

Sharon S. Lee

An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022. 198 pp.

Sharon S. Lee's case study of student activism at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) balances the particularities of what happened on one campus with larger themes that resonate with how Asian American students have pushed back against the layered and multiple forms of racism that they have encountered within US higher education. While it may seem evident that Asian American students have been racialized, Lee documents how students have been unseen and unheard, shrouded in stereotypes—perpetual foreigners in their own country, labeled as international students. The persistence of the model minority myth, moreover, continues to obscure the varied experiences and needs of students, even as the myth pits Asian Americans against other students of colour. In the process, attention is deflected from structural and systemic issues that make clear, as Lee points out, how higher education institutions in the United States were established for wealthy, white men.

Focusing on the period from the 1970s through the early 2000s, Lee documents the fits and starts by which students over several decades played an important role in securing student services as well as contributing to the building of Asian American studies as an academic field. The first stirrings at UIUC, not surprisingly, were connected to the turbulence of the late 1960s and such influences as the Third World Liberation Front and the anti-Vietnam War movements. Students formed the Asian American Alliance in 1971, but the group lasted only a few years as it was difficult to sustain. There were few faculty or staff members on campus during this period. Nevertheless, UIUC students were able to reach out to students at other Midwestern universities and held some regional conferences that would plant the seeds for the establishment of the Midwest Asian American Students Union (MAASU), which would gather thousands of students together in later years.

In the 1980s, the children of post-1965 immigrant families came of age to enter college, and given the presence of Asian Americans in the greater Chicago area, UIUC began to see a rise in numbers that allowed a more substantial and internally diverse community to form. The university claimed Asian American students as part of its minority population for reporting and presumably for state allocations, but there was no recognition of student needs. A new group, the Asian American Association, formed in 1986, along with ethnic-specific groups. Lee recognizes that there were some tensions around those students who were more focused on cultural and social issues with those who were engaged with racial politics. The murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 galvanized some students as a grassroots movement spread throughout the Midwest and across the nation. An issue that did unify the various groups was the longstanding goal a student cultural center.

In the 1990s, students pushed back against the double standard in which Asian Americans were counted as minorities without any accompanying institutional

support. Cross-racial solidarities also emerged as events took place such as the Latino student sit-ins and the Columbus Day protest by Native American students. Students submitted a formal petition for a student centre in 1992 and started an Asian American-specific orientation program. Around the same time, students and supportive faculty and staff advocated for the first classes in Asian American studies. Early signs of change in 1996 included the hiring of a dedicated Assistant Dean of Students and two faculty positions for Asian American studies. The ribbon cutting for the long-awaited student centre took place in September 2005, and the Asian American Studies program became a department in 2012.

While the legacy of student activism at UIUC is surely one of struggle and dedication, spanning some fifty years and worthy of note in its own right, there are other insights embedded in this particular history that Lee has ably told. The first is the salience of Asian American racial identity. Asian American student experiences have an integrity of their own, and parity in terms of the percentage of students compared to the overall population does not mean equity. The prevalence of the model minority myth can further mask the real needs of Asian American students, including the pernicious effects of the myth itself.

Furthermore, Lee calls for an expansion for how we think about student activism. The strategies used by Asian American studies such as coalition building and legal arguments provide a more nuanced understanding of how change takes place in higher education. Asian American student experiences also highlight the particularity of their racial positioning and a fuller understanding of how whiteness operates. The UIUC case adds to our knowledge base of how racial dynamics in higher education need to move beyond a Black-white paradigm.

As the current moment of anti-Asian violence demonstrates, there is a need to understand the particular histories of Asian Americans that stand distinct if related to other communities of colour. Lee provides a deeper dive into how students in the Midwest critically engaged and fostered community and coalition building in the push for racial and social justice—lessons that extend far beyond college campuses.

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Catherine Larochelle

L'école du racisme. La construction de l'altérité à l'école québécoise (1830–1915)

Montréal : Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 350 pp.

Les enjeux liés à la race et au racisme ne manquent pas de susciter la controverse, au Québec comme ailleurs. Avec cet ouvrage, Catherine Larochelle s'empare frontalement de la question à partir d'une perspective quelque peu inédite, qui lie études historiques et éducation. Le livre découle de sa thèse de doctorat, dont l'objectif est d'analyser les représentations de l'altérité au sein de l'institution scolaire du