January 2005

Limiting Ourselves: A Response to Elbert Lin's Identifying Asian America

Sumayyah Waheed

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/aalj

Recommended Citation

Link to publisher version (DOI)
https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38RW0G

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals and Related Materials at Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian American Law Journal by an authorized administrator of Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact jcera@law.berkeley.edu.
Limiting Ourselves:
A Response to Elbert Lin’s “Identifying Asian America”

Sumayyah Waheed†

I. INTRODUCTION

As a child, I was accustomed to being the only South Asian in my class. I automatically identified with other non-Whites in my history books and at my school, knowing that in the past, I would have been considered one of the persecuted “savages,” and in the present, they were “different,” as was I. Later, as a teenager, I found that the one comfortable space within my high school was at Cultural Awareness Club meetings, where all the people of color gathered into one room and for once outnumbered the Whites.

What I shared with the other people of color was not animosity toward White people, but the experience of not being White in an environment that normalized Whiteness.¹ Throughout this Comment, I may refer to this normalization of Whiteness as Eurocentrism, White supremacy, or White-centrism. I mean essentially the same thing: when society normalizes one race and culture, it pushes all other experiences to the margins, assigning an inferior status to them. The experience of marginalization led to my feelings of solidarity with other marginalized racial and/or religious groups.

These feelings, in addition to the dearth of South Asian Americans among my peers, are what lead me to participate in multiracial coalitions. When I came upon Elbert Lin’s Identifying Asian America,² I confronted the idea that my coalition work was a waste of time that has led to the failure of the Asian American movement.³ Lin’s central argument is that “asian Americans”⁴ must establish their identity. This necessitates that they

† J.D. Candidate, University of California, Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall), 2005. I would like to thank Alex Lee, Professor Junichi Semitsu, Professor Kathy Abrams, editors Veena Dubal, Deepika Bains and Michelle Leung for all of their enthusiastic and insightful input at various stages of this Comment’s production.

³ Id. at 218.
⁴ Lin refuses to capitalize “asian,” as a reflection of his belief that the noncapitalized word in such phrases as “asian American,” “jewish American,” and “black American” are simply adjectives “no
organize solely around racial identity, and dedicate themselves to combating the tendency of "Non-asian Americans [to] perpetually see asian Americans as foreigners." Asian American scholars, Lin asserts, have contributed to the failure of the Asian American movement by focusing on coalition building and progressive politics.

Identity certainly matters and can be a productive, essential basis for Asian American organizing. To make the establishment of a collective Asian American identity the primary goal of such organizing, however, is necessarily so contentious that an Asian American identity may never be "established" in any meaningful sense of the word. Moreover, coalitions represent a critical source of power that Asian Americans cannot afford to neglect, even if only temporarily. In other words, we need not choose one or the other; Lin goes too far in so dramatically limiting Asian American activism.

I will first focus on racial identity and its unstable, contextually dependent nature. A proper understanding of race as it fluctuates throughout history exposes "establishment" as an illusory goal. I then turn to coalitions and argue that despite their potential drawbacks, they are essential in the current American landscape of eroding civil liberties. Moreover, coalition work meets Lin's strategic criteria of practicality, timing, and inclusiveness.

II. IDENTITY

Lin sketches a general sequence for collective Asian American identity formation, drawn from Professor Robert Chang's work: in the first stage, "asian Americans suppress their identity and assimilate as best they can"; in the second stage, "asian Americans assert their racial identity,... and seek recognition as asian Americans"; in the final stage, termed "liberation" by Professor Chang, "asian Americans jettison identity as an

more important than other adjectives." Id. at 218 n.1.
5. Id. at 252.
6. I choose to capitalize "Asian" out of my belief that "Asian" is not simply a "natural" adjective with a static, objective meaning attached to it, instead, as with White and Black, "Asian" is a socially constructed and temporarily fluid racial category with arbitrary and ill-defined boundaries, notwithstanding the U.S. Census Bureau's precise definitions of all three categories. See Cheryl I. Harris, Whiteness as Property, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1707, 1710 n.3 (1993). Rather than a "signpost of presumed foreignness," my capitalization interrupts and rejects the tendency to view races as naturally occurring phenomena. Cf. Elbert Lin, Book Note, Yellow Is Yellow, 20 YALE L. & POL'Y REV. 529, 543 (2002) (reviewing Frank H. Wu, Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White (2002)). If anything, I would refuse to capitalize "American" to reflect my opposition to the jingoism that fosters brutality both in America and in the sovereign nations that it invades or otherwise exploits. It would also demonstrate that "American" should be no more important than "Asian."
7. Harris, supra note 6, at 218.
8. It is important to remember that Lin's strategy is only preliminary; that is, Asian Americans must focus exclusively on identity until they have established it; after this, they will be better equipped to work in coalitions. Id. at 238.
organizational theme in favor of a 'multiple consciousness.' Criticizing the tendency for Asians to act as if they were in the third stage, Lin asserts that Asian Americans have not yet established their identity.

From the outset, it is important to note that Professor Chang mapped the three stages of "[r]esponses to oppression" in reference to legal scholarship. More importantly, Professor Chang explicitly noted that the stages do not "imply a historical order or progression, and all three stages exist simultaneously." I will return to this point below, but for the purposes of this Comment, I refer to Lin's version of these stages and their implications for Asian American political action.

The idea of establishing an Asian American identity is problematic for various reasons. First, race is not a static concept: historical and other forces shift the boundaries around what society considers distinct races in any given period. Second, Asian Americans are not a monolithic group. Thus, any purported "Asian American" identity will necessarily exclude some subgroups of Asian Americans, an idea that I will discuss shortly.

Professor Ian Haney López documents the historical manipulation of race in *White by Law: the Legal Construction of Race.* In a general atmosphere of exclusion and exploitation, some Asian Americans were at first able to claim Whiteness and thereby gain citizenship; ultimately, however, the privileged perceptions of legal actors and anthropologists led them to exclude South Asians and East Asians from the racial category of White, as well as its attendant benefits. The fact that courts no longer explicitly engage in such involved inquiries into a party's race does not mean that this process has ended.

Indeed, for Asian Americans, this process is far from over. By implicating such an expansive geographic region, the term "Asian American" necessarily refers to a heterogeneous group. Many nations comprise the Asian continent, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to Japan; descendants from any of these countries, therefore, can technically claim to

---

9. *Id.* at 227 (quoting ROBERT S. CHANG, *DISORIENTED: ASIAN AMERICANS, LAW, AND THE NATION-STATE* 98-105 (1999)).
10. *Id.* at 228.
12. *Id.* (emphasis added).
14. For example, California passed a law decreeing that all Chinese and Japanese women wishing to enter the United States be first inspected by the Commissioner of Immigration to ensure that they were not prostitutes. Sucheng Chan, *The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943, in ASIAN AMERICANS AND THE LAW: CHINESE IMMIGRANTS AND AMERICAN LAW* 6 (Charles McClain ed., 1994). In addition, the Chinese Exclusion Act completely prohibited Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States from 1882 to 1943. *Id.* at 17; 1882 Ch. 126, 57 Stat. 600 (1943).
15. Chan, *supra* note 14, at 80-107, 131. My version of this process is significantly truncated.
be Asian American. This fact alone ensures that any attempt to establish a monolithic Asian American identity will be contentious at best, impossible at worst.

Lin indicates that he understands Asian America to include East Asian and Southeast Asian Americans only, basing this on "American" perceptions. 17 Even if Lin is correct that Americans perceive East Asians and Southeast Asians to be one race, there are problems with this classification. Firstly, one would imagine that an initial step in claiming liberation would be self-definition, but Lin unquestioningly accepts this characterization from a dominant culture that typically oversimplifies matters of race and identity. Secondly, such a classification dispossesses both West Asians and South Asians of the right to call themselves Asian. 18 Even disregarding these issues and accepting that "Asian" should include only East Asians and Southeast Asians does not diminish the heterogeneity of that limited group. The intra-ethnic Asian conflicts to which most White Americans are oblivious pose substantial barriers to a neat, stable "Asian American" identity. As a Pilipina educator who moved to Hawaii from the Philippines stated, "[H]ere it's the Japanese Americans, and sometimes the Chinese and Korean Americans too, who look down at us and keep us out of government jobs. It makes me furious." 19

This statement hints at further divisions within Asian Americans, along the class, gender and political lines that divide any racial group. 20 For instance, Southeast Asian refugees' needs differ from those of affluent descendants of the Chinese laborers who immigrated to California in the 1870s. Yamamoto is more explicit: "Asian American justice now also includes the differing struggles of Filipinos, Koreans, South Asians, Southeast Asians, Native Hawaiians and more, first through fifth generations, of multiple cultures, classes and sexual orientations." 21 Intra-

17. Lin, supra note 2, at 257. Lin again offers no proof for this claim. Since I have included South Asians (including, importantly, myself) in "Asian America" for the purposes of this paper, perhaps Lin would contest (or begrudge) my use of personal pronouns throughout this piece.

18. The problem with racial categorization, of course, is that the lines will always be somewhat arbitrary. To enclose widely differing peoples within the same category based solely on the line that encircles Asia may render the entire endeavor pointless. One might ask how Syrians, Russians, Chinese, Indians and Pilipinos could possibly be the same race. So many factors—societal perceptions, law, history, etc.—influence racial classification that this issue will likely never be resolved. See HANEY LÓPEZ, supra note 1, at 111-154 (1998). The U.S. Census Bureau, for instance, defines Asian as "people having origins in any of the original people of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian Subcontinent." Jessica S. Barnes & Claudette E. Bennett, The Asian Population: 2000, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, CENSUS 2000 BRIEF 1 (Feb. 2002), available at http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf (last visited May 9, 2004).


20. Kevin R. Johnson, The Struggle for Civil Rights: The Need for, and Impediments to, Political Coalitions Among and Within Minority Groups, 63 LA. L. REV. 759, 782 (2003). Johnson actually argues for coalitions within racial groups, and notes that it has "proven difficult" for Asian Americans because of their extreme heterogeneity. Id. at 780.

Asian struggles have abounded in history, and descendants of these countries inherit such experiences as the Japanese imperial invasion of China and the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh violence in South Asia. Adequately accounting for these differences and histories is a project that will likely be endless, and any identity projected in the meantime will necessarily neglect some aspects of the continually evolving entity called Asian America.

The larger problem with Lin's argument that Asians must establish their collective identity is that he never identifies what he means by "establish," making it difficult to address his claims fully. There can be no "magic point" at which we decide that Asian American identity has been established, especially if Lin has not articulated a method by which to determine when we reach that point. Importantly, Professor Chang himself disavowed the idea that these stages progress linearly; in fact, according to Chang, all three stages exist at the same time. The reality of Lin's argument is that it could stultify Asian American politics so that it never moves beyond the second stage.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any "established" racial identity. According to Lin, however, African Americans can serve as a basis of comparison for Asian Americans, since "black Americans . . . have a strong sense of identity[.]" The only explanation Lin offers for this unsupported assertion is that "Black Americans . . . know the history of the black American movement," which he links to their imputed sense of identity. Because identity is such an inherently personal concept, to suggest that something as simple as a history book will solve a collective identity crisis is naïve. Knowing the history of Asian American activism can be valuable in facilitating identity formation, but it cannot be isolated as the "key" to identity.

Lin proceeds to claim that Blacks "have begun to fragment." Presumably, this is because some Critical Race Theorists, such as Professor

22. Chang, supra note 9, at 98.
23. Lin, supra note 2, at 229. Before concluding, Lin adds that African Americans have "achieved a level of success and established a baseline." Id. at 256. He does not elaborate, but whatever baseline Lin imagines is unacceptably low: schools across America are more segregated now than pre-Brown v. Board of Education; inner-city schools that serve predominantly African American populations are in such poor shape that the situation prompted a recently settled lawsuit in California; 12% of young Black men are in jail or prison; the statistics about health care, lack of police protection, police brutality, drugs, and crime are abundant. PUBLIC ADVOCATES, INC., Governor Signs Williams v. California Settlement Laws: Major Step Toward State Responsibility for Providing Better Education for California's Poorest Children, Sept. 30, 2004, at http://publicadvocates.org/Press%20Release%20Williams%2093004.htm; Fox Butterfield, Prison Rates Among Blacks Reach a Peak, Report Finds, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 7, 2003, at A12 (statistic for Black men aged 20 to 34). See also Richard Delgado, Zero-Based Racial Politics: An Evaluation of Three Best-Case Arguments on Behalf of the Nonwhite Underclass, 78 GEO. L.J. 1929, 1930-31 (1990). Although this is obviously not the state of all African Americans, the fact that such problems exist means that the baseline for African Americans is not satisfactory, and not where Asian Americans, or any group, should be setting its goals.
24. Lin, supra note 2, at 229.
25. See id. at 228-29.
26. Id. at 229.
Manning Marable, encourage African Americans to shift away from identity-based politics\textsuperscript{27} and because neoconservative Blacks "no longer believe that the camaraderie engendered among blacks by our collective experience of racism constitutes an adequate basis for any person's self-definition."\textsuperscript{28} Evidence indicates that Marable's position is simply that African Americans should join coalitions in the face of imposing societal barriers.\textsuperscript{29} I will discuss both coalitions and neoconservatives subsequently, but for now I wish to refute Lin's claims about African Americans.

Lin states that the purported fragmentation of African Americans represents the third stage in Chang's three-phase identity process, which Lin argues the history of African Americans particularly exemplifies. However, detractors from the Black liberation movement have been present since at least the 1960's.\textsuperscript{30} Moreover, a rift between integrationists and separatists in the Black movement has existed for at least 150 years, and continues today.\textsuperscript{31} While education and class has also divided African Americans throughout history, the separatist/integrationist divide is more significant for organizing, since it obviously bears on the intended outcome of mobilization. In the absence of a shared goal, communal action is understandably difficult. This history belies the claim that the African American struggle has just proceeded from identity establishment to a stage of fragmentation.

A deeper problem is the very comparison of African Americans to Asian Americans (although valuable lessons can be drawn from an honest joint study of both struggles). Lin himself argues that Blacks' and Asians' progress should not be conflated; the particular histories of the two groups make this comparison inappropriate. I have acknowledged that it is misleading to present the Black liberation movement as one that has been especially unified. However, the particular experiences of slavery and Jim Crow laws, which impacted almost all African Americans, led to dynamics of cohesion that are necessarily divergent from what Asian Americans

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{27} Id. (citing Manning Marable, Beyond Racial Identity Politics: Towards a Liberation Theory for Multicultural Democracy, in PRIVILEGING POSITIONS: THE SITES OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES (Gary Y. Okihoro et al. eds., 1995), reprinted in CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE, supra note 5, at 448, 452).
\bibitem{28} Id. (quoting GLENN C. LOURY, ONE BY ONE FROM THE INSIDE OUT 7 (1995)).
\end{thebibliography}
LIMITING OURSELVES

experience today. The racism of modern society does not include explicitly anti-Asian laws, so Asian Americans must struggle to unify across the numerous barriers that I have already articulated, without as obvious a target as the slave trade for their organizing.  

While Lin presents the feminist movement’s recent “pressure to abandon identity-based organizing” as another illustration of the third stage of Professor Chang’s identity process, this is misleading. His citation is to Professor Angela Harris’s landmark critique of gender essentialism, where Professor Harris condemns the tendency of her contemporaries to speak of women as a unitary whole, pointing out that this silences women who do not occupy privileged positions. Far from an attack on identity-based mobilizing itself, Professor Harris’s demand is that feminism not exclude already-marginalized voices. Organizing around any specific identity must always be done with a conscious effort not to systematically marginalize particular voices. In fact, rather than an abandonment of identity-based organizing, such effort represents a necessary component of group mobilization.

Another important consideration is multiracial individuals. If Asian Americans are to organize solely around race, what should those who are multiracial do? Lin brushes over this issue by acknowledging that individuals with multiple identities, such as “gay Asian Americans,” are the reason why Asian Americans’ mobilization cannot center on one identity for too long. This reasoning would presumably apply to multiracial individuals, who are entirely neglected in Lin’s article. However, multiracial individuals should not be forced to choose one strain of their heritage and deny the rest. Lin’s strategy thus assumes not only that race is monolithic on a societal level, but on an individual level as well.

All of the factors involved in racial identity formation and fluctuation demonstrate how complicated race is for Americans. The persistent and differential attachment of privilege to racial categories also means that race retains deep significance in American life. To suggest, then, as Lin does, that Asian Americans “jettison” their identity in the third stage of identity formation is problematic. Lin may simply mean that only in the third stage may Asian Americans organize around something other than their racial identity, having firmly established that. If this is the case, then the

32. The closest example of explicitly anti-Asian laws would be the Japanese internment, which actually caused Chinese Americans to assert their identity as non-Japanese. Once again, my intent is not to portray slavery as a unifying force for African Americans—on the contrary, slave masters expertly utilized the divide-and-conquer strategy, by favoring lighter-skinned slaves, systematically raping slave women, and encouraging hierarchical relations among different factions of the slave population.

33. Lin, supra note 2, at 230.

34. Id. (citing Angela P. Harris, Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory, 42 STAN. L. REV. 581, 585-86 (1990)).

35. Id. at 230-31.


37. Lin, supra note 2, at 227.
choice of the word “jettison” is inappropriate. Taking the idea literally, on the other hand, is out of the question. Identity is important for all individuals, and as long as race matters in America, racial identity will too. In fact, to jettison identity is no less than to jettison the self.

III. COALITIONS

Thus, while racial identity is important, it does not follow that coalition building must therefore be abandoned. To presume that Asian Americans must choose one or the other limits our political potential. Understanding the various forms of oppression as interrelated, a more conscious Asian American would be dedicated to eradicating stereotypes against all groups who cannot claim Whiteness. In order to do this, both types of organizing are essential. As various scholars have advocated, the coexistence of coalition work and a “homeplace” provides both the requisite nurturance and the opportunity for different communities of color to work together toward social justice.

Because this is too much to ask of some Asian Americans, Lin asks that we confine ourselves to Asian Americans, and more specifically, East and Southeast Asian Americans.

A. Definition

It is important to explain what I mean by coalitions. I use Francisco Valdes’s definition of “critical” coalitions as “alliances based on a thoughtful and reciprocal interest in the goal(s) or purpose(s)” of a collaborative and collective project. This definition emphasizes the cooperative nature of coalitions and the constant deliberation such collaboration requires. I first discuss the goal of an Asian American movement and the difficulty in determining “the” goal for such a broad and diverse population. From here, I move on to explore both the need for and the difficulty of coalitions. Then, using Lin’s criteria of practicality and
reality, timing, and inclusiveness, I conclude that coalitions are part of an important political strategy for Asian Americans. 42

B. A Single Goal for "Asian America" is Impossible

Precisely because of Asian Americans' heterogeneity, it is impossible to single out a goal on which everyone would agree. Lin, however, off-handedly declares the goal to be recognition, without considering other possibilities. 43 The recognition that Asian America seeks, he states, is that we exist and that we face discrimination because of our race. 44 Such a goal limits the Asian American movement to those individuals with the luxury to fight nothing more urgent than the recognition of their race. It leaves in the dust undocumented workers who receive little or even no wages, indefinitely detained non-citizens who have violated minor visa regulations, women attempting to survive domestic violence with their bodies and children intact, and a host of other concerns that do not directly or solely implicate discrimination against Asian Americans. 45

With such concerns disproportionately impacting communities of color, it is understandable why Asian Americans, as people of color, would wish to combat them. It is also understandable why they would wish to work in coalitions in order to do so, given the intricate web of racism, classism, sexism, and other forces that are sometimes impossible to isolate from each other. 46 Numerous scholars have asserted racial minorities' need for political coalitions. 47

Lin decries this tendency without adequately arguing against it. Instead, Lin asks, "why not identity?" 48 Switching the focus fails to address the reasons in favor of coalitions. Interracial activists understand our various issues as stemming from the same root cause: White supremacy. 49

42. See Lin, supra note 2, at 248.
43. Id. at 220.
44. Id. at 220-22.
45. By this I mean that fighting discrimination against Asian Americans alone will not release the noncitizen from his or her detention; it will also not grant exploited workers a living wage. Racism against Asian Americans is intertwined in these issues, but it is not the only factor. I will argue that for some, it is not the most urgent factor.
46. Much has been written on multiple axes of oppression. Mari Matsuda, for instance, has written about how different forms of oppression are interrelated, and that to oppose one is to oppose another (or all). She argues that "patriarchy killed Vincent Chin," through the cultural expectation that boys express themselves through violence. By disallowing boys to express nurturing, "female" qualities, males learn that violence is their accepted form of interaction. Thus, when they feel angry, their response is to lash out. Mari Matsuda, Standing Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy, WHERE IS YOUR BODY?: AND OTHER ESSAYS ON RACE, GENDER, AND THE LAW 61, 63-65 (1997); see also Kimberlé Crenshaw, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, 1989 U. CHI. LEGAL. F. 139; Adrien K. Wing, Brief Reflections Toward a Multiplicative Theory and Praxis of Being, 6 BERKELEY WOMEN'S L.J. 181 (1990-91).
47. Johnson, supra note 20, at 767 (citing various articles advocating coalition-building).
48. Lin, supra note 2, at 220.
49. Lawrence III, supra note 30, at 829-30; Wing, supra note 40, at 749-53.
In modern terms, this is the White privilege, which, by centering Whiteness, leads White Americans to unconsciously (or consciously) fear and distrust non-Whites. Since Whiteness is at the center, “American-ness” is a White birthright. Everyone else must earn it and continuously prove it. Those who do not are ungrateful or, even worse, insurgents.

It is clear why Asian Americans would organize around such a concept. We are obviously implicated when non-Whiteness is viewed as suspect by the dominant culture. I will expand on this idea shortly.

1. Neoconservatives

This understanding of interlinked oppressions is also what may lead Asian American race scholars to adopt a progressive agenda that clashes with neoconservatives, whose emphasis on individual rights, “colorblindness,” and de jure discrimination, among other things, obscures the interconnections of oppressions. In Lin’s assessment, race scholars have treated neoconservatives as if they were “the footsoldiers of Satan.” Lin believes, and argues convincingly, that neoconservatives’ perceptions of race in America are inaccurate, but he cautions against the “blindness and irrationality” with which race scholars apparently treat neoconservatives.

Although Lin ridicules it, when race scholars point out how extensive and organized conservative groups such as the Federalist Society are, it is not irrationality. It is simply reality. Many of the “dire setbacks in civil rights law” can be linked to neoconservative thought and action. Just one example is the refusal to acknowledge the difference between Jim Crow laws and affirmative action, which justifies the characterization that Lin ridicules, of “how the right wing has co-opted race.” For Asian Americans particularly, conservatives have been exploitative. As Matsuda states, “In every field where we have attained a measure of success, we are underrepresented in the real power positions. And yet, we are in danger of being manipulated into opposing affirmative action by those who say affirmative action hurts Asian Americans.” Those who oppose affirmative action on these grounds implicitly support the underlying premise that

50. See HANEY LOPEZ, supra note 1, at 197-202.
52. Lin, supra note 2, at 242.
53. Id.
54. See Yamamoto, supra note 29, at 839.
55. Johnson, supra note 20, at 759-60. See also JEAN STEFANCIC & RICHARD DELGADO, NO MERCY: HOW CONSERVATIVE THINK TANKS AND FOUNDATIONS CHANGED AMERICA’S SOCIAL AGENDA (1996).
56. Lin, supra note 2, at 242 (quoting Karin Aguilar-San Juan, Linking the Issues: From Identity to Activism, in THE STATE OF ASIAN AMERICA 9 (Karin Aguilar-San Juan ed., 1994)).
merit can be objectively measured by test scores which correspond most consistently with race and wealth as opposed to actual success as a student or professional. Moreover, focusing on affirmative action in public institutions ignores that private institutions admit legacy applicants with no regard to merit, thereby further entrenching wealthy White privilege.59 Thus, while public schools are forced to comply with so-called “colorblindness,” private institutions are free to effectively discriminate.

Essentially, what Lin asks is that Asian American race scholars disown their commitment to overall justice—that which earns them the label “progressive.” In order to truly serve Asian America, Lin asserts, Asian scholars must devote themselves solely to Asian America, and what constitutes that identity. Only after Asian Americans have succeeded in establishing their identity can they then use that success “on behalf of other efforts.”60 This devalues the scholars and activists who took the time to speak or write against the PATRIOT Act, Guantanamo Bay, indefinite detentions, and the other post-September 11th executive actions that harkened back to the Japanese internment.61 Such acts, taken to preserve civil liberties for all Americans—especially the people of color who suffer disproportionately from civil liberties setbacks—do not constitute a waste of resources simply because the issues do not immediately impact Asian Americans.62 On the contrary, by asserting the connections between the Japanese internment and the racialization of “Muslims”63 as “enemies within,” Asian Americans enact identity in opposing the current trend, even if it is not an exclusively “Asian American” concern. A more expansive notion of “success,” which acknowledges the interrelations of oppressions, provides that a victory for any racial minority is a victory for all of us.64

---

60. Lin, supra note 2, at 238.
61. See, e.g., Leti Volpp, The Citizen and the Terrorist, 49 UCLA L. REV. 1575 (2002); Wing, supra note 40, at 728-35.
62. Wing, supra note 40, at 728-35.
63. Of course, many victims of post-September 11th hate violence targeted at Muslims have not been Muslim, but rather Sikh, Hindu, or other nonwhites who were therefore presumptively suspect in their aggressors’ minds. See Muneer I. Ahmad, A Rage Shared By Law: Post-September 11 Racial Violence as Crimes of Passion 92 CAL. L. REV. 1259, 1261 n.1 (2004) (alternately describing hate violence victims as Arab, Muslim, and South Asian, or as “Muslim-looking,” acknowledging the advantages and limits of both categorizations). Elvia R. Arriola notes how the government’s release of Jose Padilla’s name and identity after he was detained for alleged terrorism constructs all Brown men as terrorists. Staying Empowered By Recognizing our Common Grounds. A Reply to Subordination and Symbiosis: Mechanisms of Mutual Support Between Subordinating Systems, by Professor Nancy Ehrenreich, 71 UMKC L. REV. 447 (2002).
64. See Matsuda, supra note 46, at 63-65; Johnson, supra note 20, at 829-30. This understanding also militates against the trend of inter-minority competition for relative success, which may come at the expense of another minority group. Lin argues that focusing on actual as opposed to relative success will achieve the same goal. Lin., supra note 2, at 237-38. Success, however, is necessarily relative since marginalized groups inevitably measure their achievements against dominant groups.
2. Antisubordination

The progressive, pro-coalition movement that Lin discusses is the antisubordination movement, which seeks to combat all forms of oppression, including White supremacy. Lin expresses concern that White Americans are alienated by the Asian Americans who espouse antisubordination values. Indeed, with no evidentiary support, Lin labels the antisubordination movement "anti-White." To be against White supremacy is not the equivalent of being anti-White. Instead, it is to demand that Whites acknowledge and surrender the White privilege that remains as a barrier to a truly fair and just society. Similarly, if White Americans feel alienated among progressive people of color because they are uncomfortable without their White privilege, they need to realize that White privilege makes people of color not only uncomfortable, but also second-class citizens.

Lin first excuses Whites' belief in the model minority myth, acknowledging some truth to the stereotype. Subsequently, however, Lin states that the stereotype "has been called significantly into question, if not wholly debunked," which is knowledge that Whites are apparently excused from obtaining, since Lin accepts Whites' belief in the myth. If Whites are to have no more responsibility than to question Asian Americans' (and other racially marginalized people's) dissatisfaction without bothering to examine the reasons behind it, then they will inevitably feel too alienated to support the struggles of people of color. Whites cannot expect their understanding to be easy or immediately effective upon their involvement in such struggles. For all of these reasons, White alienation cannot be a fair index of a group's success.

Further discussion of post-September 11th discrimination and hate violence illustrates how various forms of oppression intersect and support one another. Professor Muneer Ahmad analyzes the forces of race-, gender-, sexuality-, and class-based oppression that operate in the hate crimes and racial profiling following the September 11th terrorist attacks. First pointing out that the hate crimes have been popularly understood as "heat of passion" crimes, Ahmad catalogues various reactionary anger
and vengeance following September 11th. This includes flyers that depicted Osama bin Laden being sodomized by the World Trade Center, accompanied by the caption “You like skyscrapers, bitch?”; an American Navy officer who wrote “HIGH JACK [sic] THIS FAGS” on a bomb intended for Afghanistan; rumors of homosexuality among alleged terrorists and in Afghanistan; and portrayals of Osama bin Laden as a convenience store owner. The racialized Other, in this case conflated Muslims/terrorists, are hereby cast not only as violent enemies, but as feminine, homosexual, and working-class, as if to add to their purported evil. Thus, the various forms of race, gender, sex, and class subordination interact to construct an enemy who offends every hegemonic norm that operates in American society.

C. The Need for Coalitions

One strategic purpose for coalition work is to demonstrate that a given issue is important to a broad group of people. When a coalition organizes around a specific issue, such as tribal sovereignty, diverse participants in the struggle serve to indicate that tribal sovereignty is not just an “Indian issue,” which can thereby be dismissed as a fringe concern with which the “average” non-Native American need not concern herself. By organizing as coalitions, participants defy the strategy that pits marginalized populations against each other and instead cast their various concerns as social justice issues that should be important to everyone, not as causes that are particular to ever-smaller factions of society who end up fighting each other to have their voices heard.

Asians and members of other racial groups have managed to overcome the structural barriers to their cooperation at different points in history. Vijay Prashad traces the sinusoidal struggles of Asians and Africans in the Caribbean, where Asians worked as indentured servants after Africans had won freedom from slavery. Early attempts by workers of any ethnic group to gain basic rights were not supported by workers of the other ethnic groups, due to the structural and spatial segregation that imperialist officials instituted. The Trinidadian Workingmen's Association ("TWA") reflected these changes, as East Indians initially refused to join because of the TWA's stance that indentured Indian workers were to blame for low plantation wages. Two decades later, in 1919, anti-imperialist struggles were unfolding across the globe, and both Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians went on strike in a mutual fight against worker exploitation. This unity was foiled in 1931 by a divorce bill that proved

74. Id. at 1309-10.
75. See id. at 1310.
76. PRASHAD, supra note 59, at 76-80.
77. Id. at 74, 76-78, 81, 84-86.
78. Id. at 84.
controversial, but again in 1937 Afro-Trinidadian oil workers and East Indian agricultural workers allied to strike for political power and economic benefits.  

In the United States, solidarity among Asians and Africans dates at least as far back as 1918 when Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois supported Japan's war against imperialist European forces. African American leaders of the 1930s were connected with Asian radicals, and the 1960s and 1970s freedom movements witnessed an alliance between the Black Panthers and the Red Guard, as well as the Brown Berets.  

A more recent example from this history of alliance is the Asian and Latina/o garment workers who struggled against California sweat shop operators. Predominantly poor, non-English speaking women, they joined forces to sue manufacturers and retailers who had effectively enslaved them. Julie Su, an Asian American attorney who worked on the case, told the Latina/o workers, "[T]he struggle is a big one. If we do not fight together, we will not succeed." Another example is the Asian Americans and Latina/os who cooperated to formulate a redistricting scheme in Monterey Park, California.

The garment workers' experience in particular highlights how coalitions can serve a need that particular situations demand. Both the Asian (in this case Thai) and Latinas/os garment workers represent extremely marginalized groups struggling for the same objects from very powerful corporations: fair treatment, accountability, and monetary redress for their mistreatment. By pooling their resources, they were able to successfully prosecute the Thais' captors and win a large settlement for all the workers.

This example also comports with Valdes's definition of critical coalitions. Lin, however, conceives of coalitions as venues that "suppress particularized interests in favor of common, universal concerns." Under Lin's conception, Asian Americans' interests will be lost in a coalition of

---

79. Id. at 86.
80. Id. at 28-30. Prashad also discusses how African American leaders overlooked the contradiction of Japan's imperialist invasions in their celebration of what they saw as a blow to White supremacy. Id. at 31.
81. Id. at 138-39.
82. Julie Su, Making the Invisible Visible: The Garment Industry's Dirty Laundry, 1 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 405-411 (1998). While the Thai workers were physically confined, the Latina/o workers were imprisoned by what Su refers to as "economic servitude." Id. at 406, 410.
83. Id. at 411 n.15 (English translation of Spanish original).
84. Johnson, supra note 20, at 771-72.
85. See Su, supra note 82, at 408-09.
87. See Valdes, supra note 41.
88. Lin, supra note 2, at 222.
racial minorities, so Asian Americans cannot afford to rely on coalition building as their strategy for acquiring recognition.89

I have already discussed why recognition alone is not and perhaps should not necessarily be the primary goal of Asian Americans.90 The Thai garment workers case provides a concrete example of how shared concerns, such as workers’ rights, may sometimes trump the goal of recognition as Asian Americans. Importantly, this devotion to overarching justice does not necessitate abandoning one’s racial identity. Lin seems to assume that working for an issue that cannot be solely characterized as “Asian American” equals compromising that identity. Underlying Lin’s arguments is the premise that political organizing, and the scholarly aspect thereof, is a zero-sum game where one’s efforts in any particular arena are equivalent to one’s absence from another.91 Such absences are in turn losses for the deprived arenas.

This conception negates the reality of interlinked forces of oppression and encourages the competition and jealousy that Lin seems to think characterizes coalition work.92 By focusing the attention on other oppressed groups’ successes instead of on the actual oppressor groups, such an adversarial approach to organizing is inherently detrimental. When activists perceive their oppressions as interconnected, they understand that working together for change, even when that change seems to impact only one group, is in reality for everyone’s benefit.

This is not to say that specific topics need not be addressed directly. For illustration purposes, imagine that the domestic violence advocacy movement is in its developing stages. Such advocacy demands, among other things, scrutiny of the intersections of criminal, immigration, tribal, and welfare laws, as well as the various cultural contexts in which intimate violence arises, with the express goal of empowering survivors of domestic violence. It would be counterproductive to discourage domestic violence advocates from involvement in a larger and more established women’s movement that aims to eradicate domestic violence as only one of its many goals, and instead assert that domestic violence advocates must form their own movement in order to succeed. On the contrary, the general women’s movement would likely possess the resources and strategic expertise that result from experience, and domestic violence advocates would have much to gain from taking advantage of this experience.93

89. Id. at 220-22. Lin also dismisses Prashad’s theory of polyculturalism as clever rhetoric rather than practical analysis. However, Prashad’s discussion of the historical cooperation between Africans and Asians, in America and around the world, is yet another example of the potential for coalition building. Simply because Lin disagrees with this conclusion does not justify his out-of-hand dismissal of Prashad.

90. See supra notes 20 and 47.

91. Lin accuses certain Blacks and Jews of having this confusion when they envy each other’s successes. Lin, supra note 2, at 237-38.

92. Id. I admit that I speak in idealistic terms, but I discuss the shortfalls in coalition work infra.

93. This analogy is admittedly imperfect, as the domestic violence movement can be understood
In the same way, Asian Americans can benefit from the resources of coalitions of social justice advocates, as the larger women’s movement would translate for our purposes. Likewise, domestic violence advocates would translate to Asian Americans. Instead of insisting that Asian Americans splinter themselves off from the larger movement, Lin should exhort the coalitions to include specifically Asian American issues within their goals. Collective action will always require that participants constantly question whether and which particular voices are being silenced and how to draw those voices out. Even if Asian Americans work solely amongst themselves, they will have to face this difficulty.

Mary Romero argues the reverse of Lin’s assertion that coalition politics have slowed Asian American identity development. Romero maintains that the history surrounding a particular racial identity may have adverse effects on coalition building. The “centuries of colonialism, conquest, slavery, capitalism, racism, sexism, classism, and the politics of appropriation and co-optation” out of which racial identity emerges often result in “tunnel vision,” by which the complexities of intersectionality fade from thought. By this account, an identity formation that is not “constantly reconsider[ed] and reconstruct[ed]” may, by entrenching some of this baggage, impede coalition building. On the other hand, participation in coalition building may force this constant reconsideration.

Furthermore, interacting with other communities of color may facilitate Asian American identity formation. The tension of confronting differences can result in heightened awareness about, and refinement of, the self. By differentiating their experiences from other people of color, Asians can identify what is unique about them and what is important to them about their uniqueness.

As I suggest above, coalitions may provide a necessary tool by which Asian Americans can access power. Furthermore, since passivity is a stereotype of Asian Americans, the very act of mobilization, on any political issue, challenges such racial stereotypes. Therefore, by organizing with people of color, and/or progressives, Asian Americans defy White society’s presumptions about them.

---

94. What these issues might be, of course, is highly debatable.
96. Id.
97. Id.
D. Trouble in Paradise

These hopeful visions do not negate the potential drawbacks of coalition work. My discussion of Asian Americans' internal complexities applies with perhaps more force to coalitions: each racial group multiplies the layers of varying interests that activists must respect. This difficult work can be exhausting and thankless.100 Some groups may not be willing to acknowledge their participation in racial hierarchy or to address their own internalized racism.101

Richard Delgado, in fact, argues that the investments required by collective action are so immense and the pitfalls so inevitable that coalition work should be abandoned.102 The majority, he argues, will easily manipulate different races to sell each other out in order to align themselves to the vast wealth and power promised by the majority.103 Delgado cites the example of minority leaders and organizations whose radicalism was mollified by funding from the White establishment, and law students whose progressive objectives yield to the promised luxuries of corporate firm life.104 He also refers to coalitions among Latinas/os, Asians and Blacks that failed when one group expected its demands to take precedence, and the other groups bristled.

Again, all of these problems cannot be avoided by simply abandoning coalitions. Delgado’s statement that a “steadfast group” of progressives could easily deteriorate “if individual members defect or if the leaders turn out to be assimilated people who fail to appreciate the needs of their group’s most impoverished members” applies just as forcefully to “monoracial” collectives (pretending that such groups exist) as it does to interracial coalitions.105 Delgado’s breezy suggestion that Latinos organize for bilingual education and Native Americans struggle for sovereignty betrays the same essentialism he accuses progressives of having: simply because each group’s entire membership fits into the same majority-ascribed, arbitrary racial category does not guarantee that either group will be unified on either goal, or any other conceivable objective.106 The pitfalls of internal discord, hierarchical leadership, and assimilated power-mongers can only be avoided if every person works for change individually. In that case, advocates for social change would degenerate into a morass of clucking hens, canceling each other’s demands out as the powerful elite continue in their privileged lives unbothered.

100. See Johnson, supra note 47; Wing, supra note 40.
101. See Wing, supra note 40, at 749-50.
103. Id. at 868-870.
104. Id. at 870-71.
105. Id. at 871.
106. See id. at 884.
Intergroup and intragroup discord, internalized oppression, and defectors all make coalition work unglamorous and exhausting but do not justify abandonment. The stakes of the Thai and Latina/o garment workers exemplify how necessary coalition work can be. Moreover, by focusing on particular objectives, and ensuring that all participants agree to such objectives, coalitions can maximize their potential while avoiding the major pitfalls of unquestioned power dynamics directing unfocused organizations. Indeed, Lin’s and Delgado’s works are helpful to the struggle, because they identify the many pitfalls that coalition members must vigilantly strive to diminish, if not avoid altogether.

E. Practicality and Reality, Timing, and Inclusiveness

I will now turn to Lin’s criteria for a successful political strategy and discuss how coalition politics meets Lin’s own standards. Lin offers three criteria: consistence with practicality and reality, appropriateness to present conditions, and adequate inclusivity without the loss of particular goals. Lin advocates that Asian Americans “embrace identity and reject any narrow agenda,” thereby fulfilling these criteria.

1. Practicality and Reality

Coalition building fulfills Lin’s criteria when both it and identity-based organizing work simultaneously. The reality is that Asian Americans are not likely to abandon their coalitions, as the variety of scholars cited in this article demonstrates. Practically speaking, too, at least some segments of the Asian American population will not be willing to replace their alliances for urgent objectives with identity politics, or limit their organizing to Asian Americans. In Lin’s argument, one aspect of reality is what the “vast majority of people think and experience.” The problem with this is that people, especially privileged people, have a skewed sense of reality. Their “lived experience” is blind to the experiences of individuals without such privilege. Therefore, critical scholarship must expose these oversights. For example, Lin points out that scholars cannot simply presume that their readers have a sophisticated understanding of race relations in America, for example. People’s everyday realities, as they perceive them, are important,

107. Lin, supra note 2, at 248-51.
108. Id. at 248.
109. Lin, too, acknowledges how generally accepted (“pervasive,” in his estimation) coalition work is to Asian American race scholars. See id. at 220.
110. Undocumented workers facing work hazards and economic exploitation would likely choose to mobilize with non-Asian workers to achieve these goals, rather than restrict themselves to Asian Americans in order to “establish” themselves in American politics. The same could be true for indefinite detainees, who share interests with Arabs and South Asians (who may or may not be Asian, depending on one’s perspective), undocumented battered women, and various other disenfranchised groups.
111. Lin, supra note 2, at 249.
even if they are somewhat deluded. It is not the job of critical scholars, however, to simply accept these falsities as reality. Scholars must actively endeavor to counteract them. By adopting an antisubordination stance, scholars acknowledge the reality that different forms of racism are connected.

Another aspect of practicality for Lin is focusing exclusively on eradicating the perpetual foreigner syndrome, which refers to the tendency of Americans to view Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Lin’s rationale is that most Americans do not believe that Asian Americans face discrimination. If mainstream American perceptions are to dictate Asian American politics, then it is questionable that perpetual foreignness is a strategic focus. The majority of Americans may not be impressed by such a problem at all. In order to demonstrate the harm of this stereotype, Asian Americans will be forced to “address many issues simultaneously,” such as hate crimes, racial profiling, and the glass ceiling. Lin discourages such expansion, asserting that “we need as little resistance as possible.” Resistance, however, is inevitable when a population challenges the status quo, no matter how “reasonable” the mainstream should perceive the demand as being. That, definitively, is what Asian Americans want to do—otherwise, no change or organizing would be necessary.

More basically, the perpetual foreigner syndrome is undesirable, but the reasons behind its undesirability deserves scrutiny. What is so bad about being “foreign” that Asian Americans must assert our existence specifically in order to combat so wretched a label? While it betrays an exasperating propensity to equate “American” with “White,” the deeper wrong of the perpetual foreigner stereotype is the presumed evil of the foreigner. When the foreigner is White (European), of course, s/he is simply a person, rather than a potential invader. This indicates that it is our Asianness that subjects us to such distrust; the fact of being Americans, however, is not what should insulate us. It is the fact that we are human beings. Therefore, Asian Americans who wish to challenge the perpetual foreigner syndrome must ensure that they do not unwittingly contribute to the collusion of foreignness with evil.

2. Timing

Part of the necessity for coalition building right now is the wholesale dismantling of civil liberties after September 11th. Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians are collectively too powerless to succeed on their own, and the injustices they face have vast repercussions for all persons of color.  

---

112. Id. at 255.
113. Id. at 255.
114. Id. at 256.
115. See Wing, supra note 40, at 746, 747 (discussing racial profiling’s effects on various racial minorities).
The dichotomization of "Muslims" versus "Americans" stems from and reinforces the notion that being American is a White, Christian birthright to which everyone else is entitled only insofar as they act White as it has been normalized. Focusing solely on identity in such a climate neglects the shared history of oppression, as well as the intersections, between Asian Americans as Lin understands them, and Arabs, Muslims and South Asians.\textsuperscript{116}

Additional factors contribute to the timeliness of coalition politics. For one, racial minorities are set to outnumber Whites in 2050, and have already done so in California.\textsuperscript{117} The expected vacancies on the Supreme Court bench, with a Republican president charged with filling them, may lead to dramatic legal setbacks in the next four years.

3. Inclusiveness

When Lin returns to "inclusiveness" as a criterion for efficient social change, the blame, as implied from Lin's earlier arguments, is on progressive race scholars who criticize neoconservatives. Somehow, from Lin's perspective, Asian America's fractured, diluted voice that encourages ignorance of Asian Americans' experiences of discrimination is due to progressive Asian Americans. According to this logic, the majority of Americans do not think that Asian Americans face discrimination not because conservative Asian Americans oppose affirmative action, but because Asian American critical race scholars oppose both the oppression of Asian Americans and the oppression of everyone else.

I have already discussed how Lin's focus on identity can exclude Asian Americans whose circumstances may force them to organize around particular issues. Political organizing, for a group as diverse as Asian Americans, is bound to exclude some people. Lin assumes that the goal of Asian Americans is "Asian American progress," but some Asian Americans are unwilling to seek that progress at the expense of other minorities.\textsuperscript{118} I have already demonstrated that a single, universally agreed upon goal for Asian Americans is impossible. Therefore, perfect inclusion of all Asian Americans is also impossible. Neither identity-based nor coalitional organizing solves these problems. However, this is not a sufficient reason to abandon either tactic.

\textsuperscript{116} National security commingled with racism to subject Wen Ho Lee to baseless accusations of espionage. See Neil Gotanda, \textit{Comparative Racialization: Racial Profiling and the Case of Wen Ho Lee}, 47 UCLA L. Rev. 1689 (2000). Similarly, Captain James Yee has faced escalated scrutiny due to his Asian American racial identity intersecting with his Muslim religious identity, which has been aggressively attacked after September 11th. See Ahmad, supra note 63, at 1311-12. The general suspicion cast on Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians has been likened to the United States' treatment of Japanese Americans in World War II. See id. at 1285.

\textsuperscript{117} See Delgado, supra note 102.

\textsuperscript{118} Lin, supra note 2, at 252.
III. CONCLUSION

Identity formation cannot fit neatly into a three-stage progression, especially where identity evaporates in the final stage. Professor Chang never intended this interpretation of his three-stage scheme. When individual persons constantly reinvent themselves, negotiating their identities in varying contexts, it is irrational to expect Asian America to cleanly “establish” its identity in a discrete historical period, when its very definition is still debatable. As Professor Romero suggests, this is not even a wise goal.119

On the other hand, identity-based organizing is an important resource for activists to develop a “homespace” in which they can rejuvenate from the exhausting work of coalition building. Given the diversity of Asian America, homespaces may ultimately be rooted in identities defined more specifically based on national origin.

Interracial coalition work is both strenuous and exhausting, but the difference between it and identity-based organizing for Asian Americans is simply one of degree. Asian Americans are heterogeneous along such lines as class and politics, but also at the level of national origin and the histories and cultures thereby implicated. It is thus unreasonable to imagine that Asian Americans can ever have a unitary (read: monolithic) voice. Therefore, the purported need to assert a singular voice is an inadequate justification for abandoning coalition work.

Simultaneously, coalition work may be the only hope for marginalized peoples to effect change in the United States. By pooling the resources of time, money, experience, and sheer numbers, while recognizing the connections in our various struggles, coalition participants pose a formidable challenge to the majority divide-and-conquer tactics of domination. Through coalition work, Asian Americans can join the effort to rid American society of White privilege in all its manifestations. This would be a victory for every American.

119. See Romero, supra note 95, at 1601.