Abstract
BOUNDARIES AND BELONGING:
ASIAN AMERICA, PSYCHOLOGY, AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

by Natalie Hung

Advisor: Professor Paul Wachtel

This dissertation addresses a vexing problem. In psychology and psychoanalysis, Asian Americans are more often understood as a collective Other than as individual Selves, more frequently an object of study than a subject. Through two overarching aims, my dissertation sheds light on neglected aspects of Asian American selves, the meanings of the invisibility surrounding them, and implications for clinical practice.

First, the project challenges extant psychological perspectives on Asian Americans, which often implicitly assume a wide gulf of difference between Asian American cultural values and the Western epistemologies of psychology and psychoanalysis. Through the examination of academic research, clinical literature, and social scientific perspectives, my research outlines several contextual factors that contribute to this trend, including the structural binary between “the individual” and “the social” in psychoanalysis and psychology, ambivalent dynamics of anti-Asian racism, and collective anxieties about Asian Otherness. Second, influenced by relational psychoanalytic theory, my dissertation seeks to reconfigure and broaden perspectives on Asian Americans in psychology and psychoanalysis.

My foregrounded field of inquiry begins broad and becomes increasingly narrow, moving from international, to national, to interpersonal, to clinical contexts. Chapter 2 examines the three binaries—East-West, shame-guilt, and individualism-collectivism—that structure most psychological studies about Asian Americans. Chapter 3 brings to bear a psychological perspective on the histories and contemporary manifestations of racialization and cultural
identities of Asian Americans. Chapter 4 reviews the subtle and ambivalent nature of anti-Asian racism through a close investigation and relational understanding of racial microaggressions. Finally, using empirical literature and case studies, Chapter 5 identifies and challenges the “culture gap narrative,” the overculturalized explanation for the underutilization of the mental health system by Asian Americans that assumes radical difference between Asian Americans and Western psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.