Chinese American children occupied a curious position in the fierce school desegregation battles that raged throughout Boston in the 1960s and 70s. In a struggle framed as black versus white, Chinese were neither. Yet in October 1966, municipal officials classified them as “white” so that Chinatown schools would not be considered “racially imbalanced”—that is, majority non-white. For the city’s public education system, failing to correct racial unevenness would likely result in the loss of state funding as punishment for failing to desegregate as mandated by Massachusetts state law. The fact that local policymakers turned to designating Chinese as white to solve the vexing integration problem presaged novel racial ideologies of the late 20th century. This new racial thinking would hinge on considering “Orientals” as exceptional people of color: well-assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically non-threatening. Asian Americans, in short, were not like black and brown people. Indeed, Americans on the cusp of the civil rights backlash understood ethnic Asians in their midst to be more like whites than other racial minority groups. In 1971, Newsweek proclaimed Asians to be “Outwhiting the Whites,” even as many (such as the residents of Boston’s Chinatown) remained poor or working-class. What consequences did this new designation have for the nation’s racial order in the coming decades?

*Overrepresented* takes a familiar context—the racial commonsense that equated “minority” with “lower-class” in the late twentieth century United States—and tells a new story by placing Asian Americans at its center. Conventional understandings of this period generally presume a direct correlation between race and class, given that people of color disproportionately suffered from the economic displacements wrought by deindustrialization. However, Asian Americans disrupted this predictable correlation between race and class because they spanned a wide socio-economic range, especially after the Immigration Act of 1965 facilitated the sizeable influx of highly educated, middle-class professionals. This class diversity posed a problem for affirmative action policy, an emerging mode of racial management in the United States, because Asian Americans were a federally-recognized “minority” that did not seem to behave like other minority groups. I argue that the solution championed by policy makers at the national, state, and local levels defined African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans as “underrepresented minorities” and Asian Americans, conversely, as what I call an “overrepresented minority.” The logic of “overrepresentation,” in turn, curtailed the opportunities and freedoms of Asian Americans. It also undermined anti-racist political coalition-building efforts between Asians and other peoples of color.

Excavating the processes by which Asian Americans became identified as “over-represented” denaturalizes cultural explanations about their socio-economic mobility. It directs our attention instead to the purposive decisions that led the (re)production of racial knowledge and the implementation of unprecedented racialized practices and policies in the post-Civil Rights era. This book project investigates five major battlegrounds of affirmative action in the late 20th century to find the answers: school desegregation, bilingual education, college admissions, census reclassifications, and the welfare state. A consideration of these
arenas promises to yield important insights about the ways through which Asian Americans became understood as overrepresented minorities as well as the consequences of this designation. A consideration of “overrepresentation” allows for a critique of the logic of “under-representation” as simultaneously an effective and ineffective means of redressing racial and class inequalities in the United States.

This structural emphasis, however, does not ignore culture but rather brings structure and culture together in a useful way by thinking about their mutual constitutiveness—how representation shaped action and how action shaped representation. This project thus considers “representation” in a double sense—on the legal and institutional register as well as on the discursive register. A discursive examination, furthermore, expands our understanding of race-making as a relational process by underscoring how the construction of Asian Americans as overrepresented minorities took place in conjunction with the racialization of whites as the “Silent Majority,” African Americans as “criminals” and “welfare queens,” Latinos as “illegals” and Arab and Muslim Americans as “terrorists.” Inspired by theoretical approaches to racial formation and racial “triangulation” by such scholars as Michael Omi, Howard Winant, Claire Jean Kim, and Colleen Lye, I argue that we cannot understand the production and consequences of racial ideologies, racialized practices, and racial subordination in the late 20th century without taking Asian Americans into account.

Finally, this study advances the recent methodological trend in U.S. historiography to place domestic race relations in a global context by moving forward the temporal framework of this approach. The bulk of this scholarship has focused on the “Cold War Civil Rights” era (1940s-1960s). Overrepresented asks a question that has yet to be probed in-depth by U.S. historians of the late 20th century: How did geopolitical imperatives and global marketplace rivalries continue to undergird racial ideologies, racial reform, and racial backlash in the late 20th century? In short, this project seeks to highlight the implications of the myriad ways in which Americans across the class spectrum in the late 20th century understood ethnic Asians in their midst as extensions of Asia in order to comprehend better the relationship between xenophobia and overseas economic competition.

The New Frontiers Exploration Traveling Fellowship would provide tremendously helpful resources as I seek to launch this book project. I will use the award to begin my archival research in 2013-2014. As with my first book, I aim to tell a national story—punctuated by local and regional examples—that intertwines social, cultural, and political history. In order to test the question of “top-down” versus “bottom-up” racial reform, I will integrate primary archival and published sources produced by the state and other influential institutions with those of Asian American community organizations and ordinary people. I anticipate two 14-day research trips (August 2013/May 2014) to the National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD) to review the records of the Commission on Civil Rights, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Committee on Fair Employment, and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the major federal bodies charged with implementing and monitoring racial reform in the late 20th century. The New Frontiers award will enable me to gather the sources to write the first chapter of my book in fall 2014. This chapter will serve as the basis for an article that I will submit to the Journal of American History (the leading journal in the field of U.S. history) in spring 2015.

Committee recommended for funding, final award amount: $3,000.

Note: This is a proposal for New Frontiers Exploratory Travel Fellowship. Budget justifications were not required when this proposal was submitted. As of July 2013, budget justifications are required for New Frontiers Exploratory Travel Fellowship.