

The Not-So-New South Suburbs: Asian Immigration and the Politics of School Integration in Chapel Hill, North Carolina



WILLOW LUNG-AMAM

This article explores how middle-class Asian immigrants disrupted settled geographies and social relations in a high-tech Southern suburb. In a case study of controversies over the redrawing of the Chapel Hill school district attendance boundaries, it asks what middle-class Asian immigrants attempts to navigate the space “between Black and White” reveals about emergent racial and spatial relations in the New South suburbs and the possibilities for advancing more equitable schools and neighborhoods. The case study shows how Asian immigrants struggled to navigate the social, cultural, and educational barriers to organize a united and effective platform, highlighting how new immigrants have challenged old ideas about equitable education policies based on a Black-White binary. But it also showed how their tactics mimicked those of White suburbanites and their resistance to integration, as Asian immigrants rallied around policies that support suburban segregation and inequality and helped to reinforce settled structures of White privilege.

Keywords: Asian Americans, New South, school integration, immigrant gateway, suburbs

U.S. immigration has been robust for several decades, but recent emigres have not located in traditional gateway cities, such as New York and San Francisco. Instead, their first stops have often been the suburbs of major metropolitan areas or new destinations in the South and Midwest (Benton-Short and Price 2008).

Asian Americans are the most rapidly growing racial or ethnic group in the United States, largely due to new immigration (Frey 2014). Many recent emigres are educated professionals who arrived on skilled or educational visas

and settled into middle-class and largely White suburbs of traditional gateway cities. Among this select group, the markers of immigrant success—from high homeownership rates to socioeconomic status and integration into elite suburbs—have reinforced ideas about Asian Americans as the New Whites and the “model minority” myth. These monikers deny the centrality of race in structuring social and economic mobility of Asian Americans and other racialized groups. As Claire Kim (1999) observes, Asian Americans’ racialization “be-

Willow Lung-Amam is an associate professor of urban studies and planning at the University of Maryland, College Park, United States, and director of community development at the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education and of the Small Business Anti-Displacement Network.

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tween Black and White” both valorizes and ostracizes them while reinforcing White racial power.

Scholars have also consistently pointed out the ways that Asian Americans, even those who are socioeconomically advantaged, fail to live up to the myth (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007; Lee and Zhou 2015). In suburbs, conflicts over the form and function of suburban homes, shopping centers, and schools, have evidenced how political and planning processes disadvantage Asian Americans vis-à-vis their White neighbors (Lung-Amam 2017). Much of the scholarship, however, focuses on inequalities between Asian immigrants and White suburbanites in the American West and Southwest. Relatively little has been said about how Asian Americans have negotiated social and spatial relationships with non-White groups and in the American South. The New South framework, which posits a relatively smooth transition from Jim Crow to a more positive and equitable era of race relations, has been widely critiqued for Latinx and especially African Americans, but less so for Asian Americans (Schmid 2003). The New South also references the region’s changing economic and spatial order in which race relations play out in a more urbanized landscapes and economic systems based less on an agrarian past than on emergent industries, including high-tech.

This article explores how middle-class Asian immigrants disrupted settled Black-White geographies and social relations in a high-tech Southern suburb, challenging New South ideologies and introducing new racialized politics of education. It follows the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, school district as it redrew its attendance boundaries for, among other things, enrolling students in a newly reopened historically African American school. The reopening marked an important moment for African Americans in Chapel Hill, particularly residents of Northside, whose children had been bused out of the neighborhood for decades to balance enrollment at predominantly White schools. Somewhat surprisingly, the loudest voice of opposition to the boundary change came from recent immigrants, primarily from China, clustered in a suburban neighborhood

slated to be redistricted to the new Northside Elementary School.

In following the debate from its origins to its resolution, this article asks what middle-class Asian immigrants attempts to navigate the space “between Black and White” reveals about emergent racial and spatial relations in the New South suburbs and the possibilities for advancing more equitable schools and neighborhoods. It shows suburban schools as a critical venue through which Asian immigrants have become involved in local politics as they struggled to find a place in the city’s racially and economically segregated landscape. Although not historically active in local politics, schools proved to be a lightning rod issue for Asian Americans in Chapel Hill, just as they have in other suburban communities (Lung-Amam 2017; Jiménez 2017; Kye 2018; Park 2020). In trying to leverage their privilege and power in the boundary debates, Asian immigrants encountered the distinct disadvantages they shared with other racialized groups. This included the many social, cultural, and educational barriers they faced in organizing a united and effective platform. It highlighted their lack of political power, their ability to navigate public processes, and the divisions among Asian immigrants and their native-born peers and their White and non-White neighbors. It also showed how Asian immigrants tactics mimicked those of White suburbanites and their resistance to integration. Asian American parents employed anti-Black stereotypes, technorational logics, and NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) politics to fiercely protect limited public educational resources.

This case study highlights how new immigrants have challenged old ideas about equitable education policies based on a Black-White binary and shifted the terms of debate around educational inclusion, segregation, and opportunity in the American South suburbs. It continues to dispel ideas about Asian Americans as the New Whites and suburban settlement as markers of their social equality, highlighting instead the unequal racialized landscape in which they struggle to find their place. It also shows how old racial divisions have remained geographically and politically

entrenched in ways that challenge ideas about the New South. Rather than acting as the harbingers of change, Asian immigrants have sometimes rallied around policies that promote racial segregation and inequality in suburban schools and neighborhoods, reinforcing settled structures of White privilege and power.

THE POLITICS OF IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION AND EDUCATION IN THE NEW SOUTH SUBURBS

In the past few decades, the marked shift from gateway cities and regions where immigrants typically settle, like New York and Chicago, has given way to new immigrant gateways in the American South. In the 1990s, North Carolina was among thirteen states, primarily in the West and Southeast, where foreign-born growth rates more than doubled the national average (Singer 2004).

Migration patterns vary considerably among racial and ethnic groups in the South, with Latinx immigrants making up the bulk of new migrants. South and Central American emigres have been attracted to southern communities, which offer a low cost of living, family connections, and employment opportunities, particularly in poultry processing and light manufacturing (Schmid 2003; Bailey 2005; Massey 2008). More than other groups, they tend to move into neighborhoods once dominated by African Americans.

Asian Americans are a smaller portion of southern migrants, but a significant portion of growth in some states, including North Carolina (Johnson and Appold 2014; Bailey 2005). In many communities, early Asian emigres were refugees and asylum seekers from Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries who arrived with the help of federally funded programs, local churches, and community-based groups. Lacking education, employment skills, and other resources, many followed the trajectories of Latinx immigrants more than their higher income, better educated Asian peers (Bailey 2005).

Since the 1990s, middle-class Asian Americans have dominated migration patterns in many new immigrant gateways. Following changes in U.S. immigration laws favoring

more highly skilled and educated immigrants that began in the late 1960s and ramped up after 1990, professional immigrants—largely from China, Taiwan, South Korea, and India—have clustered near high-tech jobs and research universities, including North Carolina’s Research Triangle Park (RTP). Wake County, where the RTP sits, is home to the highest percentage of Asian Americans in the state (Johnson and Appold 2014). The region is a “suburban metropolis” of loosely bounded low-density communities that ring RTP, including Chapel Hill (Singer 2008). Chapel Hill has emerged as a “ethno-techno-suburb” in which suburban technology firms and high-performing schools are the driving forces of new immigrant settlement (Chakravorty, Kapur, and Singh 2017).

In new southern gateways, immigrants have struggled to navigate the stark Black-White binary as they moved into new neighborhoods, schools, and otherwise. Some scholars have suggested that Latinx and Asian immigrants have helped disrupt the settled economic, social, and political order. Waters and Jiménez (2005) argue that the lack of immigration history in new gateways leave the identities and positionalities of new migrants more open to definition than elsewhere. Others highlight how immigrants fit uneasily within the traditional Black-White paradigm of southern racial and spatial relations (Massey 2008; Price 2012). In new and emergent gateway cities, immigrants often lack established immigrant-serving institutions and services and face hostility from their native-born neighbors (Waters and Jiménez 2005; Hall and Crowder 2014; Hopkins 2010; Marrow 2011).

As Kasey Zapatka and Van Tran (2023) show elsewhere in this volume, the politics of immigrant integration and reception vary considerably by race, ethnicity, and class. All immigrants face barriers, but integration in new gateways is particularly difficult for Mexican and other Latinx immigrants who sometimes arrive without legal documentation and with low levels of education and often encounter strong nativist backlash (Singer 2008; Marrow 2011). In schools, particularly suburban districts with large and growing Latinx populations, Latinx families often face backlash

from educators and parents who resist programs designed to serve immigrant and second-generation students (Jones-Correa 2008; Bathia et al. 2023, this issue).

Comparably little has been written about Asian Americans' experience of integration in new gateways, particularly in the South and in middle-class suburbs. In established and new gateway suburbs outside the South, Asian Americans' racialization as model minorities and their economic, educational, and professional status have sometimes eased their process of integration relative to other non-White groups (Alba et al. 1999; Okamoto et al. 2020). But as evidenced by the recent attacks on Asian Americans across the nation and in Georgia in particular, perceptions of Asian Americans as "forever foreigners" unable to integrate into American society pervade the experiences of all Asian Americans (Chin and Pan 2021). Asian Americans are frequently perceived as economic competitors whose political allegiances lie elsewhere, leading to mobility barriers in the workplace, local politics, and other arenas of everyday suburban life (Fong 2008).

Suburban schools are an arena of particularly intense contest between middle-class Asian immigrants and their White neighbors. In predominantly White suburbs, Asian Americans have engaged in battles over school culture, curriculum, parental involvement, and student achievement. Asian parents have often fought for science and math-based curricula, tougher courses, and greater resources to support their children's academic success. In turn, their lack of engagement in traditional social, parental, and extracurricular activities, have often led to charges of their "selfish" narrow definitions of success (Charney, Yeoh, and Kiong 2003; Lung-Amam 2017; Warikoo 2022). Some scholars point out how Asian Americans have been disadvantaged in these debates. They emphasize how school debates uphold White racial frames of success, treat Asian American students and parents as "abnormal" and unable to assimilate, and prompt White flight or intensify Asian neighborhood segregation. They also highlight the difficulties that Asian parents face in navigating these debates, given that they often lack political power and representation, encounter language and cultural

barriers, and are neither familiar nor comfortable with political and educational processes (Lung-Amam 2017; Jiménez 2017; Kye 2018; Park 2020; Warikoo 2022).

Some scholars highlight the diversity of Asian American perspectives on educational politics, emphasizing intra- and intergroup tensions and diverse experiences among different Asian ethnic, socioeconomic, and nativity groups (Lung-Amam 2017; Warikoo 2022). Scholars, for instance, often highlight divides in educational values between first- and second-generation immigrants and the divergent academic trajectories of lower-income Southeast Asian groups relative to East Asians (Ochoa 2013; Lee and Zhou 2015).

Still others focus on the consequences for other racialized groups. Asian parents often leverage their socioeconomic privilege and power to ally with White neighbors to hoard educational resources and opportunities associated with good schools (Jiménez 2017; Lewis and Diamond 2015). In this "Race at the Top" between White and Asian American suburban parents, Natasha Warikoo (2022) notes that race and class segregation keep working-class and poor families, especially Latinx and African Americans, out of the race altogether. As Erica Frankenberg and her colleagues (2023, this issue) point out, educational attendance boundaries have long contributed to creating and reinforcing suburban neighborhood and school segregation.

Little scholarship, however, has explored the politics of education between middle-class Asian immigrants and non-White groups, particularly African Americans. This case study extends the literature on the politics of Asian immigration in suburban neighborhoods and schools to a new high-tech gateway suburb in the American South. In Chapel Hill, it highlights the ways that middle-class Asian migrants defied ideas about their status as the New Whites and model minorities, and the positive rhetoric of New South racial and spatial relations. It instead shows the many barriers that immigrant parents face in navigating educational politics within the racially segregated, uneven landscape of the American South and the diversity of Asian American educational perspectives. At the same time, it shows how

they exercised their socioeconomic privilege and power, using anti-Black rhetoric, technological logics, and traditional NIMBY politics to defend existing school boundaries and thereby reinforce segregation and inequality in suburban schools and neighborhoods.

METHODS

I moved to Chapel Hill in 2012 to start a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of North Carolina (UNC). After enrolling my son at a local elementary school, I quickly became aware of emergent tensions over school redistricting. As I talked with other parents about the debate, I heard similar stories to those I heard in California's Silicon Valley, where Asian immigration led to a heated politics of school redistricting with their wealthy White suburban neighbors (Lung-Amam 2017). But I was also struck by how different the racial context of the South was in shaping these debates.

I began investigating the racial politics of the boundary debates in local newspaper archives as well as transcripts and videos from Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Board of Education redistricting hearings. The school district in-

cludes the Town of Chapel Hill and its neighboring Town of Carrboro. Analyzing these documents, I identified key school leaders, Northside community leaders, and Section 74A parents active in the debate whom I contacted for interviews. Section 74A was the name used by school district in its redistricting plans to refer to an area in north Chapel Hill that included the neighborhoods of Larkspur, Parkside, and Northwood. The area had that highest percentage of Asian American residents in Chapel Hill and was also where the most vocal opponents to redistricting centered (figure 1). My goal was to understand the internal politics of debate, its key players, and the diverse perspectives on its racial dynamics from those most ardently opposed to redistricting (74A residents) and those who expressed the most enthusiastic support (Northside community leaders).

Nearly all those whom I contacted agreed to be interviewed and many referred me to others to form a rolling sample of participants. Section 74A parents active in the debate were particularly difficult to locate from secondary data. Several interviewees were introduced to me by

Figure 1. Suburban homes in the “74A” neighborhood, where Asian Americans slated for redistricting were clustered.



Source: Photo by the author, 2012.

community leaders, including the principal of the local Chinese school where 74A parents gathered to discuss the debates. Between September 2012 and May 2013, I conducted in-depth interviews with fourteen school leaders, four current or former Northside residents, and seven 74A parents involved in the debates, all of whom were recent Chinese immigrants.¹

Questions varied slightly across groups, but largely focused on their history in Chapel Hill, the forces driving regional immigration, how immigration shaped educational politics prior to redistricting, the history of school desegregation in Chapel Hill, and recent redistricting debates. The latter included questions about the context for redistricting, major conflicts, and interviewees' opinions about its resolution. I supplemented interviews about the history of desegregation in Chapel Hill with archives, including the Southern Oral History Program archives at UNC's Center for the Study of the American South. I also attended and took notes at several school board meetings about redistricting and an informational session for Lee Charter School, attended by many parents upset about redistricting.

SEGREGATION AND IMMIGRATION IN A SOUTHERN TECHNO-ETHNOBURB

The context of the boundary debates for many African Americans in Chapel Hill was shaped by the long history of residential racial segregation in Chapel Hill. Following the Civil War, African Americans in Chapel Hill worked largely as domestic servants for White families or at service jobs at UNC. Most lived within walking distance of the campus in the Northside neighborhood. Originally known as Potter's Field, the neighborhood was segregated legally and extralegally. Northside residents experienced racial hostility outside their neighborhood and disinvestment within it. Born in Chapel Hill in 1948, Robert Humphreys (2001) recalled its hardened racial lines: "There weren't any White people who would consider moving into Northside, you know, into the real black area of Northside. Or the 'colored area' as it was called

by everybody in those days. Just as there probably weren't any 'colored people' . . . that would have been, have thought about moving to the White neighborhood. That's just the way it was."

Founded in 1917 as an independent school for African Americans, the Orange County Training Institute reflected the neighborhood's conditions under segregation. Later renamed Northside Elementary, it was the only school for African Americans in the city, enrolling students in all grades until the late 1940s, when the all-Black Lincoln High School opened. David Caldwell, a former student at Northside and Lincoln, remembered how students always received "old buses" and "old books" handed down from predominantly White schools (Pearce 2009, 2). "We knew that we weren't as equal as Chapel Hill High School or the rest of the schools," recalled Thurman Couch (2001), who attended Northside and Lincoln. "We knew that we had to work harder, study harder, be harder."

Northside and Lincoln, however, had a strong sense of community and commitment to Black excellence. Most administrators, parents, and students lived in the Northside neighborhood. Students walked to school, patronized Black-owned businesses, played together at the Hargraves Community Center on Saturdays, and saw their teachers in the church pews on Sundays. Parents knew teachers as friends and neighbors and were actively involved in the school.

Northside and Lincoln were not just schools, they were community centers. Former students spoke about teachers and administrators with deep affection. "It was like leaving home and going to a second home," Thurman Couch explained (2001). Walter Durham (2001), a graduate of Northside Elementary, recalled that "It was pretty much more a family than a school, something that you looked forward to coming to every day." Many described administrators as strict but caring; defiant in the face of racism with a mission to help students succeed inside and outside the school. Although limited in re-

1. Pseudonyms are used for most interviewees, except community and political leaders who agreed to have their names published. I attempted to interview non-Chinese residents of Section 74A who were active in the debate, but parents contacted did not respond to my requests.

sources, many segregated Southern schools were valued by African Americans for their high expectations, nurturing environments, and the culturally relevant, sometimes radical pedagogies employed by Black educators (Walker 2000; Givens 2021).

In the early 1960s, the Northside neighborhood started to change. Urban renewal projects tore down several homes to make way for what became the largest concentration of public housing in Chapel Hill (Self Help 2012). Meanwhile, the school district began integrating its schools—a process that by 1966 led to the closure of Northside and Lincoln.

With desegregation came even more dramatic changes to the neighborhood (figure 2). As Northside and Lincoln students were dispersed among primarily White schools throughout the district, they left supportive schools with high expectations to schools where students, parents, and teachers were openly hostile. White administrators, teachers, and White-dominated PTAs alienated Black parents. Although the battles over school desegregation were not as violent in Chapel Hill as in many other Southern cities (Lassiter 2013),

Black students were socially and academically marginalized. The pressure took a heavy toll on Black students. Walter Durham (2001) reflected that after being ignored or dismissed by teachers, “You get to the point where you don’t want to ask a question. You don’t want to go to the teacher for anything. Next thing you know you’re falling behind in your grades because the communication is not there.”

White teachers’ low expectations, racial hostility, and lack of resources led to a persistent racial achievement gap in Chapel Hill–Carrboro schools. African American frustrations boiled over in the 1990s, when parents demanded greater resources for underprivileged students. In response, the district started a Blue-Ribbon Task Force, but to little effect. Since the district started tracking test scores in the 1980s, the gap between Black and White students closed slightly but remained large (Tatter 2014). As Angela Simms (2023) points out in this issue, the persistent racial achievement gaps in suburban schools reflect the continued failure to close the Black-White resource gap.

But by the 1990s, the contours of the achievement gap and racial segregation in Chapel Hill

Figure 2. Typical home in the Northside neighborhood.



Source: Photo by the author, 2012.

had begun to change as the region became a popular new immigrant gateway. New migrants, particularly from Asia, were attracted to the region for new employment opportunities, particularly in high-tech. Nurtured by three main research universities—the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke, and North Carolina State—the area had become internationally known as a hub of high-tech research. It even adopted a new name, the Research Triangle, claiming Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill as its primary cities. The boom in high-tech employment coupled with new immigration laws, attracted many skilled, foreign-born scientists and engineers, especially from India, Taiwan, and mainland China (Bailey 2005). Firms such as Cisco Systems and IBM clustered among sprawling office parks and research campuses in Research Triangle Park (RTP), the region’s symbolic center and employment hub. In the 1990s, the Research Triangle, alongside two other metro areas in North Carolina—Charlotte and Greensboro–Winston Salem—received the bulk of the state’s new immigrants (Singer 2004).

Asian patterns of settlement varied in the Triangle. Carrboro, Chapel Hill’s more working-class neighbor, received an early influx of more working-class Burmese refugees, who dominated the Asian population before the arrival of middle-class Asian Americans associated with the RTP. Chapel Hill was particularly attractive to Chinese immigrants and other middle-class Asian groups, including Indian and Korean Americans (table 1). Chapel Hill offered easy access to those employed in high-tech jobs in the RTP and the University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill. Because of the university, it also had a small, but established Asian American middle-class presence for decades. But most important to many immigrant families, Chapel Hill had a strong reputation for “good schools,” with some of the highest standardized test scores in the region. Many Chinese immigrants settled in the northwest neighborhoods around Seawell Elementary, which had highest test scores of any elementary school in the district in 2012. By then, Asian Americans had become the largest racial minority group in the Chapel Hill–Carrboro City School District and in the Town of Chapel Hill.

As in many communities across the country, for nearly all the Asian immigrants I spoke to, schools were the overriding consideration that drove their decision to settle in Chapel Hill. (Lung-Amam 2017; Park 2020). “The time I moved in Chapel Hill I was told by someone that Chapel Hill has the best school district and it’s kind of close to where I work,” explained Adam Li, an immigrant from mainland China who moved to Chapel Hill in 2005 and was employed at North Carolina State in Raleigh. “There’s nothing wrong with focusing on your kids’ education” (interview, June 3, 2013).

Many Asian parents looked beyond elementary school. “We were seeing what elementary they would go to and which middle school they would go to and which high school,” explained Yuxi Zhang, who lived in the Parkside neighborhood near Seawell, “That’s the first consideration.” A recent immigrant from mainland China, Yuxi had worked at UNC and was later employed in the RTP as a computer program-

Table 1. Racial Demographics of Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools Following Redistricting

	School District		Seawell Elementary		Northside Elementary	
	2012–13	2020–21	2012–13	2020–21	2012–13	2020–21
Asian American	15	14	31	29	16	12
African American or Black	11	11	12	12	23	25
Hispanic-Latinx	14	18	7	10	11	13
White	52	50	44	38	45	42
Multiracial and Other	7	7	6	10	5	8

Source: Author’s tabulation based on Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools (2013, 2020).

Note: All numbers in percentages. Hispanic-Latinx populations are not included in other racial groups.

mer, while her husband worked at Duke. She appreciated the neighborhood for its access to their jobs, but her primary focus was the test scores of Chapel Hill schools. “Location, location, location is very important when you choose the house,” she explained, repeating the popular real estate mantra to clarify why schools were so central in their decision (interview, June 1, 2013). For many Asian immigrants I spoke with, their decision to focus their housing choice on access to “good schools” framed a critical context for their entry into the redistricting debate.

THE RACIAL POLITICS OF REDISTRICTING

In 2012, the Chapel Hill–Carrboro City School Board announced that it would construct a new school at the site of the old Northside Elementary under that name. The decision was hailed by many residents, particularly African Americans. “The Black families that I talked to were pretty excited about having Northside being a school again. It feels like a real reclamation of history,” remarked Graig Meyers, director of Student Equity for the school district (interview, March 14, 2013). Reverend Josephine Harris of Northside’s First Baptist Church praised the decision, telling the school board that it would be “a history making opportunity” for the community (Board of Education Meeting 2012). Although the decision to redistrict and reopen Northside did not face much controversy, the question of who would be moved to fill the new school raised an immediate stir. As different plans were put forward, the largest and loudest voice of opposition came from Section 74A, near Seawell Elementary, which was slated for redistricting under various plans, and had one of the highest concentrations of Asian American residents in Chapel Hill (figure 3).

Chapel Hill’s redistricting debate followed on the heels of decades of racial contention over school redistricting in North Carolina and the RTP. In 2000, Wake County, an urban-suburban school district that includes the City of Raleigh, moved from its voluntary race-

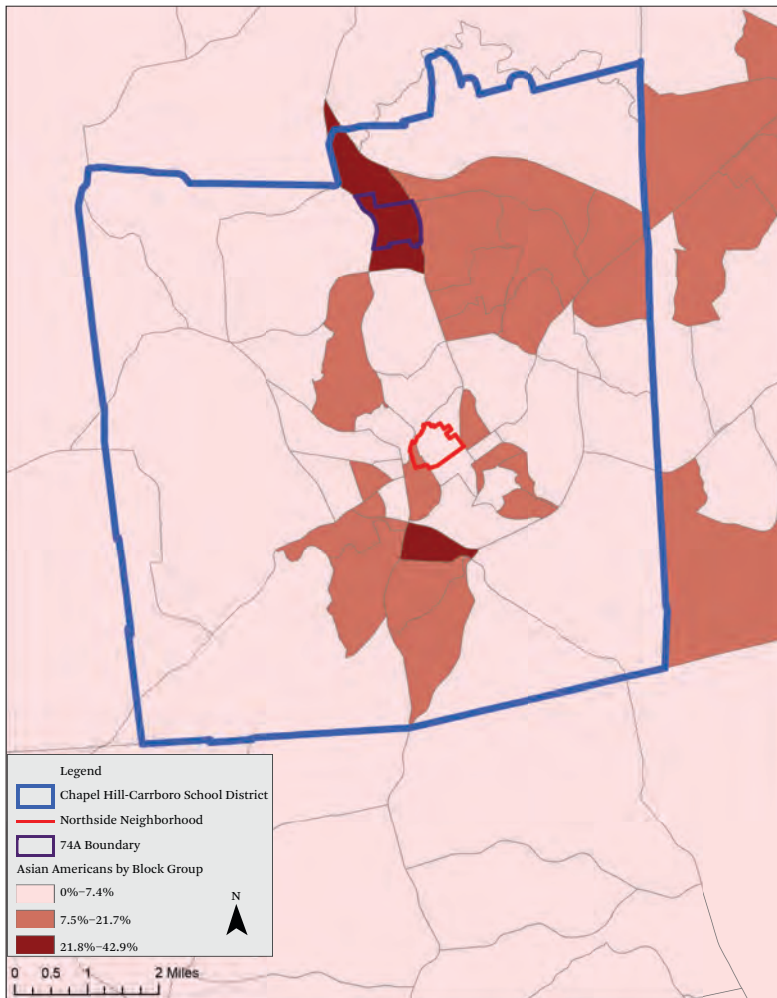
based assignment plan, unique among southern school districts, to a race-neutral policy. The new plan aimed to limit the concentration of low-income and low-achieving students. A decade later, its newly elected Republican majority school board, disproportionately representing White and suburban areas, eliminated the district’s focus on diversity to instead focus on proximity. The debate brought national attention to racial resegregation in schools, unseated several Republican board members, and led to a new policy with a greater balance between proximity and equity in school assignments—criteria similar to that of Chapel Hill (Frankenberg and Diem 2013).

In Chapel Hill, the district’s administrative team initially came up with four draft plans based on an analysis of student data and the district’s priorities for school reassignments, which included facilitating student walk zones, maximizing facility use, and equity. Equity prioritized balancing the socioeconomics of families and student achievement and minimizing travel times (Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools 2009). The draft plans were then presented to a twenty-two-member advisory council, consisting of two representatives from each school, largely parents. The advisory council provided feedback on the plans and worked with the district to refine them before they were shared publicly. Public testimony was open for two months before the school board made its final decision.

Before the first public meeting, the advisory council indicated their support for the plan that prioritized socioeconomic diversity and spreading “at-risk” students around the district. The district defined at-risk students by various socioeconomic and academic performance indicators.² The announcement seemed to indicate support for Plan 2.1, which would have the lowest variation among schools on both indicators. The proposed plan would move 1,045 students, the majority of whom would be from the two closest schools to Northside, including Seawell Elementary, the district’s most crowded school.

2. Although the matter was not discussed in the Chapel Hill debates, education scholars have been critical of the ways that at-risk indicators target and problematize Black and other students of color (see, for example, O’Connor, Hill, and Robinson 2009).

Figure 3. Asian Americans in the Chapel Hill–Carrboro School District, 2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2010b.

Note: Highlighting the percentage within the 74A section slated for redistricting and Northside neighborhood. The optimal way to view this figure is in color. We refer readers of the print edition of this article to <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/9/2/55> to view the color version.

Public hearings brought out many voices in support of Plan 2.1. Many African Americans, former and current Northside residents, and others supported the plan on equity grounds. After the first public meeting, a Chapel Hill resident penned a letter in support of the plan in the *Chapel Hill News*, echoing sentiments expressed by other parents at the hearing. She asked, “Why would we intentionally re-create the same situation by keeping high populations of ‘at risk’ and lower scoring families clustered in just a couple schools?” She urged resi-

dents to “set aside our concerns about the personal inconvenience and resistance to change and consider the broader picture. Here we have an opportunity to equalize the playing field by spreading out the families with varying levels of resources” (Parker 2012). The letter was also a plea to the many parents who attended the hearing to oppose the plan.

Not Your Typical NIMBY

Neither the residents nor opinions of Section 74A parents were homogenous. Among Asian

Americans were those sympathetic to arguments about school equity made by parents across the district. Section 74A residents were also not all Asian American. Some were White, among them several vocal opponents of the redistricting plan. The most common denominator among opponents was simply that they did not want their children to be moved, explained former District Superintendent Neil Pederson (interview, March 7, 2013). By and large, though, the 74A residents who spoke out publicly to oppose the redistricting plans were Asian Americans, and mostly Chinese immigrants. Their complicated arguments about their status as racialized model minorities in some ways reinforced the myth but in other ways undermined it. Meanwhile, their arguments about their lack of political power stressed Asian Americans' lack of equivalence with their White neighbors and highlighted ongoing patterns of segregation in Chapel Hill.

Section 74A parents expressed their concerns at school board meetings and in other public fora. Some concerns seemed to reflect those held by other neighborhoods slated for redistricting, such as the process by which decisions were made and how the options were drawn up. Unlike parents in other neighborhoods, however, 74A parents made the central argument that their neighborhood was unfairly targeted—and according to many because of their race.

Some reasoned that the school board did not expect an Asian American neighborhood to protest the decision, as they lacked political power and voice. Hongbin Gu is an immigrant from mainland China and principal of Chapel Hill's first Chinese school, which served as a hub for Chinese parents across the district. During the debate, she counseled many upset 74A parents.³ When I asked whether she thought that the district was aware of the racial composition of 74A, she responded it would be difficult for them not to know. "My guess is that first [the school district thought] the Asian community is not loud enough to express their opinion," she speculated (interview May 8,

2013). Some 74A parents said that stereotypes about Asian Americans as quiet and compliant model minorities left the neighborhood as a convenient choice. Others argued that the neighborhood lacked political representation. Asian Americans did not sit on the school board nor hold any major positions in city government. At the time of the redistricting debate, the seven-member school board included two African Americans, five White Americans, and no Asian Americans. All were elected on a district-wide basis.⁴ With historically low voter turnout and political engagement, Asian Americans were easily dismissed by the city leaders. Christine Lee, a Korean immigrant who ran for school board in 2009 but was not elected, also pointed out that 74A residents sometimes were not citizens and therefore could not vote, further dampening their political power (interview June 11, 2013).

The more common concern 74A parents expressed was that their neighborhood was targeted because their children were doing well. Given the district's stated priorities to balance at-risk students and the socioeconomic status (SES) of families across the district, 74A parents argued that it made sense to target a neighborhood with high-performing students and stable, middle-class families to go to a school with what some presumed would be a concentration of more disadvantaged students. "The children of parcel 074A are being treated differently from other children in the district," wrote Hong Zhong (2012), a 74A parent, in a letter to the editor of the *Chapel Hill News* under the headline "Gerrymandering." "It seems that they are being penalized for being a large strong neighborhood, for having good test scores and SES scores that work well for achieving balance." Some parents argued that high test scores and SES were directly tied to 74A's racial demographics. Reinforcing ideas about the model minority myth, their argument also problematized how indicators they associated with their success as immigrants were being used to target and "penalize" them.

Ironically, 74A residents also claimed the

3. In 2017, Gu was elected to the Chapel Hill Town Council. She was first Asian American to serve in this role.

4. In other suburban-urban school districts in the state, including Wake County, ward-based school board elections have been shown to reinforce racial segregation in schools (Frankenberg and Diem, 2013).

school district's support of Plan 2.1 would promote racial segregation. "We have a lot of people concerned that if our kids are moved to a new school, it will be a minority-dominated school," explained Qingsong Yang, a 74A resident (Trogon 2012). Many parents assumed that Northside would have a high proportion of African American students, and when combined with the large number of Asian American students from 74A, the school district would be perpetuating a racial imbalance among schools.

Despite intense debate, in December 2012, the Chapel Hill–Carrboro City School Board voted 5–2 to support Plan 2.1. District officials denied that any targeting of the neighborhood by race and defended their decision. When I sat down with Superintendent Dr. Tom Forcella, he combated claims of an unfair process. The goal was not to split communities up, so moving the entire 74A section made sense, he explained. Their commute time would only increase by a few minutes. "There is no long commute in Chapel Hill," he argued (interview, May 20, 2013).

Few 74A parents were surprised by the result, but many were upset. Following the decision, some threatened to sue the district for racial discrimination. Others said they were going to leave the district, either sending their children to private school or Lee Charter School, the first proposed public charter school in Chapel Hill. Ironically, Lee Charter's goal was to serve minority and low-income students and close the achievement gap between those groups and their White and more affluent peers. The informational meeting that I attend for Lee Charter in early 2013 was filled with many curious Asian parents who had recently been informed of the board's decision. In the end, however, Lee Charter failed to open and most 74A families resigned themselves to attending Northside.⁵ When Northside opened in 2013, it had a 16 percent Asian American student body, ranking fourth among elementary schools for its Asian American population, and a 25 percent African American student population. Since its opening, the percentage of Asian American students has decreased slightly, and

the African Americans population increased (table 2).

Many Chapel Hill residents praised the school board for helping to create more equitable and balanced school. A closer look at the debate shows how Asian Americans attempted to exercise their socioeconomic privilege in ways that could have reinforced greater inequalities and segregation in schools.

The Exercise of Asian American Privilege

After the four proposals were revealed publicly, 74A parents organized a campaign to force the school board to reconsider their proposed alternatives, particularly Plan 2.1. Their efforts showed how their tactics mimicked those of White residents and their resistance to integration, but in ways that highlighted their position as racialized immigrants. Asian American parents used anti-Black stereotypes, techno-rational logics, and NIMBY politics to fiercely protect defend existing school boundaries and hoard their educational resources.

Many of the tactics used by 74A parents were common to those used by White suburbanites to resist racial integration, including their focus on neighborhood schools. In late 2012, 74A parents started a Google group, met regularly in the Chinese school, organized neighbors to attend and speak at public hearings, and submitted petitions to the school board with hundreds of signatures requesting that Section 74A and its adjacent neighborhood not be redistricted. They began a letter writing campaign to the *Chapel Hill News* and board members. In a campaign that focused on neighborhood schools, 74A parents rallied around Plan 4.1, the only plan that did not have them redistricted. According to district projections, Plan 4.1 would lead the greatest variance in at-risk students among schools, the majority concentrated at Northside Elementary. Parents claimed the district was undermining their stated principle of proximity equity, or equitably commute times. They argued that there were closer schools from which to pull students, and that the decision would mean that their children would endure long bus rides and

5. The school was slated to open in the fall of 2012 but delayed by a year to secure land and space. It later broke ties with their parent company and did not open as planned.

Table 2. 2010 Demographics for the Towns of Carrboro and Chapel Hill

	Carrboro		Chapel Hill		Total	
	Population	Median Income	Population	Median Income	Population	Median Income
Total population	19,582	\$41,971	57,233	\$52,785	76,815	\$47,459
Asian American	8%	\$26,094	12%	\$54,929	11%	\$52,011
Asians by ethnicity						
Chinese	34%	—	39%	—	38%	—
Burmese	20%	—	6%	—	8%	—
Indian	20%	—	19%	—	19%	—
Korean	9%	—	19%	—	17%	—
Japanese	3%	—	4%	—	4%	—
Filipino	5%	—	2%	—	3%	—
Other Asian	9%	—	10%	—	11%	—
African American or Black	10	\$27,355	10	\$27,794	10	\$27,242
Hispanic-Latinx	14	\$29,359	6	\$40,750	8	\$36,107
White	65	\$50,855	70	\$61,183	68	\$57,864
Multiracial and Other	3	—	3	—	3	—
Foreign born	24	—	16	—	18	—

Source: Author's tabulation based on U.S. Census 2010a and 2010b.

Note: Hispanic-Latinx populations are not included in other racial groups. Asian ethnic groups are % of all Asian Americans. Census geography, towns of Carrboro and Chapel Hill.

a loss of sleep. Parent participation would decline because they would have a harder time volunteering in the classroom and lose a sense of community centered on their neighborhood school.

The 74A parents also exercised their privilege by leveraging their skills as scientists and engineers, using publicly available data to create alternative assignment plans. Based on the school district's stated priorities, they came up with optimized plans that they argued were more scientifically valid—and did not have their children redistricted. Elsewhere, scholars have critiqued data-centric approaches to tough questions about racial inequality in schools as part of a neoliberal trend that treats inequality as a technological problem rather than a political one. Techno-rational approaches prioritize data that can be efficiently measured, they argue, but undermines culturally relevant approaches, political discourse, and equity-minded ends (Garner, Thorne, and Horn 2017). As Jennifer Girouard (2023) shows, techno-rational logics also center expert knowl-

edge, like those 74A parents use, that obscure the exclusionary roots of suburban policies and their beneficiaries.

The 74A parents also invoked anti-Black rhetoric and stereotypes. "The Chinese parents would say some things that just didn't have the right language, and they weren't intending to be racist probably, but is sure sounded like they were," explained Graig Meyers (interview, March 14, 2013). Their words mimicked those of other school debates that associated Asian-ness with high achievement, and Blackness a lack of achievement (Jiménez 2017; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). Some 74A residents agreed that the debate revealed racial biases that ran deep in the culture. "Asian communities or Asian people have a high regard of White people, and we look down upon Black people. That's part of Chinese culture," reflected Adam Li, "It is racist because you make a judgement on people based on the skin color" (interview, June 3, 2013).

For Adam and others, though, there was little equivalence between Asian and White rac-

ism. “Chinese type of racism is different from American type of racism,” Adam argued. For him, nationalism and xenophobia shaped many immigrants’ reactions to other groups. Repeating a common scholarly thesis about selective migration (Lee and Zhou 2015), Adam also argued that Asian immigrants were highly motivated immigrants trying to make it to the upper class and navigate upward mobility within a racist system (interview, June 3, 2013). As scholars have noted, many immigrant groups disassociate themselves with African Americans to get ahead within America’s uneven racial hierarchy (Kim 1999).

Other Chapel Hill residents were sympathetic to the difficult racial lines Asian Americans had to navigate, noting that their stereotypes and insults did not hold as much weight as that of White residents. In response to my question about her reaction to comments about Northside expressed during the debates, Donna Bell, an African American who sat on the town council during the debates and a resident of Northside, noted that stereotypes attached to Black neighborhoods and Black people are pervasive inside and outside Chapel Hill. “As much as we try to deny it, Blackness still means lack of safety. People don’t feel safe with Black people, it doesn’t matter. And it’s a message that we’re still producing for lots [of people] to consume whether they be old residents or new residents,” she reflected (interview, May 9, 2013). For her, Asian American racism reflected the contours of American racism but lacked the same power, history, and hostility as White racism.

Others added that Asian Americans did not have the same context for thinking about race, and to navigate a challenging racial discourse within a public debate. “I wasn’t particularly offended by what the Chinese parents said because they’re immigrants and they’re from another culture. I don’t expect them to know all the racial codes of the United States,” argued Graig Meyers (interview, March 14, 2013). Adam Li added that 74A immigrant parents did not understand how to communicate with their neighbors or the school administration about race. “In the South, the White community has this racism root, but they have been educated not to speak in public. These Asian families are

not educated in a political sense, so they spoke whatever they feel and that is not tolerable” (interview, June 3, 2013). 74A parents lacked an understanding of the political and education system and what was acceptable to say and not to say about race publicly.

In fact, several I interviewed felt that Asian Americans were manipulated to express fears and concerns that White Chapel Hill residents had but knew not to say. “What was seemed to be happening was there was a small group of very vocal folks who are mostly Caucasian, who were gathering a larger number of folks who are not Caucasian to sit in the audience. And they’re basically fearmongering,” Donna Bell explained (interview, May 9, 2013). “I felt like I would listen to their arguments, and I was like this just feels a variation on the argument that [a] White man made last week. It feels like you got co-opted a little bit, convinced that your kids somehow will be worst off if they go to this other school,” noted Graig Meyers (interview, March 14, 2013). These community leaders sympathized with the difficult path that Asian Americans had to tread to learn the language of American racism and navigate their place within the racial hierarchy—as well as the many barriers they faced along the way.

Struggling to Organize an Asian American Voice

Asian immigrant parents’ inability to subtly navigate the tough political terrain during the redistricting debate highlighted the barriers that they face within educational politics. Intra-Asian divides, a lack of political organizing skills and interracial coalition-building, and cultural and language issues hampered Asian immigrant parents’ ability to organize and lead a successful campaign.

Asian Americans did not hold a united position on redistricting. The Asian American Parent Advisory Council (AAPAC) was a group started by parents to represent the voice and interests of Asian American within the schools. On the issue of redistricting, however, AAPAC did not support 74A parents and publicly stated so in a letter to the *Chapel Hill News*. Sarah Wang, AAPAC’s vice chairwoman and author of the letter, said that the leadership disagreed with 74A parents that redistricting was about

race and were unwilling to spend their hard-earned political capital on a few unhappy parents. “We have been building bridges between the school board members, with the teachers, with the principals and parents, and I was not going to throw away all the investment of my time and our officers’ time in helping 74A [students] stay at school,” she explained. Beyond that, Wang hoped the letter would dislodge the perception, widely circulating at the time, that Asian American parents were racist.

What was being said—I think was there was a language barrier issue here—but what was being heard was we do not want to go to school with poor performing kids. It sounded very racist. Most of the school board members, all of them unanimously agreed that what they were saying was racist. One of the reasons why I wanted to write that article was to say there are better ways, there are more professional ways, of getting your point across without stepping on another group. (interview, April 12, 2013)

Section 74A parents argued that AAPAC did not reflect their views. They critiqued the organization for failing to outreach to diverse Asian American groups and respond to changing immigration patterns. Noting the split between new immigrants and native-born Asian Americans, 74A resident Adam Li argued, “AAPAC is more on the side of the school administration because AAPAC is a group of people who are more Americans” (interview, June 3, 2013). Others argued that it was simply too difficult for one organization to represent the interests of diverse Asian Americans groups in Chapel Hill.

In addition, 74A parents failed overcome cultural barriers to catalyze diverse Asian American voices in the neighborhood. Although the voices of 74A residents were loud, they were not many. Adam Li noted his frustration with the participation of Asian American families in the neighborhood, complaining that they tended to show up only when issues affected their families. But Li did not blame families for being selfish (as, he noted, was a common perception among non-Asian residents). Rather, he understood their behavior as adhering to ideas about Confusion modesty. “A

Chinese gentleman is not supposed to be talkative. If you are talkative, it means you are superficial” (interview, June 3, 2013). Leaning on cultural explanations for their lack of participation, Li failed to acknowledge the larger structural factors that stunted the participation among Asian American residents.

Further, 74A parents failed to work in coalition with their White neighbors. Larkspur, a neighborhood in Section 74A had a smaller percentage of Asian Americans, immigrants, and higher-income residents than Parkside and Northwood and was also slated for redistricting. There residents took a different position on redistricting. Instead of arguing against Plan 2.1 with other 74A parents, Larkspur residents argued that the 74A district was too big and should be split up. The other two neighborhoods could be moved and they could stay put. Many Parkside and Northwood parents saw Larkspur’s lack of support as rooted in race, class, and power dynamics across the neighborhoods. They speculated that Larkspur parents saw their best chances of not be moved in disassociating themselves from immigrants who lacked political power.

When 74A parents spoke out publicly, language barriers prevented some from clearly expressing their concerns. Before running for office, Christine Lee was the lone Asian American voice in various educational fora, including on Seawell’s School Improvement Team, an elected parent group that counsels the board of education. She argued that Asian immigrants were not experienced nor trained to engage in public forums and did not speak in a “diplomatic fashion”, which made them appear self-centered and easy targets for media sound bites and critique (interview, June 11, 2013).

Sarah Wang added that a lack of knowledge about the historic context of the debate exacerbated language issues. Many parents did not understand the weight of their words nor the strong reactions they provoked: “There are Asian immigrant parents who has difficulty with the language to begin with and the English language has little nuances. If you say the wrong word, you are just literally stepping on a mine without knowing, if they do not know the political climate. They do not know the history of achievement gap that we have been trying so

hard to strip or decrease the achievement gap for twenty years. . . . You have to be pretty nuanced to walk that rope, but you put folks who could barely speak English and it sounded racist” (interview, April 12, 2013).

Hongbin added that 74A parents’ fears and anxieties intensified the issue. “When people are scared and have a lack of information, it’s almost a lion feeling like their cub is being threatened. They are going to say things that are irrational, especially if they don’t have the language,” she noted (interview, May 8, 2013).

Many 74A parents said the negative labels, such as “selfish” and “irrational,” that were leveled at them made it difficult for their perspectives to be heard and taken seriously. Yichen Liu, a Chinese immigrant who worked in the RTP as a software engineer, said the debate was the first time he and many of his immigrant neighbors had spoken publicly about an issue, but they were disappointed with the school board’s response. “They say that we are irrational. They say that we are selfish. They really didn’t listen to our comments,” he asserted. To him, African American history and culture was important, but “out of topic” for 74A parents whose main focus was the “isolation of our neighborhood from other schools” (interview, May 4, 2013). Others said that the NIMBY label the neighborhood received was dismissive and demeaning, overlooking parents’ efforts to work with the district to come up with alternatives. The 74A parents tried to meet with school board officials to discuss their position, but many officials declined or did not respond to the group’s invitations.

Although the debate ended in a loss for 74A parents, it was one that offers lessons to other new immigrant suburbs in the American South beyond Chapel Hill about the many complications and possibilities for fostering equitable schools and neighborhoods (figure 4).

CONCLUSION: SUBURBAN ALLIANCES AND SOUTHERN SOLIDARITIES

As immigrants make their way to new gateways in the American South, they have reshaped the politics of suburbs like Chapel Hill. In debates over Chapel Hill’s school boundaries, Asian Americans’ failure to subtly navigate the tough terrain of racial segregation

not only ripped open old wounds but also opened new possibilities to challenge its social and spatial order.

The long legacy of White advantage and Black disadvantage in the South affected contemporary educational politics and ensnared new groups in its persistent racial order. Northside’s history of segregation and desegregation prefaced the inequalities in Chapel Hill central to the redistricting debate. In a rapidly diversifying region, it left segregated suburban neighborhoods, unequal schools, and stigmas associated with Black neighborhoods and students easily adopted by new immigrants.

Asian Americans’ failure to challenge these structures highlighted how they were bound within them. In the debate, Asian Americans attempted to deploy their “proximity to Whiteness” and socioeconomic advantage by rallying around the same tools and language of neighborhood schools and techno-rational logics long used by White Americans to maintain segregated suburban schools and neighborhoods. Asian immigrants’ hard-line opposition to redistricting and course anti-Black rhetoric allowed their White neighbors to claim racial innocence while wielding their power and privilege in other ways. It offered a scapegoat to shift the lens away from the White supremacist structures and institutions at the root of the problem.

Although Asian immigrants tried to exercise their socioeconomic privilege in the debate, their unsuccessful attempts showed the fallacy of their equivalence with White Americans. Asian immigrants did not have the same political power, knowledge, and networks; language skills, cultural context, and cues to subtly navigate tough racial issues; or elected representatives and organizations to represent their voices and interests. As Asian immigrants tried to gain visibility in the debate, their inability to fit within the rigid racial divide of the South and navigate its tough racial politics showed how little the space was for new frames of reference to emerge.

As in any qualitative case study, the findings of this research are place specific and limited by the perspectives of those interviewed. Had I spoke with more non-Asian parents or those from more diverse Asian ethnic backgrounds,

Figure 4. The new Northside Elementary School under construction in the historic Northside neighborhood.



Source: Photo by the author, 2012.

I might have gotten a deeper sense of the tensions and opportunities for collaboration among and across different racial and ethnic groups. Still, the lessons of the research in advancing equitable schools and neighborhoods go well beyond Chapel Hill.

For other new immigrant suburbs, particularly those in the American South, this case shows that schools have become important driver of Asian immigration and one way they are seeking to build political power, agency, and participation in new gateway communities. Their migration patterns not only reinforce established patterns of neighborhood inequality and segregation but also spur new debates about educational equity that offer opportunities for reframing and addressing these divides. In these debates, Asian immigrants can reinforce the status quo or be allies to help challenge unequal, racialized structures and rooting out White power and privilege at their core. The latter requires school debates to serve as catalysts and forums for building inter- and intraracial bridges and coalitions between new immigrants and other racialized groups. It also requires a focus on the barriers

that prevent Asian immigrants' equitable participation in political and educational processes, and outreach and education to new immigrants that helps frame the racialized context of educational inequities and the disparate impacts of educational policy. As Clarie Kim (1999) argues, to go "beyond Black and White" requires more than simply elaborating the racial hierarchy to fit in more groups. It demands contest to its central premise that continues to bind new groups into old boxes. As the demographics of the New South shift, immigrant inclusion within the everyday suburban institutions—be they schools or otherwise—add new voices that can help reimagine old ideas about neighborhood belonging and equity toward more expansive ideas of justice.

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