential segregation was conquered, minorities are now face loans with higher interest rates if they can even get a loan at all. Though the military was integrated, minorities are promoted at disproportionately low rates. Though school segregation was outlawed, corrupt redistricting and an increasing number of private schools have segregated schools to their highest degree in decades. The “problem” is ongoing. Now, at the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though the color line little resembles that of the time when Du Bois made his original assertion, our society still grapples with problems of race and racism with no indication that the struggle will ever end. For the first time in the history of the United States, over 50 percent of children in the country are non-white decent, and in many of the country’s largest cities, the population of whites sits below 50 percent. A broad shift in the racial demographics is happening; we are rapidly becoming a majority-minority country, where whites no longer dominate the population. Though similar demographic predictions were made in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it was at a time when many Europeans were not yet considered white, but as whiteness evolved, those predictions became false. But at this moment in history, the minorities are not only non-“white,” they are non-

European. With these changes, questions of race theory will become more and more important as the nation comes to grips with its new reality and attempts to categorize this new population and (re)define the roles of everyone, including whites.

With the election of President Barack Obama, the country's first black president, in 2008, post-raciality has taken a firm hold on the American mainstream, with many Americans declaring the struggle for racial equality officially over, that Dr. King's "dream" has been realized. The idea that we have entered an era that is "post-racial" hinges on the belief that race no longer provides barriers to success and that racial discrimination is a thing of the past. Many Americans claim to be colorblind, that is they claim to not "see" race, that their decisions are not influenced by race. Maintaining this post-racial colorblindness necessitates ignoring racism outside of overt interpersonal discrimination and upholding a belief that institutional racism was eliminated during the Civil Rights Movement; supposedly racial equality has become the status quo. These beliefs are so strong that programs that seek to use race as a factor are met with cries of "reverse racism" from whites asking why there isn't a "White Entertainment Television." American individualism and meritocracy dominate post-racial thinking, placing the blame for one's eventual social situation squarely on his or her shoulders, and to help maintain this illusion a new image of the model minority has begun to rise.

The model minority, the focus of this paper, is vital to the maintenance of post-raciality. The model minority provides the "evidence" necessary to continue to argue that non-white groups are not at a systematic disadvantage in nearly every aspect of American society. The model minority stereotype emerged at a time of great social turmoil in the United States. It was the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and minority groups were taking to the streets to protest harsh living conditions and blatant racism, while the keepers of the status quo fought

desperately to maintain the current order with violence, subversion, and blame displacement. This desire to displace the blame for blacks' lack of economic and social satisfaction, created the perfect environment for the formal rise of the model minority stereotype that was conferred upon Asians and Asian-Americans. The model minority stereotype essentially provided a blueprint for achievement that other minorities were supposed to be able to follow if they weren't so dedicated to causing a fuss. But Asian-Americans, even though they were the first group formally labeled a "model minority," were not the first group put on display as a role model for the behavior of other minorities.

In the white imagination, there has always been a "model" way to be a minority, and these models have been used to explain and justify the success gaps across race despite the supposed equality of opportunity in the United States. This model was typified by "white" European immigrants and images such as the Uncle Tom and the Happy-Go-Lucky-Darkie during the antebellum years and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The latter represented black people who knew their place in the world, who were subservient and deferential to white people, who were happy with their position and didn't agitate with talk about race and racism. They served as models and contrasts to those angry black people who, in the eyes of whites, sought to cause trouble by calling white people racist and demanding an equal place in society; according to them, if these few black people were happy and content, they should all feel the same way. This perception developed during the antebellum period as white slave owners sought to present an image of slaves as happy and content to stave off attacks by abolitionists. They used the slaves' singing and supposed joyfulness to create an image of a satisfied, comfortable slave, who adopted the idea of slavery as philanthropic institution and perhaps even willingly fought for The Confederacy during the Civil War. In the immediate post-bellum/reconstruction period, the



notion of the content slave morphed into one of the displaced former slave who longed for the supposed security of the antebellum years. This idea would have been nurtured by the image of the comfortable, elderly slave who, after spending an entire life toiling, supposedly so loved their owners and had so thoroughly embraced white superiority that they voluntarily continued to serve them even after emancipation. These images were cultivated by southerners seeking to return to a “happier” south, and to an extent, they still endure today as evident by the increasing popularity of confederate celebrations. The idea of a simpler, less stressful time in The South is directly related to these images of pacified Negroes.

Following the National Compromise of 1877, in which the federal government agreed to move all occupying troops from the southern states, southern violence against blacks exploded, and blacks were routinely lynched for the smallest of perceived offenses, including simply running successful businesses. During this time, only blacks who submitted to white superiority and actively showed their deference would be safe. Because Jim Crow laws sought to create obedience and subordination from blacks and the rising eugenics movement deemed them biologically inferior, they were not expected to succeed. It was easy to explain the gap in success because blacks were perceived as being incapable of succeed. Unlike later model minorities, success was much less important than silence and deference.

In the years that followed the minority archetype was replaced by white eastern and southern European immigrants. Their model status was expedited following the Immigration Act of 1924 that severely restricted the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country; European immigrants were allowed to immigrate in vastly greater numbers than Asians and Africans. Though they were initially the subject of widespread discrimination similar to that of other minority groups, they were also the beneficiaries of great skin privilege and were allowed to not

only immigrate but to become citizens. Despite being perceived as inferior to Americans and Western Europeans, Eastern and Southern Europeans were considered much more desirable than Africans and Asians, and by 1940, the U.S. Census removed the ethnic distinctions from the “white” racial category, allowing European ethnics to identify as white (1940 Census Archives, 2012). Their model status was further solidified following World War II. The GI Bill afforded many white ethnics the chance to earn college degrees, technical training, and purchase homes, opportunities denied to blacks, thus placing them firmly in the middle class and making them the model for American assimilation and conquering discrimination. (Brodkin, 2008). By the 1940s, eugenics had largely fallen out of favor, and the successful assimilation of Eastern and Southern Europeans began a shift towards cultural explanations for the success gap.

The immigration act of 1965 allowed greater numbers of Asian immigrants, especially Southeast Asians, to come into the country amidst the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement. Even though Chinese and Japanese-Americans had been in the country for decades, with increased numbers came increased attention. In 1966 the language of the model minority stereotype first appeared with two widely-read articles: “Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.” in the *US News and World Report* and “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” in *The New York Times*. The two articles praised Chinese and Japanese-Americans for achieving economic success despite being discriminated against, perpetuating the myth that they toiled diligently in silence in the face of internment and oppressive railroad work. Since by this point the previous iteration of the ideal “minority-ness,” European immigrants, had been fully subsumed by whiteness, the Asian-American model minority came at just the right time. Chinese and Japanese-Americans were commended for their independence and alleged refusal to use government assistance; they were framed as having an inherently strong familial culture that

sought to solve their own problems without outside help. The *US News and World Report* staff (1966) quotes the publisher of a Los Angeles based Chinese-language newspaper to illustrate this point:

We're a big family. If someone has trouble, usually it can be solved within the family. There is no need to bother someone else. And nobody will respect and member of the family who does not work and who just plays around (p. 73).

Held up in contrast were other ethnic minorities, primarily black-Americans, who were accused of lacking similar initiative, drive, and resilience in the face of rough times despite supposedly receiving massive amounts of money through government sponsored programs. The quote even implies that blacks are dysfunctional, that they lack family networks or fail to look to their family for help in tough situations or excuses family members who refuse to work. These articles effectively said of black America, "If they can do it, why not the blacks? If they cannot, it is their own fault," that "the nation's 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own—with no help from anyone else" (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1966). That Asian-Americans are framed as not seeking help is a convenient myth for whites. It absolves them of any for the lack of financial and social success of other minorities; it places the onus for their second-class status squarely on their own shoulders. But of course, black Americans lacked opportunities to succeed as they were systematically denied equal access to basic resources. After being leaving the horrors of chattel slavery with nothing and many falling victim to a system of sharecropping that again left them with nothing if they were lucky. The less fortunate accumulated massive amounts of debt. Then they were not only punished by vengeful, frightened whites for becoming "too" successful, they were systematically incarcerated, becoming de facto slaves because of rampant chain gangs and convict leasing. Couple these with rampant housing discrimination resulting in

an inability to use their GI Bills and black Americans did not simply happen to lack access to wealth building resources during the 1960s due to poor luck or random misfortune. Their access had been actively and systematically taken away by whites for generations, over the entire history of blacks in this country. Ignoring this history and framing blacks as lazy and undeserving allowed whites and the government to continue to deny blacks the financial and social assistance that they desperately needed and deserved.

This model minority rhetoric not only universally raised the expectations of all Asian-Americans regardless of ethnic affiliation and muted their future cries of racial discrimination, but it also underscored the shift from biological to cultural explanations for black-Americans' lack of economic success. By emphasizing that Chinese-Americans are "moving ahead by applying the traditional virtues of hard work, thrift and morality" (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1966) or that "the Japanese...could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion [internment]...because of their meaningful links with an alien culture" (Peterson, 1966) the authors imply that black culture lacks the values necessary to achieve similar success.

We can learn from such as work as Robert Bellah's "Tokugawa Religion" that diligence in work, combined with simple frugality, had an almost religious imperative, similar to what has been called "the Protestant ethic" in Western culture. And...the Japanese in Japan and Japanese-Americans respond similarly to psychological tests of "achievement orientation," and both are in sharp contrast to lower-class Americans, whether white or Negro (Peterson, 1966, p. 42).

This quote is telling as it reveals that this so-called "alien culture" is actually remarkably similar to perception of white middle-class culture, which stands in contrast to black, and even lower-

class white, culture. The foreign culture that white have praised as bringing so much success to Asian-Americans is essentially their own culture, which is why it has been so easy to set it opposition to black culture, which as opposed to valuing “hard work, thrift, and morality” is perceived as being lazy, lavish, and immoral and therefore dysfunctional. This continued a growing trend of explaining black deficiencies using culture instead of concluding that they are simply biologically inferior that was highlighted by texts such as the popular and controversial Moynihan Report (1965) from a year prior. The report blamed the continued financial and social struggles of black Americans on the alleged deterioration of the black family, claiming that the rise of single-parent, female-headed homes was destroyed the black community’s chances for social mobility, thus implying that black culture was flawed.

Even the term “model minority” is inherently racist. The term model minority creates innate difference as the very label “minority” stigmatizes Asian-Americans as residing outside of the white American norm and categorizes them as a separate racial group. When the term “model minority” was coined, the term “minority” as we know it today had just reached the American mainstream. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had been used to refer to one being not of legal age or in reference to politics, as in “minority politics” (Gleason, 1991). It was first published in the dictionary as the term we know today in 1961:

a group differing from the predominant section of a larger group in one or more characteristics (as ethnic background, language, culture, or religion) and as a result often subjected to differential treatment and esp. discrimination. . . .

*(Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged as cited in Gleason, 1991, p. 392).*

This widely used definition, derivatives of which are the most common today, had been in use by American sociologists since 1932 when it was imported from Europeans who used it to refer to minorities of nationality. Americans were the first to use it to refer to racial groups, and Louis Wirth was the first to formally define the word in a way that conveyed the inherent stigmatization that plagues the term “model minority,” saying that “minority status entails exclusion from full participation in the life of the society” (Gleason, 1991, p. 398). Though the word has undergone a few transformations over the years with the emergence of affirmative action, this characteristic has remained consistent among those classified as minorities, and “model minorities” are no different.

The qualifier “model” is also problematic. It implies that they have reached the apex of their minority status, that there are no further advancements to be made, that they have successfully gained the approval of the whites, and that other groups should emulate them.

...[A]s the term model minority suggests, no matter how Asian Americans are successful, or even how Asian Americans assimilate well, Asians Americans at best are the model minorities instead of becoming part of the majority...the notion of model minority isolates Asian Americans from the white ‘Americans’...It assumes an ‘American’ norm that Asian Americans can never achieve because they are culturally marked as being ‘different’...Asian Americans are ‘like’ white Americans, but they are ‘not’ real Americans. Asian Americans can never constitute the ‘American’ norm (Chou, 2008, p. 222).

Furthermore, the term implies that there is a “non-model” way to be a minority, that somehow other minorities are not upholding their end of the bargain by not living up to the standard set by

Asian Americans, and in the past white ethnics and deferential blacks. This belief helped fuel the idea among politicians, especially conservatives, that blacks were responsible for any social or economic problems that they faced, but this conservative attitude soon became the dominant racial ideology among politicians.

The creation of the Asian model minority coupled with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed formal discrimination, allowed future politicians of both parties to downplay the significance of race in one's life chances and to frame the United States as the epitome of the modern meritocracy, celebrating American "rugged individualism" and an "up by your bootstraps" mentality; no longer was racial conservatism the exclusive realm of the political right. And over the course of the following decades as whites realized that racial equality actually meant that they would lose some of the privileges that they had been unfairly afforded over the years, they pressured their politicians to tear down the gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the name of "reverse discrimination." the need arose to expand the model minority to include blacks and other minorities. Indeed, even as early as the 1970s, whites were already attempting to turn back the clock of racial justice, claiming that affirmative action was going too far and discriminating against whites (Omi and Winant, 1994). "Proving" reverse discrimination necessitated the inclusion of blacks and other minorities in the model minority.

The racial attitudes of the decade are epitomized by the 1978 Supreme Court case *University of California Regents vs. Bakke*. The medical school at the University of California at Davis maintained an affirmative action policy that reserved a set of their 100 admissions spots for a special admissions program for students of economic and/or educational disadvantage, typically racial and ethnic minorities. Over a four year period 63 minority students were granted admission under the special program while only 44 were admitted under the general program. No

white students had been admitted under the special program. After failing to be admitted two consecutive years and discovering that minority students with lower test scores had been admitted, Allan Bakke sued the University of California. Bakke was eventually granted admission as the court ruled that while the university could use an affirmative action program that attempts to increase and maintain diversity by using race as a factor, it could not maintain racial “quotas” (FindLaw.com, 2012). The University of California regents eventually disbanded its affirmative action policy completely in 1995, and in 1996 Proposition 209 banned all affirmative action in California’s public sector.

These attacks on the gains of the Civil Rights Movement continued in the 1980s with the election of President Ronald Reagan. School segregation and black unemployment began to increase, an increasing number of families began to fall below the poverty line, and the gap between the mortality rates of white and black children began to widen. Even liberals decided to get in on the act. “In February 1985, newly elected Democratic National Committee Chair Paul Kirk said that caucuses within the DNC (representing such groups as blacks, Hispanics, Asians/Pacific Islanders, women, and gays) were ‘political nonsense’ and promised to abolish them” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 133-134). This signaled the Democratic shift to the conservative frame of individual responsibility. Omi and Winant (1994) describe how President Clinton and the “new Democrats” exhibited this thinking:

Clinton adopted the rhetoric of “personal responsibility” and “family values” which was so successfully utilized by the right. In order to win back the suburbanites, liberals too claimed the right to “blame the victim,” to disparage the “dependence” of welfare mothers, and bemoan the disintegration of the family. In



their use of racially coded language, the “new Democrats” chose to remain silent on an explicit discussion of race and its overall meaning for politics... (p. 150).

Consistent with his avoidance of race while on the campaign trail, Clinton and the new Democrats proceeded to institute “universal” programs that they claimed would combat poverty wherever it appeared, not just in minority communities. However, that was rarely the case; the universal programs continued to disproportionately benefit whites. Minorities continued to suffer as federal money for the new Democrats’ universal programs was funneled through the same state and municipal governments that had perpetuated past racial inequality with unequal, racialized distribution of resources. Without federal regulations and monitoring that would ensure that racial minorities received their fair share, local districts would be free to continue their former disproportionate distribution with their new federal funds (Omi and Winant, 1994).

#### The New Model Minority

Justifying these universal policies would have been much more difficult without the emergence of a new rhetorical strategy that makes possible the blame game, the castigation of black welfare queens, and the rhetoric of the dysfunctional black family. This rhetoric was aided by emerging images of successful blacks, further stigmatizing lower-class blacks. Sitcoms began to display a new image of black America that better fit the meritocratic theme of the post-Civil Rights years. They showed successful blacks like the Jeffersons, the Cosbys, the cast of *A Different World*, and the Bankses from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* who had supposedly pulled themselves out of poverty without government assistance. These fictional representations were paired with real life versions in people like Bill Cosby, Eddie Murphy, and Robert “Bob” Johnson.

Similar to Asian-Americans, President Obama, prominent minority politicians such as former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain and Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, and other successful minorities such as Oprah, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and Will Smith have been held up as models of achievement for other minorities, as “proof” that our society is colorblind and post-racial. These successful minorities form the core of a “new model minority,” one that is bolstered by the inclusion of other minorities. Having a wide variety of individual assimilated minorities, rather than simply Asian-Americans, occupy a space near whiteness strengthens the social buffer provided by model minorities. Not only can whites point to successful Asian-Americans and tell blacks and Latinos “the Asians can do it, so if you fail, it is your own fault,” but with the new model minority, they can point to certain blacks and Latinos, the Barack Obamas and the Susana Martinezes, and make a similar statement, “these black people can do it, so if you fail, it is your own fault.” Though such assertions passively acknowledge past racial discrimination, they imply that the playing field has been leveled and place the onus of success fully on the individual while ignoring institutional barriers to success. The idea of blaming individuals is a new direction for explanations of the racial gap; it represents a rhetorical shift from the former era of cultural explanations that pathologized black culture and deemed it inadequate and unable to impart the values and skills necessary to achieve success through traditional means.

This “new model minority” occupies a space similar to that of Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) “honorary whites” in his “tri-racial order.” He argues that the United States is moving toward a tri-racial system similar to that of Latin-American countries, where the various racial and ethnic groups will fall into one of three broad categories: whites, honorary whites, or collective black. He posits that the “whites” category will consist of “‘traditional’ whites, new ‘white’

immigrants...totally assimilated white Latinos...lighter-skinned multi-racials” (p. 179.). The “honorary whites” will consist of “light-skinned Latinos...Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, and most Middle Eastern Americans” (p. 179.). The “collective black” will consist of “blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Filipinos, and Laotians” (p. 179). He argues that the move toward this tri-racial system will further solidify white superiority as the honorary whites will provide a buffer to disperse racial and economic conflict between the whites and collective black.

Just as with the Asian-American model minority of the past, the relative success of the honorary whites provides a group for the whites to point to as evidence of society’s meritocratic value. He also underscores the importance that economics and education will play in determining where one fits into the tri-racial system. Groups with greater wealth and higher overall levels of formal education will find themselves nearer to the top of the racial order; it is a combination of skin color, economics, and education that determine where each group will land.

The tri-racial system is a structural analysis and is very useful for considering how race operates socially and legally, especially in a time where common wisdom is that we are moving towards a “majority minority” country. Who is white and who isn’t will affect how we view integration and representation in our schools, businesses, neighborhoods, and government. It may be the difference in determining whether a university needs to diversify because it is 90 percent white and 10 percent black or if that same university is already diverse because it is 25 percent Hispanic, 25 percent East Asian, and 10 percent black. It could be vital in determining who receives government construction contracts that are set aside for racial minorities or minority fellowships at graduate schools. Things like property values would also be affected by perceptions of how many people of color are in a neighborhood.

While the tri-racial system is a purely structural analysis the new model minority is more applicable to individuals, which allows dark-skinned minorities to be adopted into honorary whiteness. Just as in the tri-racial system, economics and education play a critical role in which individuals are allowed to be new model minorities and brought into honorary whiteness. A member of the new model minority must be economically successful and formally educated, which immediately excludes many athletes, artists, and entertainers. However these latter groups are eligible for inclusion once they enter mainstream business, like Magic Johnson, Jay-Z, and Sean “P. Diddy/Puff Daddy/Puffy” Combs. As athletes and entertainers, they play into familiar stereotypes about blackness. Blacks are expected to be successful athletes and entertainers because of their “natural” athleticism and vocal talents so their success is delegitimized; to be considered a model minority, they must take the legitimate—white—path to success: formal education and boardroom business.

Just as with the previous Asian-American representation of the model minority, it is important for new model minorities to maintain moderate to conservative racial politics, like Herman Cain or Bill Cosby, or even to be silent on issues of race, like Will Smith. A race rebel would undermine the entire model minority paradigm, which only exists to diminish the salience of racism on one’s life chances.

#### Asian Americans as the “Model” Model Minority

Asian Americans have been imagined in various ways over the years. Outside of the model minority, which didn’t emerge until the 1960s, the yellow peril may be the most notable. The yellow refers to the skin color of East Asian immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Chinese laborers brought in to work on railroads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later the

increasing numbers of Japanese were seen as a threat to white wages and culture, the yellow peril image was a mainstay in American culture for decades. But since those two inaugural articles in the 1960s, the image of Asian Americans has shifted, and they have become the “model” model minority. While non-Asian representatives of the new model minority are included as individuals, perceived as exceptions to their racial groups’ typical trend of failure, the model minority image has become the dominant paradigm for viewing Asian Americans (Wu, 2002). In the eyes of many, to be Asian American is to be the model minority; “Asian Americanness” has come to be equated with “model minority-ness.” Frank Wu (2002) commented on this perception when discussing Philip Vernon’s *Ability and Achievement* (1982) in which he analyzed the success of Asian Americans in North America, arguing that their success is largely due to innate intelligence:

Whatever the root causes for individual achievement, Vernon links the status of Asian Americans to their identity as Asian Americans. By his account, Asian Americans flourish because there are Asian Americans, and they continue to thrive only to the extent that they behave as archetypal Asian Americans (p. 45).

This stands in contrast to blacks in the new model minority. Because blacks are perceived as lazy and poor and have a history of agitating for racial justice, blacks as a group lack the ability to be representative of the model minority. Conversely, the history of Asian-Americans has been framed as the ultimate success story, similar to the group assimilation of Eastern Europeans. Asian-Americans represent a group formerly heavily discriminated against, who shed the racist image of the yellow peril and has endured incarceration in WWII internment camps, toiling hard in silence to succeed, the prototypical Horatio Alger story. In 1966, William Peterson, the author of the article that coined the term “model minority,” demonstrated this thinking when he

described the history of Asian-Americans, “Denied access to many urban jobs, both white-collar and manual, they undertook menial tasks with such perseverance that they achieved a modest success” (p. 21). Though individual new model minorities follow this model, the history of black Americans has been framed differently, preventing them from being viewed as a model as a group.

Asian Americans as the model minority have become what Mari Matsuda (1996) would call a “racial bourgeoisie,” a buffer between the white racial aristocracy and the “lower” minorities like blacks and dark-skinned Hispanics. Through Asian Americans the model minority stereotype has come to be defined as follows:

First, Asian Americans are supposed to be extremely hard working—more hard working than whites. Second, they are said to be intelligent and highly educated... Third, as a group they are seen as economically successful, especially compared to other ethnic minorities... a regrettable history of past discrimination has not kept them down—and indeed may have spurred them on. Fourth, Asian Americans are described as “assimilating” into mainstream American life... but not entirely: the articles tend to describe (and mirror) a persisting element of foreignness or exoticism (McGowan and Lindgren, 2006, p. 335).

McGowan and Lindgren’s definition, one that is articulated in similar forms by most model minority scholars, describes the model minority stereotype as growing from a series of racist stereotypes and misrepresented facts. The first is the perception that Asian Americans are harder working than whites and are shamefully over competitive. Supposedly, this is because Asian culture is superior to American culture and encourages hard work and thrift (Osajima,

1993; Wu, 2002). And though American culture also purports to value hard work and thrift as well, Asian culture is perceived as doing this to a fault, to the point where they neglect fun and socializing. Peterson, in his 1966 article, even describes Asian-American success as growing from “their meaningful links with an alien culture” (p. 42). The second and third tenets are both based on misleading statistics. Though Asian Americans as a group may be overrepresented in universities, once the statistics are broken down by ethnic group, wide disparities appear. While 85 percent of all Asian Americans 25 and older have a high school diploma and nearly 50 percent have a bachelor’s degree, 53 percent of Cambodians, 59 percent of Hmong, and 49 percent of Lao lack a high school diploma. Placing all Asian ethnic groups under one umbrella hides these startling statistics.

The economic statistics follow a similar trend. While Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans are relatively well off, 30 percent of Cambodian, 37 percent of Hmong, and 18 percent of Lao live below the poverty line. The statistics demonstrating the relative affluence of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans can also even be misleading. Because most Asian Americans are concentrated in the metropolises of the West Coast, where the cost of living is higher, their average income appears larger when compared to whites across the country. However, the salaries of whites who also live on the West Coast are much more comparable to their Asian counterparts (Lee, 2009; Chou and Feagin, 2010).

There is a general consensus on the first three points, but McGowan and Lindgren’s fourth point must be expanded and explored more. They describe the perception of Asian-American assimilation as contradictory. Asian-Americans are described as being assimilated in that they live in the suburbs and intermarry with whites, but they are still viewed as foreigners, their culture still “alien.” But McGowan and Lindgren fail to state explicitly that “assimilating”

also means being silent about matters of race, a point that Bonilla-Silva also makes when discussing the ideal contemporary minority politician, who cannot be a “race rebel” (p. 215). Because the model minority stereotype only exists to reify myths of society’s colorblindness, this is a crucial point. Mainstream Americans fail to see race and experience no racial discrimination. Further, for so long Asian-Americans have been portrayed as sharing similar attitudes, experiences, and success to whites. For Asian Americans to draw attention to their racial discrimination would be to elicit sincere questions about the validity of their claims; after all, all Asian-Americans are supposed to be successful scientists and engineers so according to whites surely they cannot be victims of discrimination. Complaining about their discrimination would also draw parallels between Asian Americans and those “problem minorities” (blacks, Hispanics, indigenous people) who supposedly seek to fan the racial flames and keep race alive by crying racism. The image of the silently hard-working Asian American would be ruined, thus forfeiting their model minority status.

Scholars also fail to agree on the extent of Asian-American assimilation. There are those who equate model minority status with “becoming” white, much in the same way that eastern and southern Europeans were able to in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (Loader, 2010; Endo & Della-Piana, 2001; Yancey, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Kaba, 2008; Koshy, 2001); I have dubbed this the “whitening camp.” Then there are those who argue that (1) Asian-Americans’ unique, foreign culture provided a method to achieve the group’s perceived success and/or (2) that Asian-Americans may have managed to achieve limited economic success in the face of continued racial discrimination (Chou & Feagin, 2010; Zhou, 1997; Tuan, 1998; Wu, 2010; Min, 2003; Park, 2008; Chou, 2008; Prashad, 2000; Wu, 2002; Matsuda, 1996; Lee, 2002, Osajima, 1993, Osajima, 1993); I call this the “continued discrimination camp.” Non-Asian scholars are much



more likely to be in the whitening camp than Asian American scholars, who generally fall into the continued discrimination camp. Perhaps this is indicative of differing in-group-out-group experiences. Scholars in the whitening camp are also less likely to make ethnic distinctions among Asian-Americans, and are more likely to discuss Asian-Americans as a single group. The continued discrimination camp, however, argues that the refusal to acknowledge stratification among Asian ethnics is another form of discrimination as it ignores that many Asian ethnics live in dire social situations. Furthermore, the continued discrimination camp discusses structural inequities in much greater detail and argues that Asian-Americans are positioned as foreigners, forever distanced from whiteness. Conversely the whitening camp assumes that structural inequities are minimal and are more likely to discuss the permeability of whiteness and its ability to consume Asian-Americans.

The whitening camp generally argues that with increased economic status and structural assimilation comes greater cultural acceptance and eventually full assimilation. Yancey (2003) uses Gordon's (1963) model of assimilation to argue that Asian-Americans are becoming white. Yancey makes his point using four different types of assimilation defined by Gordon: (1) cultural assimilation – "change of cultural patterns to those of host society" (p. 71), (2) structural assimilation – "large scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on primary group level" (p. 71), (3) marital assimilation – "Large scale intermarriage" (p. 71), and (4) identificational assimilation – "development of sense of people-hood based exclusively on host society" (p. 71). Yancey argues that because Asian-Americans have achieved cultural, structural, and marital assimilation and will be fully assimilated once they finish undergoing identificational assimilation. The attitudes of Asian-Americans, especially on issues of race, are beginning to mirror those of the dominant group, in part because of a mutual opposition to blackness. Bonilla-

Silva doesn't necessarily believe that Asian-Americans will *become* white, but that they may take up a role as "honorary whites" in a tri-racial system similar to that of Latin-American countries. His reasoning largely mirrors that of Yancey in that Asian-Americans have experienced cultural, structural, and marital assimilation. Most notable about Bonilla-Silva's analysis of the tri-racial system is that he removes the generic label "Asian" and applies the levels of assimilation to the various Asian ethnic groups, concluding that Southeast Asians (i.e., Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) are much less assimilated than other Asians (e.g., Japanese, Korean, Chinese) and in fact may never become fully assimilated at all, in part because of less economic prosperity and in part because of greater phenotypic differences (darker skin, unlike facial features, etc) compared to whites. This inability to fully assimilate due to phenotypic difference also holds true for black honorary whites in the new model minority.

The continued-discrimination camp rejects the idea that assimilation happens so smoothly or that it is inevitable for Asian-Americans. Chou & Feagin (2010) and Tuan (1998) argue that sometimes Asian-Americans purposely adopt cultural traits that they see as white (including an opposition to other minorities as Yancey suggests), which typically means white middle class, while attempting to distance themselves from Asian culture. This may include a range of actions from seeking a white partner to participating in white dominated activities, such as cheerleading, golf, and tennis. They believe that whites will see their hard work and cultural similarities and accept them as equals. For example, Chou & Feagin interviewed a successful Chinese-American entrepreneur, who described her experiences:

I was in the math club, and the Latin club, and the vocational club...I was also a varsity cheerleader...I was the only Asian; there were no African American

cheerleaders in my group that I can recall. Um, so basically of a squad of, let's say, a squad of sixteen, it was all white and one Asian...I have tried very hard to assimilate (p. 140).

Asian-Americans in the continued discrimination camp may overlook instances of interpersonal and institutional discrimination and simply ignore it or dismiss it as an isolated instance of bigotry perpetrated by an ignorant person. But it is this very racial discrimination that prevents those attempting to assimilate from achieving whiteness; it serves as a constant reminder that they are, in fact, different regardless of their attempts to join the ranks of white normalcy.

Lee, Wu, and Osijima all discuss how whites' feelings toward Asian Americans vary in response to their perceived threat level. When whites are comfortable and secure in their position, Asian Americans are model minorities, but when whites feel threatened, Asian Americans again become the yellow peril. For example, when Asian-Americans first began to attend elite universities in numbers, a variety of racist nicknames began to appear. The University of California at Irvine (UCI) became "University of Chinese Immigrants." Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) became "Made in Taiwan." And The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) became "University of Caucasians Living Among Asians." But a much more recent example is happening in Silicon Valley, California:

...there have been reports of white flight in Silicon Valley in response to the growth in middle- and upper-middle-class Asian American population in local public schools...white parents in Silicon Valley have expressed concern that Asian American students are too competitive and that their own children end up being stereotyped as underachievers in contrast to the hyperachievement-oriented

Asian American students. In short, white parents fear that their children can't compete against the Asian American students. Thus, within the white imagination, Asian Americans have been transformed from model minorities into Mongol hordes (Lee, 2009, p. 137-138).

That whites see Asian Americans as threatening can be an indicator of two seemingly conflicting phenomena. The first is that Asian-Americans are not becoming white. If they were becoming white as some scholars have suggested, whites would not fear them so; never do whites flee the school system because they are afraid of competition from other whites. But it may also be a sign that they are being too well assimilated, that they are crossing the boundaries that whites have set for them as a model minority, that they no longer "know their place" as a minority, that they are actually "better" whites than the whites themselves. It is not the job of a minority group to perform better than whites; they may occasionally perform equal to whites when it demonstrates the American meritocracy, but whites must remain dominant. When whites begin to be outperformed, when they feel as if they are losing the power that they are entitled to, in this case their status as the best students in the school district or their spots in a university, there is a backlash.

The concept of segmented assimilation also falls into the continued-discrimination camp (Tuan, 1998; Zhou, 1997; Zhou & Xiong, 2005; Rumbaut, 1994). Segmented assimilation contests models of assimilation where successive generations of immigrants gradually move further and further into the mainstream while steadily losing their immigrant culture. Under this frame, assimilation can take many forms that may be intentional or unintentional. Instead of linear, upward assimilation, segmented assimilation argues that assimilation may also be lateral or downward; that is to say that the children of immigrants may fail to achieve greater financial

success or adopt more of the mainstream culture. In fact, among Hmong, Vietnamese, Laotian, and other Asian ethnic groups studied by Zhou (1997), the children of poorer immigrants typically had incomes lower than their parents and would sometimes even retreat further into their own culture. But declining certain aspects of mainstream culture has benefited some groups. Zhou discusses research that suggests that for certain Asian ethnic groups, particularly Southeast Asians, preserving aspects of their native culture provides superior academic achievement, especially among the residents of lower socioeconomic statuses. High integration into their respective local ethnic communities proves more beneficial than the alternative, “excessive Americanization.” But even those immigrants who achieve upward mobility or academic success, regardless of ethnicity and level of affluence, do not simply lose their culture organically. Instead, theorists of segmented assimilation argue that immigrants choose which elements of their culture to display publicly and which ones to discard or reserve for inside the home.

### Research Question

With this thesis I seek to answer the question: is there subversive version of the model minority that affords more freedom to its practitioners by allowing them to speak out against racial injustices instead of being forced to conform to damaging and false ideas such as post-raciality and color blindness. I hope to explore ways that model minorities can subvert the dominant racial politics while maintaining model minority status and to discuss the consequences of this subversion. I argue that a “model minority,” when simply defined as a “successful minority,” is not an inherently negative designation; it is the silence forced upon model minorities which is the primary problem as it may force minorities to choose between economic success and combating racism.

For this thesis, I define a model minority or new model minority as a minority who is economically successful, has achieved that success by traditional, approved means (i.e. through going to college and working one's way up the economic ladder or some similar method that requires traditional intelligence; athletes and entertainers, especially black entertainers, are typically excluded), is culturally assimilated (so they celebrate American holidays, speak English, etc), and is silent about race and/or adhere to the dominant racial ideology. Though Asian-American model minorities are expected to be silent, whereas new model minorities such as Herman Cain and Bobby Jindal harbor normative racial politics, if interviewed or surveyed, they would likely reveal that they also adhere to the dominant racial ideology (Chou and Feagin, 2010).

A subversive model minority adheres to most of the tenets of the traditional and new model minorities; they have achieved economic success through approved means and are culturally assimilated. The key difference is their respective attitudes toward race. Subversive model minorities attempt to subvert the racial hierarchy by refusing to be silent about racial injustices that they encounter. They also recognize their position as a model minority and know that they must work harder than whites and navigate a racist system to move up the economic ladder.

To demonstrate the subversive model minority and its possible consequences, I will use the Souphanousiphone family, a Laotian family on the animated series *King of the Hill (KotH)*, consisting of engineer Khan, housewife Minh, daughter Connie (who is often referred to as Khan Jr. by her father). I chose the Souphanousiphones because they were one of the few minority families on primetime television to consistently speak out against racial injustices.

## II. METHODS

On the *King of the Hill*, the Souphanousiphones serve as the universal “other” to which the whites are compared, and this is the space that they occupy in my analysis. Their plight is generalizable to other people of color who in trying to gain economic success and mainstream acceptance refuse to be silent about racism. The creators of the show made this possible by choosing Laotians as the town’s chief minority instead of blacks, Latinos, or other East Asian ethnic groups, all of whom already have a plethora of racial stereotypes attached to them. Conversely, Laotians, as a small and little known Southeast Asian ethnic group, have few specific racial stereotypes, were able to serve as a sort of generic minority in some ways. They faced very “universal” minority problems, such as institutional exclusion, workplace ostracizing, and being stereotyped as angry in addition to the specific problems of being Asian-American.

But because *KotH* is an animated series, the structure of the show is also very important in my analysis. Though it stood at the vanguard of a growing population of satirical, adult-oriented, prime-time, animated programs such as *South Park*, *American Dad*, *Futurama*, and *Family Guy*, *KotH* eschews the over-the-top satire that categorizes other series in the genre in favor of animated realism. It “refrains from...deconstructive surrealism...For example there are no aliens, no talking dogs, and no singing excrement. Although characters are crudely drawn and barely age, they are based on realistic human proportions...” (Loader, 2010, p. 16). In this way, the show plays much like a live action sitcom with “storylines (and injuries) often spanning multiple episodes” (Loader, 2010, p. 16). Because of the show’s relative realism, the characters

are expected to solve their problems in a realistic way (Thompson, 2009). This limits the possible conflicts and conditions to those that can be handled realistically unlike the aforementioned animated series. The situations and relationships are all based on a level of “cultural authenticity—getting the details right in order to get the big picture right” (Thompson, 2009, p. 49).

*King of the Hill* aired on FOX and later Cartoon Network for 13 seasons from 1997-2009, making it one of the longest running animated programs in television history. It is set in the fictional small town Arlen, Texas and revolves around Hank Hill, a middle-aged white propane salesman, the patriarch of his home and, indeed, his neighborhood, as he negotiates interactions with his family, consisting of wife Peggy, son Bobby, and niece Luanne Platter, and erratic working-class neighbors. There are a total of 259 *KotH* episodes. In order to select relevant episodes, I viewed each episode on fast forward searching for episodes where the Souphanousiphones made an appearance. I then re-watched the episodes where they appeared and included in my study the episodes with plotlines that focused on one or more of the Souphanousiphones. I found 23 such episodes.

After selecting the episodes, I viewed them again, this time taking careful notes on the behavior and speech of the Souphanousiphones and how other characters referred to them when they weren't around. I noted how they interacted with other characters and with each other, especially as it related to tenets of the model minority, race and racial discrimination, or inequality. As a pattern began to emerge, I was able to group all of the behavior of the Souphanousiphones and the other characters into three categories: (1) “Adherence to the Model Minority Stereotype” where I noted the ways in which the Souphanousiphones fit the image of



the model minority, (2) “The Souphanousiphones as Foreigners” where I noted where the Souphanousiphones were framed as foreigners by other characters, and (3) “The Subversive Model Minority” where I noted where the Souphanousiphones attempted to subvert the model minority image.

I also used another local, apparently more affluent and assimilated (they have a larger house in a better neighborhood, they’ve converted to Christianity, and have lost their accents) Laotian family, the Wassanasongs, as a contrast. Because the Wassanasongs were similar to the Souphanousiphones in that they were both first generation Laotian immigrants but the Wassanasongs had resided in town longer, they were an important point of comparison, a testament to the supposed benefits of conforming to the model minority stereotype. In essence, the existence of the Wassanasongs allowed me to easily compare the model minority to the subversive model minority within the context of the show. The Wassanasongs, like the Souphanousiphones, serve as a general “other,” a stand-in for other people of color.

### III. RESULTS

The Souphanousiphones are primarily contrasted with two other families in town: their neighbors the Hills and the Laotian Wassanasongs. The Hills are the prototypical American family. Hank fulfills his role as the patriarch by working full-time and taking care of the lawn. He also attempts to manage his son's masculinity by encouraging him to play sports and participate in carpentry, and informing Bobby whenever something he may be interested in may not be traditionally masculine. Peggy works part-time as a substitute teacher, but her primary job is clearly that of a housewife. She is responsible for all of the cooking and cleaning.

The Wassanasongs exist to show the supposed rewards of being an assimilated model minority, in contrast to the Souphanousiphones and Kahn's insistence on confronting racial issues. Their accents, the age of their son, and firsthand knowledge of the Laotian civil war, similar to that of the Souphanousiphones, suggest that they are also new immigrants. They probably left Laos around the same time as Kahn and Minh and only arrived in Arlen a few years earlier. As new Laotian immigrants, it's reasonable to assume that they initially experienced discrimination similar to that of the Souphanousiphones. This claim is further substantiated by the fact that they were charter members of Nine Rivers Country Club, which was founded because local Asians were denied admission to other local country clubs. But over the years, Ted Wassanasong assimilated. He adopts a more American accent, converts from Buddhism and eventually becomes Episcopalian, becomes a successful entrepreneur, and moves into a manor in an upper class neighborhood.

The following chart shows the episodes that I used in my analysis and how the behavior of the characters in each episode fits into three categories: “Adherence to the Model Minority Stereotype” (AMM), “The Souphanousiphones as Foreigners” (FOREN), and “The Subversive Model Minority” (SUBM). Though I included each episode on the chart, inevitably, some episodes were richer than others. Some may have completely lacked behavior relevant to the study, and others may have had such a miniscule amount, maybe an isolated sentence, that it wouldn’t have added anything to the deeper analysis that follows the chart.

## Episode List

Name	Episode #	Original Airdate	AMM	FOREN	SUBM
Westie Side Story	7	March 2, 1997	X	X	X
The Son That Got Away	20	November 23, 1997		X	
Bobby Slam	22	December 14, 1997			
Three Days of the Kahndo	27	February 15, 1998	X	X	
Traffic Jam	28	February 22, 1998			
Nine Pretty Darn Angry Men	42	November 17, 1998			
De-Kahnstructing Henry	48	February 2, 1999	X		
Aisle 8A	65	November 7, 1999			
Father of the Bribe	109	January 6, 2002	X		
The Bluegrass is Always Greener	113	February 24, 2002	X		
A Man Without A Country Club	119	April 14, 2002	X		X
Bad Girls, Bad Girls, Whatcha Gonna Do	129	November 17, 2002			
Board Games	140	March 2, 2003			X
Maid In Arlen	148	May 18, 2003			
The Redneck on Rainey Street	170	May 16, 2004	X	X	X
Orange You Sad I Did Say Banana	192	December 11, 2005	X		
The Year of Washing Dangerously	195	March 26, 2006			
The Minh Who Knew Too Much	221	December 9, 2007			
DreamWeaver	222	December 16, 2007			
Pour Some Sugar on Kahn	229	March 30, 2008			
Square-Footed Monster	238	October 19, 2008			
A Bill Full of Dollars	241	November 16, 2008			
Just Another Manic Kahn-Day	259	May 6, 2010			

a) Adherence to the Model Minority Stereotype

The Souphanousiphones' attempts to create a subversive version of the model minority stereotype must start with their adherence to at least some of the basic aspects of it. The first, which may be the most overlooked, especially in the case of the Souphanousiphones, is the Americanism. The Souphanousiphones had been in the United States for 20 years and had intentionally or organically culturally assimilated to a large degree. This is evident even in their very first appearance in the episode "Westie Side Story." To quell the initial awkwardness with their new neighbors, the Hills decide to invite the Souphanousiphones to dinner with an invitation that reads "Howdy," a traditional western greeting. But the "Howdy" disgusts Kahn, who says to Minh in reference to the card, "If you want to live in this country, learn to speak English" (*King of the Hill*, episode #7, 1997). It is apparent that Kahn has adopted a conservative middle class American view of language that rejects slang, other languages, and alternate versions of English even language that is supposedly as quintessentially American as Texas/Western. Also, in that same episode, they prove to be excellent cooks of quintessential American dishes such as barbequed hamburgers and brown betty. In fact, they cook better than everyone else in the neighborhood, leading Hank to remark that "those people can improve on anything" (*King of the Hill*, episode #7, 1997) in an attempt at a compliment that only serves to further marginalize the Souphanousiphones. Hank's comment falls in line with a common stereotype of Asian-Americans: the idea that they are nerdy and hyper-efficient. He is saying that because of their inherent intelligence and efficiency, which is greater than that of whites, they can improve on anything that whites have created.

The episode “Three Days of the Kahndo” begins with Kahn singing along to “Mickey” by Toni Basil, one of the most popular songs from the 80s in the United States, as it is played on a jukebox and reenacting the choreography from the music video. His Americanness is evident not only in his knowledge of the lyrics but in his knowledge of the choreography; he is demonstrating a familiarity with American popular culture. This sets up the rest of the episode that makes many references to immigration and Kahn’s American-ness. After traveling to Mexico for vacation, Kahn, Hank, and their friends have their IDs confiscated by the local government through a series of comedic events. While discussing how they are going to get back into the United States, Hank and his friends remark that they shouldn’t have any problems because they are white, but Kahn isn’t so he may be interrogated. As they discuss the possibility of leaving Kahn in Mexico, he pleads with them, saying, “You can’t leave me; I’m American” (*King of the Hill*, episode #27, 1998). This part of the episode also positions Kahn as a foreigner. Because he isn’t white, his friends do not think he will be acknowledged as American when they reach the border. Regardless of how long he has been in the country and the legitimacy of his entrance and citizenship, because he isn’t white, he will never be identified as truly American. Later in that episode, Kahn again self identifies as American, referring to the United States as “my country” (*King of the Hill*, episode #27, 1998) when comparing the difficulty of his legal immigration process to illegal Mexican immigrants. Though he appears to sympathize with the immigrants, Kahn sees himself as more legitimately American than them and perhaps even than the white characters as evident by his comment that he had to learn the U.S. Constitution to gain his citizenship and he doubts that his white friends know it as extensively as he.

In “Orange You Sad I Did Say Banana,” the Souphanousiphones’ cultural assimilation is on full display as it is the focus of the entire episode. The Souphanousiphones are belittled by

others in the local Asian community after forgetting a major Laotian holiday and primarily associating with their white neighbors, consistent with Kahn's identification as "homogenized and Americanized" (*King of the Hill*, episode #192, 2005). This homogenization doesn't sit well with other Laotians as he is called a "banana," meaning that he is "yellow on the outside and white on the inside," (*King of the Hill*, episode #192, 2005) an insult stemming from his perceived lack of Laotian cultural traits. Kahn is initially hurt by the insults, especially after realizing that his own daughter doesn't speak Lao, and attempts to force his family to adopt a more traditional Laotian lifestyle, including selling all of their furniture, abandoning their diet diversity to eat rice and meat every night, and only watching Laotian television shows. But by the end of the episode he resumes his former lifestyle as he realizes that his Laotian-ness is not in superficial cultural characteristics. After this realization through a conversation with Minh in which she reminds him that he enjoys all of those things he would have to give up to be "authentically" Laotian, he promptly reprimands Ted Wassanasong for attempting to make him feel guilty about how he chooses to live.

Kahn's realization is a powerful one as he eschews the idea of cultural authenticity and asserts his right to live freely. He implies what other minorities have been attempting to assert for years, that cultural authenticity can be a restrictive and oppressive idea that marginalizes in-group members. In rejecting this idea, Kahn acknowledges that he doesn't need his culture to demonstrate his "Laotianness" as his body adequately communicates that to the outside and makes him a target for discrimination regardless of what foods his family serves for dinner or what television programs they watch after dinner. It also shows their commitment to assimilation. Though they initially "Americanized" inadvertently, they've not accepted the idea that they identify more with American culture than Laotian culture.

In addition to their cultural assimilation, the Souphanousiphones meet the model minority expectation that they be successful and hard-working. This is demonstrated primarily by Connie, who is pushed very hard to achieve by her parents. In “Westie Side Story” she reveals to Bobby that she practices violin five hours per day, and throughout the series she is often seen practicing. In “The Bluegrass is Always Greener” she earns a spot in a prestigious youth orchestra, which she ignores to travel to a bluegrass competition with Hank in order to demonstrate her promise as a fiddle player. She also maintains a 4.0 grade point average while enrolled in honor’s courses and participates in many unspecified extracurricular activities. Her parents regularly boast about her achievements, calling her a “genius,” “perfect,” and “destined for Harvard.” All of this fits perfectly into the image of the Asian Americans as innately intelligent, hard working model minorities who invade elite universities.

Kahn also plays a large role in filling the role of the hard-working Asian. He is a systems analyst and diligently pursues a promotion that he eventually receives. He becomes” systems manager of coordinator project systems,” (*King of the Hill*, episode #48, 1999) but is fired for showing Hank a classified government project in an attempt to make him jealous. But Kahn has so internalized the model minority stereotype that when he loses his job he leaves his family and refuses to return until he can find a job of equal prestige. When he is finally found by Hank, he attempts to explain himself,

I can’t fail. This not supposed to happen to me. I’m Asian for God sake. More expected of me. You not understand; you somebody’s worker bee. If I accept your redneck life, it like I bury myself alive (*King of the Hill*, episode #48, 1999).



Kahn recognizes the expectations society has set for him as an Asian man and desires to meet them. He has fully bought into the “outwhiting the whites” mentality. He has so internalized the duties of the model minority that failing to meet his end of the bargain as a hard working Asian American is akin to death.

And though Minh is a housewife, it is clear that she is also formally educated. As revealed in “The Redneck on Rainey Street,” she participates in a book club and donates to National Public Radio, two prototypical middle class, educated, liberal activities. In “Board Games” she even runs for a seat on the local school board and berates Peggy, who is also running, for lacking a Bachelor’s Degree.

It is apparent that the Souphanousiphones strive to meet the model minority ideal as they proudly and strongly adhere to many of the “rules:” they are culturally assimilated, they are hard working, they are formally educated, and they are financially successful. But they fail to exhibit one of the major rules by refusing to be silent about race.

#### b) The Souphanousiphones as Foreigners

Some scholars would argue that a part of the model minority stereotype is a perpetual foreignness, that by virtue of being a part of the “model minority” one can never truly be a part of the mainstream, that the model minority is the apex of achievement for some. Model minorities, regardless of their level of achievement or cultural assimilation, are still consistently “put in their place” by whites; they’re othered in a variety of ways, from outright interpersonal discrimination and stereotyping to subtle comments and institutional discrimination.

Unsurprisingly, the Souphanousiphones experience their share of othering by other characters on the show, starting with their very first appearance in “Westie Side Story.”

Early in the episode, Peggy offers to explain the concept of a barbeque to Minh even though Minh had just invited her to a barbeque. Hank and Peggy also discuss the need for the Souphanousiphones to assimilate, saying “all they need is time.” They even compare the Souphanousiphones’ immigration to Peggy’s move from Montana to Texas and how she would initially refer to “pop” as “soda pop” (*King of the Hill*, episode #7, 1997). By comparing international immigration to moving to a new state, Hank trivializes the struggles of new immigrants and how difficult it is to adjust to a new country, learning a new language and customs. Ironically, Hank’s misguided assertion is more accurate than he intended as the Souphanousiphones were moving from California, not from Laos. His statement is made even more offensive by the fact that the Kahn had already told the men in the neighborhood that his family was moving from California. In this same episode, Hank has an exchange with Connie when he asks the name of the Souphanousiphone family dog. Connie replies that the name of their dog is “Doggie.” The conversation then continues with Hank telling Connie that his dog, Ladybird, is a “doggie” too, assuming that Connie lacks a firm grasp of English and mistaking him asking for the dog’s name with him asking what animal it is. This happens despite Connie’s lack of an accent and Hank’s implicit knowledge that she was born in the United States. All of these incidents speak to how Asian-Americans are positioned as foreigners; the association seems almost inherent in Hank’s mind. Despite knowledge to the contrary, despite being told explicitly that the Souphanousiphones were moving from California, foreignness and Asian-ness are so inextricably linked that Hank simply cannot, or refuses to, acknowledge that they are American. They are moving, and they are Asian so they *must* be moving from some foreign land, not California.

Throughout the series, Hank also makes frequent references to Kahn's international origins with phrases like "your part of the world," "this country," and "your country" despite his knowledge that the Souphanousiphones have been in the United States for over two decades.

In "The Son That Got Away" Bobby, Connie, and another neighborhood child, Joseph, ran away from home. While driving around town searching for them Minh comments on Peggy's reckless driving, saying that the children were probably in the mall. Peggy responds that when she is upset she tends to drive faster and that Minh appeared undisturbed because "being calm comes naturally to you Buddhists" (*King of the Hill*, episode #20, 1997) and that she was less worried because if they failed to find Connie, she would just "come back"—be reincarnated—as a "seahorse or something." Peggy implies that Minh's Buddhism prevented her from being a good parent and being as worried as a normal, Christian, American parent should be about finding her lost daughter.

In "The Redneck on Rainey Street," Connie is denied entrance into a prestigious summer program at Rice University, and a confused and furious Kahn goes to the university to speak with one of the program's administrators.

School Administrator: "There were many highly qualified applicants, and unfortunately..."

Kahn: "Connie has best grades in school."

SA: "Yes, but it is not just about grades."

Kahn: "I know that. Connie also have more extracurriculars than anyone else."

SA: “Look, Connie’s a really smart Asian girl, but I’ve got a boatload of them. Pardon the expression. She’s not Black. She’s not Hispanic or even white. Good lord, give me a white kid from a public school with Connie’s specs, and that kid could waltz in here.”

Kahn: “You telling me Connie didn’t get in because she’s an over-achieving Asian? That’s discrimination!”

SA: “In a way it’s flattering isn’t it? Hey, maybe there is something that you left off of Connie’s application. You know, some kind of hook. Has Connie ever had to play that violin of her’s on the street? You know, to buy her strung out mother just one more hit?”

Kahn: “No.”

SA: “Well that could have helped” (*King of the Hill*, episode #170, 2004)

The exchange between Kahn and the administrator demonstrates the awkward place in which they find themselves. They are caught in a space between the disadvantaged and the privileged. They’re not “enough” of a minority (i.e. Black or Hispanic) to give the program prestige for having diversity because there is supposedly an abundance of high-achieving, middle class Asians and Asian Americans. But they lack the “normality” or privilege (i.e. whiteness) to be granted access through normal channels, on merit. They are also too financially stable to be an asset. Because the program is undoubtedly full of affluent students, they benefit little from admitting another. If the Souphanousiphones were poor, Connie’s chances for admission would increase, but middle class students, especially middle class Asian students, are expected to

succeed. Their model minority status makes them too “white” to qualify as a disadvantaged minority, but their Asian-ness others them, makes them perpetually foreign, thus disqualifying them from standard admission as whites.

Even the Wassanasongs, seemingly a model minority prototype, cannot escape the stigma of being eternally, inherently foreign. Though they are supposed to be an assimilation/model minority success story, it becomes apparent that they are also vulnerable to the effects of racism that not even their wealth can protect them from. Their son is initially rejected from the summer program for the same reasons as Connie; though he is eventually admitted, it costs the Wassanasongs a \$10,000 donation. There is also the racism surrounding Nine Rivers Country Club. Despite the club being prestigious enough to attract the attention of the PGA Tour, they still have been unable to attract any white members. They are still othered. It’s even problematic that the PGA Tour demands that the club have white members before they use the venue for the tournament. The PGA’s request implies that their club is simply not good enough to host the tournament if it lacks white members. The value of the club’s course and that its current members are affluent and successful fail to be enough to warrant hosting the tournament without the added value of whiteness to validate the club’s prestige. But this condensation is conveniently ignored by the Wassanasongs and other high ranking club officials.

The Souphanousiphones and the Wassanasongs, despite their apparent assimilation and model minority-ness, cannot escape the image of Asian Americans as foreigners in the white imagination. Regardless of how much they appear to be accepted into mainstream American life, they will never be quite white enough to escape stigmatization.

c) The Subversive Model Minority

Throughout the series, though Kahn has internalized the idea of the model minority and strives to adhere to it, he refuses to be silent about instances of racial injustice and submit to the stereotype of the submissive Asian man and the silent model minority, and he sets this precedent from his very first appearance. In “Westie Side Story” he calls Hank a “narrow-minded redneck” when Hank says that his dog, Ladybird, is too prestigious to breed with the Souphanousiphone family dog. And though, this was his first appearance time in Arlen and thus his first appearance on the show, in a later episode, Minh revealed that they were forced to move to Arlen because Kahn had been fired many times in the past for being flippant. His constant dismissals demonstrate his unwillingness to submit to racial discrimination without speaking out, even if it means losing his job and putting his family at risk.

Kahn expands his critiques beyond interpersonal racism. In “A Man Without A Country Club” he makes a poignant critique of white privilege. In this episode, Ted Wassanasong offers Hank admission into the prestigious all-Asian Nine Rivers Country Club, which the Souphanousiphones had applied to and been rejected numerous times in the past. Hank was offered membership because the club had been offered the opportunity to host the Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tour, but the offer would be rescinded unless they could find a white member. Hank was initially reluctant so Ted offered Kahn and his family membership under the condition that Kahn convinced Hank to join. Because Kahn’s admission into Nine Rivers Country Club was dependent upon Hank’s acceptance of the offer of membership, when Hank decided not to join, Kahn’s membership was terminated. After being told of his membership termination, Kahn asks Hank why he rejected the offer to which Hank responds that he “didn’t

feel comfortable” at the club and that Kahn “wouldn’t understand.” A clearly upset Kahn sarcastically responded, “Yeah, you right. I always feel comfortable everywhere I go. You know my original name is Smith. I just change it to Souphanousiphone when I move to Texas” (*King of the Hill*, episode #119, 2002). Kahn is telling Hank he is privileged to only have felt uncomfortable in a prestigious country club that was aggressively seeking his membership because he was the only white person there. Conversely, Kahn lacks the privilege to avoid spaces where he feels uncomfortable being the only representative of his race.

Kahn also recognizes institutional racism, something rarely acknowledged on television, especially among Asians and Asian-Americans. In “The Redneck on Rainey Street,” after Connie’s rejection from the summer program, a frustrated and demoralized Kahn complains to Minh about their inability to advance socially, saying, “no matter how hard I work or how hard Connie study, we all just stuck here” (*King of the Hill*, episode #170, 2004). Later in the episode, Kahn and Minh decide to give up their ambitious pursuit of a better life and become rednecks, saying it’s “for Connie, so she won’t have to spend half her life losing at their rigged game” (*King of the Hill*, episode #170, 2004). Kahn is expressing a desire to protect his daughter from the disappointment of working hard only to have her social mobility hindered by discrimination. He thinks that life would be easier and less disappointing if they discard the economic and social goals of the American Dream and adopt a counter culture with alternate goals.

Towards the end of the episode, Hank finds Kahn about to participate in an underground street fight and tries to convince him to abandon his new redneck lifestyle, saying that the bank was about to take his house. Kahn responds, “Everything already been taken away... We flee

horrible dictatorship, learn a new language, and then work hard and study hard and our reward for doing everything right is to be told ‘Go to hell. You work too hard. You study too hard.’ Here Kahn expresses his disgust and disappointment with an America that claims to be meritocratic. After escaping the brutality of the Laotian dictatorship and fleeing to the “land of opportunity” and working hard to become “American,” Kahn and his family are constantly reminded that they are not full Americans and can never be, that they’re hard work only invites more criticism.

Because one of the core tenets of the model minority is to be silent about issues of race and racism, Kahn’s habit of bringing attention to racial injustices subverts this idea. He refuses to adhere to the image of silent, hard working Asian, and instead, chooses to express his displeasure whenever he is afforded the opportunity, occasionally to the detriment of his family. Though his subversion does not improve his lot in life, and in fact may be hindering his economic and social advancement, Kahn continues to speak up.

Kahn’s discursive subversion isn’t the only subversion happening in Arlene; there are also instances of institutional subversion. In “Board Games” Minh decides to run for an open seat on the local school board and reveals that she will certainly receive the votes of “Little Laos,” an ethnic enclave where many local Laotians live and operate their business. This implies an ethnic solidarity that is also subversive as they express their willingness to vote for a fellow Laotian rather than a white person. Minh certainly isn’t friends with everyone in Little Laos, but her status as a Laotian seems to be enough to secure their votes. By doing this, the local Laotian community is forgoing the idea of rugged individualism, a core American value



one that true model minorities would have adopted, in favor of a subversive ethnic unity that perhaps seeks to diversify the local school board.

Though this type of institutional, political subversion is the minority, it is equally, if not more important and effective than Kahn's methods. Though Minh didn't win the school board election due to underhanded trickery by one of her opponents, she would have easily had enough votes to at least make the race competitive. If she had been victorious, she would have certainly been in a better position to fight racism in the local community than Kahn.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

##### a) The Souphanousiphones

For all their efforts, which are certainly to be commended, the Souphanousiphones are ultimately unsuccessful at completely subverting the model minority stereotype for two reasons: 1) white resistance and 2) they had a tendency to resolve their racial issues as if they were only interpersonal problems and not systemic. White resistance is almost a given. It was at the hands of whites that Connie was denied entrance into the summer program, that Kahn was fired, and that the model minority stereotype was created, but I am referring specifically to Hank. Hank refuses to allow the Souphanousiphones to be subversive; he always comes to put them back in their place as a hardworking model minority working diligently to earn their piece of the American pie. When Kahn and Minh become rednecks, thus abandoning their model minority identities for one with less pressure, Hank comes to Kahn to tell him that he is throwing away everything that he has worked for, implying that he is abandoning the model minority role that he has worked so hard to achieve. When that argument fails to sway Kahn, Hank goes on to describe how despite her parents giving up Connie has continued to study and work hard in school, “Even when you and Minh went off the deep end, Connie never complained and never stopped trying, you couldn’t drag that little girl into the muck with you” (*King of the Hill*, episode #170, 2004). Here, Hank is telling Kahn that his daughter has yet to abandon her model minority status, and he should follow.

There was also the tendency, as is the case on most television programs, to resolve instances of racism as simple misunderstandings among people instead of larger issues that must be addressed. This is probably an inherent problem in the television because of the need to resolve all conflicts within the 22 minute window. Nevertheless, it is a problem that misrepresents and trivializes racism and prevents it from being explored as thoroughly as it should be. Alison Loader (2010) describes how this manifested in the Souphanousiphones first appearance in “Westie Side Story:”

Portrayed as ignorant rather than malicious, the white characters regard the Asian Americans as exotic, foreign and inferior. Peggy Hill is delighted with the newcomers because, “It’s like we get to travel to the Orient without having to worry about getting diarrhea or being jailed for our pro-democracy beliefs...Scenes throughout the episode undermine the Hills’ unwitting prejudices by demonstrating how like them (and therefore ‘American’), their neighbors really are...I would describe “Westie Side Story” as “assimilationist television discourse,” marginalizing “social and cultural differences in the interest of shared and universal similarity;” locating racial prejudice in readily resolved individual misunderstandings rather than systemic racism and unequal power relations...(p. 18).

But this is only one instance of many. Another prominent one happens at the end of “A Man Without A Country Club.” After Kahn’s critique of Hank’s privilege, implying that Khan often feels uncomfortable in his white surroundings, Hank and his friends go to Kahn’s house and invite him to join the “Rainey Street Country Club,” which is essentially them golfing on a makeshift course in their backyards and alley. Kahn accepts, puts on a “Rainey Street Country

Club” t-shirt, and all is well. But this scenario fails to resolve or even discuss in any detail why Kahn was even upset; Hank doesn’t disavow his privilege or even apologize for his insensitive comment about Kahn failing to understand how he would feel uncomfortable, and Kahn will still feel out of place wherever he may be in Arlen.

Kahn talks a lot about racial problems, which in itself distances him from the model minority stereotype, but he rarely actually addresses problems in a productive way; instead, they are all given 22 minute, micro level solutions. But outside of the show, the problems may fail to be addressed at all on a macro level as well.

The Souphanousiphones attempt to subvert the model minority undoubtedly limited their opportunity for social mobility, unlike the Wassanasongs, who submitted to the image and were able to achieve upward mobility because of it. But each comes with a cost. The Souphanousiphones are forced to constantly face rejection and disappointment because of their decision to be vocal about discrimination, and the Wassanasongs must quietly endure discrimination lest they lose the material benefits of their silence. This can be applied to the new model minority as well.

But the Laotian community of Arlene may ultimately be more successful at subverting the model minority because they have the numbers to influence local elections. Not only might they be able to get Laotians elected into important positions, but even in situations where they cannot, their numbers and solidarity make them a powerful lobbying group with the ability to hold other elected officials accountable for fixing the institutional racism that is almost certainly present.

Using the Souphanousiphones and Arlene's other Laotians as examples, it's apparent that the theories of the continued discrimination are more valid than those of the whitening camp. Model minorities do not appear to be actually becoming white as much as they are succeeding in the face of discrimination. Their financial success and cultural assimilation are not enough evidence to declare that they are on the road to whiteness when they are still subject to regular discrimination, both interpersonal and institutional. If they were truly on the road to whiteness, like Eastern and Southern Europeans in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, their experienced discrimination would be decreasing as their financial success and cultural assimilation increase, similar to the Europeans in the 1930s and 40s. Though it's yet to be seen if their financial success and assimilation will lead to more than honorary whiteness, it is clear that is not happening in the new future.

b) The Subversive Model Minority

Subverting the model minority is difficult. As the Souphanousiphones demonstrate, systemic racism seeks to punish those who attempt to undermine the white logics of the system. Though the Souphanousiphones provide a fictional example, this phenomenon also manifests in reality, and using the subversive model minority as a frame, we can see how new model minorities are punished. For example, though Spike Lee has seen moderate success as a filmmaker, the subversive tone of his films have failed to yield the widespread financial success as those of a filmmaker such as Tyler Perry, whose films are markedly more conformist. Lee has even had trouble financing his films despite his longevity as a filmmaker. Other entertainers such as Dave Chappelle, the creator of *Chappelle's Show*, and Aaron McGruder, creator of *The Boondocks* comic strip and animated series, saw considerable mainstream success even though their programs consisted almost exclusively of racial satire that criticized the existing racial

hierarchy. Their viewership was high and their respective programs were critically acclaimed, yet Chappelle left *Chappelle's Show* during the filming of the third season, and McGruder left *The Boondocks* immediately following the third season. Despite their financial success, both Chappelle and McGruder grew tired of the stresses associated with attempting to subvert the dominant racial ideology through television, such as having to justify the use of the word “nigga” or convince the producers that the audience was smart enough to understand the satire. In contrast, white cartoon satirists with shows that do not attack racial issues so vehemently, such as Seth MacFarlane (*Family Guy*, *American Dad*, *The Cleveland Show*) and Matt Groening (*The Simpsons*, *Futurama*), have programs that have been running for over a decade with no signs of pending cancellation or burnout amongst the creators. And even though Mike Judge created the *Souphanousiphones*, which I have used to demonstrate the subversive model minority, and *King of the Hill* aired for 13 seasons, that show isn't *about* the *Souphanousiphones*; indeed, they only exist to humanize Hank by making him flawed yet redeemable evidenced by the way characters reconcile their racial misunderstanding at the end of each episode.

Those outside of the entertainment industry are also punished for their subversion. Even in a supposed “progressive” discipline such as sociology speaking out is punished as demonstrated by prominent race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as he describes his experience on a panel that attempted to address the lack of diversity in sociology:

...Professor Yu Xie...lectured on good methodology as the solution to the diversity challenge...I discussed the history of exclusion of people of color in sociology, the slow and recent process of integration of minority scholars in the discipline, and how the White imagination still blocked sociologists from doing things such as including W. E. B. DuBois or Oliver C. Cox as “classics” or

precluded them from fully seeing how race worked in contemporary America. And guess what happened? I got creamed! My colleagues accused me of calling them “racist,” or making race “real,” or fanning the racial flames, and of talking about something for which I did not have systemic data. I told them they all sounded like first-year college students in a sociology class...although I believe I stood my ground, that event marked the beginning of the end for me as a professor at Michigan (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 15).

Had Bonilla-Silva adhered to the role of the new model minority by either declining to sit on the panel or taking an alternate approach to the solving the “diversity challenge,” one that failed to directly address racism, his departure from the University of Michigan may not have been hastened; indeed, he may even still be working there as is the other minority professor on the panel, Yu Xie.

The punishment consistently doled out for attempting to subvert the model minority begs the question of whether a truly vocal subversive model minority archetype can exist. Unfortunately, because new model minorities are individuals it is much more difficult to orchestrate ethnic solidarity similar to the Laotians in Arlen. In an era where the actions of public figures are under constant scrutiny, attempts to organize ethnic communities would not escape the public eye and the organizer would almost certainly suffer consequences similar to those I’ve just mentioned. Subtlety may prove to be much more successful. For example, Barack Obama may choose to subvert by giving people of color more job opportunities in his sphere of influence. This can be as small as an intern in the White House (though certainly the President doesn’t select interns) or as large as appointing Sonya Sotomayor to be the first Hispanic justice on the United States Supreme Court. But examples don’t have to be as extreme as the President.

An entertainer like Aaron McGruder could do a similar thing by offering people of color job opportunities or donating to grassroots efforts by people of color. Or a prominent professor like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva may decide to push for more students of color to be accepted into his local graduate program or guide them through once they've been accepted. This subtlety is the future of the subversive model minority as history has shown us that overt subversion is not the best way to combat the model minority image.



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