

# THE IMPORTANCE OF ASIAN AMERICANS? IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN THE  
RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT



**CHANGELAB** *Strategy, Research & Vision for Racial Justice*

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ChangeLab is a grassroots political lab that explores structural solutions to achieve racial justice.  
We conduct research, convene people across sectors, develop movement-building tools,  
and provide platforms for dialogue, analysis, and strategy building.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF ASIAN AMERICANS? IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK.

*Future Directions in the Racial Justice Movement*

<b>Introduction: Being Asian American: Why It Matters</b>	<b>4</b>
The Permanence of Race in a Post-Racial Era	5
The Three-Sided Struggle	6
Building Interracialism	7
Asian Americans & the Meaning of Radicalism	10
Our Take on What We Heard	12
<b>I. Please, Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood: Orientalism &amp; Asian American Utility</b>	<b>15</b>
Out of Sight, Out of Mind	16
Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts	21
Getting Our House in Order	23
<b>II. What We're Up Against</b>	<b>28</b>
Colorblind Racism: The Silencing of Race	28
Under Attack: War, Criminalization and Hate Crimes	29
The Economy	31
Analysis: Not Up to Speed	32
Electoral Organizing: Missed Opportunities	38
Infrastructure & Capacity: Not Up to Scale	40
Surviving Burnout	43
The Need for Mass Base-Building	43
Lack of Political Education Tools	44
<b>III. The Way Forward</b>	<b>47</b>
Contesting White Supremacy:	47
Working It Out	49
Building Asian American Race Politics	49
Developing Ethnic-Specific Political Education Tools	50
Building Movement Analysis and Strategy	50
Agitating Asian Americans	51
Beyond the Nonprofit Sector	53
<i>Terms and Definitions</i>	56
<i>Sectors of the U.S. Right Active in the Year 2012</i>	58
<i>The Politics of Our Participants</i>	59
<i>The Research Process</i>	62
<i>Interview Questions: Asian American Participants</i>	65
<i>Interview Questions: Non-Asian American Participants</i>	68
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	71
<i>Sources</i>	72

# Being Asian American: *Why It Matters*

“In an essay several years ago, Toni Morrison argued that the immigrant to the United States is not made fully American until she or he has learned and exercised racism toward African Americans... I suggest that Morrison is only partially correct... Changes in immigration law in 1965 produced a dramatic shift in the composition of immigrants, transforming a largely European population to one that is now predominantly Latina/o and Asian. ...Immigrants today are made American not only when they learn to subordinate African Americans, but when they are racialized as subordinate as well. By this definition, Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities in the United States have in recent months become more American, and September 11 and its aftermath constituted the citizenship ceremony by which this was accomplished.”

— Muneer Ahmad,  
“Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day After September 11”

**I**n our previous report, *Left or Right of the Color Line*, we explored what we heard from nationwide interviews with racial justice leaders, organizers, scholars, and artists about Asian Americans and the racial justice movement. The vast majority of the 57 interviewees who ended up in our analysis were Asian Americans, except for three African Americans whose work cuts across communities of color.<sup>1</sup> While *Left or Right* focused on Asian American racial identity and behavior, this report looks at the **challenges** that Asian American racial justice activists face, and **strategies** for moving forward.

As we reported previously, several informants said that many Asian Americans embraced “honorary whiteness” and, therefore, any kind of Asian American organizing must be anti-racist. If that’s true, then what does it look like to assert *Asian American-ness* authentically, expansively, and progressively? It should come as no surprise that this work is already happening. After all, no amount of model minority framing can erase the fact that “Asian American” began as a political identity. The historical basis for being Asian American is twofold — a rejection of labels like “Oriental”, “gook”, “Jap”, etc., and their roots in war and imperialism, and a fundamental commitment to interracial solidarity. In reality, there were no Asian Americans before the Civil Rights, Black Power and antiwar movements. And those of us who dedicate our lives to combating white supremacy today are authentically Asian American.

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1. Midway through our interviews, we decided not to include Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander informants in this research. In our conversations, although we used “API” in our questions, it became clear that the “PI” part of the API coalition is routinely marginalized within the broader category. It was the rule and not the exception that Asian American informants would use the term “API” without discussing issues or dynamics specific to Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander populations at all. For this reason, we focused on Asian Americans only, to avoid the pattern of marginalizing Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander racial experiences, which we believe demand separate research that centers them.

This might seem like an academic argument given how many people, including Asian Americans, are unaware of this history. Idealizing those movements of the '60s and '70s dangerously masks the problems within them, and the important lessons to be learned. Still, there are both hope and affirmation to be found in the radical roots of Asian American identity for those of us committed to racial justice. That's why being Asian American matters.

## The Permanence of Race in a Post-Racial Era

Movement strategies must account for the conditions around us. In the five months since we released our first report, the climate for racial justice has not improved. Post-racialism—the idea that race in a post-Civil Rights era no longer matters—pervades, even as the accrued injuries of racism continue to mount. At the time of this writing, the New York Police Department, the largest municipal police force in the United States, is on trial for stop-and-frisk practices that have led to an astounding 5 million stops in New York City in the past decade, mostly of young Black and Latino men. Only one-tenth of those stopped were arrested. As *The Nation* reporter David Cole explains:

*In theory stop-and-frisks, like arrests, are regulated by the Constitution. The Supreme Court ruled in 1968 that police must have objective evidence providing 'reasonable suspicion' of criminal activity before they can forcibly stop a citizen, and they must have an independent basis for fearing the person is armed before they frisk him ... it requires objective, individualized suspicion—not racial stereotyping.*

*Reforming political and legal structures borne of White Supremacy is not enough.*

And yet, in one city alone, a 1968 U.S. Supreme Court ruling to ensure freedom from race-based police stops has failed at least 5 million mostly Black and brown young men and their families more than 40 years later. This is but one example of how the hard-won gains of the Civil Rights Movement, in the end, left the project of racial justice unfinished.

Trends within the nation's largest federal police force are equally bleak. If nothing changes, by 2014, the Obama administration will have deported over 2 million people from the United States — more than the total number of people deported between 1892 and 1997. Indeed, the first African American U.S. president will have deported more people during his presidency than during the entire period of U.S. deportations before 1997—evidence that multicultural representation alone falls short of racial justice.

These and other wrongs are being contested on the ground, in courts, and in the halls of Congress. Time will tell what, if any, remedies emerge, but holding a finger to the political wind forecasts limited remedial solutions at best. These are critical fights, but history shows us that reforming political and legal structures borne of white supremacy is not enough.

On the grassroots front, the racist right continues to gain momentum. As the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) reports:

*Since 2000, the number of hate groups has increased by 69 percent. This surge has been fueled by anger and fear over the nation's ailing economy, an influx of non-white immigrants, and the diminishing white majority... These factors also are feeding a powerful resurgence of the antigovernment "Patriot" movement, which in the 1990s led to a string of domestic terrorist plots, including the Oklahoma City bombing. The number of Patriot groups, including armed militias, grew by 755 percent in the first three years of the Obama administration — from 149 at the end of 2008 to 1,360 in 2012.*



Asian American and other students demonstrating support for affirmative action policies at the University of Michigan.

Add to this mix the resurgence of academic arguments asserting a biological basis for race, and the picture looks even worse. The belief that race is biologically determined masks how structural racism, and not genetics, shapes the lives of people of color. As Michael Omi warned recently in a *Journal of Asian American Studies* article called "Slippin' Into Darkness' The (Re)Biologization of Race":

*Given the past history of racial thinking, it is important that we subject the notion of genetic racial differences to very close scrutiny... Could genetic differences be at the root of perceived racial differences in intelligence, in athletic ability, or in the propensity to commit crime? ...There is dramatic change afoot. Biological categories of race are back on the table.*

Among Asian Americans, questions of race reveal a patchwork of ideological confusion. At the same time that racialized attacks on Asian Americans persist, battles over key issues reveal the fault lines among us. For example, on affirmative action, the *Fisher v. University of Texas* U.S. Supreme Court case has drawn Asian Americans from both the left and the right.

## The Three-Sided Struggle

From national narratives about fairness to scientific studies of genetics, we are in a war of racial ideas that extends far beyond single campaigns and issue areas. In this historical moment, there is an ideological front that urgently demands our attention. We are in a three-sided struggle — between the state, the racist right, and us. Engaging only with the state is not enough. Organizers know that fights in policy or legal arenas are the *end* debates, where solutions are constrained by entrenched political realities that demand movement building solutions, not short-term campaigns.

What are those realities? The U.S. Census Bureau projects that non-Hispanic Whites will fall to minority status by the year 2042. On its face, in a nation whose political system favors majority rule, this would seem like a new opportunity to push for racial justice strategies. However, as the Southern Poverty Law Center has reported, this demographic shift is fueling anxiety among race-sensitive Whites. Conservative forces are organizing white anxiety into opposition against an array of disadvantaged groups, including people of color, women, non-Christians, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, and the poor. Their strategy is tried and true: exploiting the politics of whiteness to build their base.

What this demands is a racial justice movement that unites people of color within and across lines of structural disadvantage, reaching beyond short-term campaigns to counter the grassroots momentum of the political right. Our last report included an introductory chapter called, "The Road to an Era of Racial Confusion." It sketched out the historical trajectory of U.S. Empire and the political right, and the implications for racial justice today. In that context, we now take a deeper look at what our informants said about the challenges they face as Asian American racial justice organizers, and possible responses.

## Building Interracialism

A central problem that people described was Asian American invisibility and misrepresentation. Our first chapter explores this challenge and its implications. It also addresses the question of how to counter invisibility without demanding inclusion at the expense of other communities of color. Many of our informants said that it is in fact possible to assert an Asian American identity, grounded in communities, that advances structural transformation and interracial solidarity. One person gave this example, from an Oakland-based organization:

*The work [they do] around education justice ... they don't just kind of carve out this exceptional API (Asian Pacific Islander) identity... [It's a] case of racial justice work done in the name of Asian Americans that says ... "There's no way you [can] get what we might consider justice for Asian American students [here] and not think about Latinos and African Americans.*

In *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, Daryl Joji Maeda, one of the many scholars whose work we have studied over the last year, reminds us that Asian Americans in the '60s and '70s centered the politics of interracialism and internationalism:



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a powerful speech in 1967 called "Beyond Vietnam" connecting U.S. racism to poverty and war. He would lose major political support because of it, from President Johnson to major newspapers, and in popular polls.

*The Asian American movement created a multiethnic alliance comprising Asians of all ethnicities by drawing on the discourses and ideologies of the Black Power and anti-war movements in the United States, as well as decolonization movements around the globe... Coalitional politics was ... foundational to its understanding of the United States as a capitalistic and imperialistic system that exploited people of color both within and outside its borders.*

Native scholar Andrea Smith's analysis of white supremacy offers a useful way to understand what interracialism demands—to acknowledge and reject the trinity of racial bribes that white supremacy offers to all people of color. In her essay in *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, she explains:

*All non-Native peoples are promised the ability to join in the colonial project of settling indigenous lands. All non-black peoples are promised that if they comply, they will not be at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. And Black and Native peoples are promised that they will advance economically and politically if they join U.S. wars to spread "democracy." Thus, people-of-color organizing must be premised on making strategic alliances with one another, based on where we are situated...*

Smith's analysis helps us understand that, while different communities of color are situated differently, no single community experiences just one form of racial oppression. White supremacy is a complex of interlocking oppressions and privileges that play out in all of our communities, all the time.

Racialized attacks on President Barack Obama offer a real-life example of this. To be sure, the current president is the target of anti-Black racism, but Islamophobia is also undeniably at work. The right has vilified him by casting him as a Muslim and, therefore, a threat to the nation. The hatred of Muslims is based on *Orientalist* thinking—the idea that the West is superior, because it is the *opposite* of an exotic, dangerous, and inferior Orient. This is the logic that supports U.S. war and imperialism, not just in Asia and the Middle East, but throughout the Global South. Obama is the target of Islamophobia despite the fact that he is Christian and Black, or that U.S. militarism has, in fact, expanded under his administration.

This is also why calls to acknowledge Asian American race privilege within the Black-White binary misfire in certain communities. We heard much in our interviews about the different racial positions of Asian American subgroups. Young Hmong and Cambodian men, for example, often experience similar kinds of racial profiling that young Black men do. The privilege of not being Black must be little comfort to the family of Fong Lee, for example, a young Hmong man killed by a Minneapolis police officer in 2006, and whose killer was cleared of any wrongdoing. In addition to being viewed as threatening and unassimilable, some Asian Americans experience the brutality of anti-Black racism. Several informants, both Asian American and Black, pointed this out. As one person said:

*White supremacy is a complex of interlocking oppressions and privileges that play out in all of our communities, all the time.*



*Oakland's working class Asians are in many ways racialized as Black... The kind of model minority stuff isn't quite available to them.*

Historical and present-day experiences of U.S. war and imperialism place Asian Americans in a strong position to challenge that specific dimension of White Supremacy, and how it intersects with others. With today's national security rationales for more aggressive policing, there are plenty of opportunities to do that, by lifting up how war and anti-Black racism intersect in the area of criminalization.

In *Left or Right of the Color Line?* we drew a parallel between model-minority framing, which casts Asian Americans (the good minorities) in opposition to Blacks (the bad minorities), and American exceptionalism, which casts the United States as a model nation defending freedom and democracy against its enemies, domestically and internationally:

*If America is a model nation, then there must also be 'problem' nations ... American exceptionalism, and its opposition in the form of 'rogue' or 'terrorist' nations, justifies expanded U.S. military projects in the name of security. The criminalization of Blackness is a precursor to the criminalization of entire nation-states and religions.*

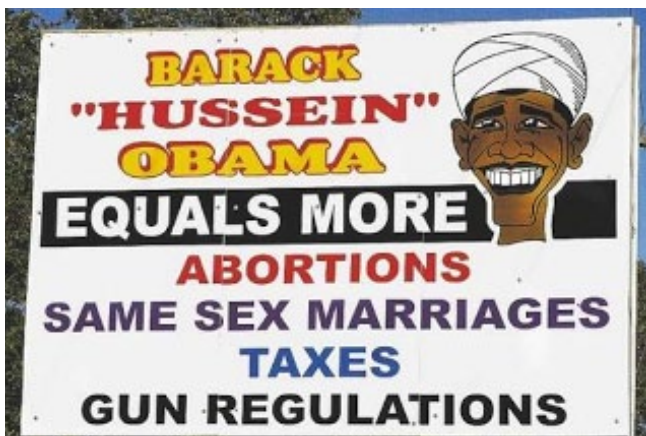
Expanded criminalization creates opportunities for new kinds of solidarity on the ground, and Asian American organizers are seizing them. As one South Asian leader described:

*I'm seeing for the first time a very heartening realization that this is not just about us, not just about Muslims are the victims, or South Asians are the victims, or Arabs, but we need to be forging alliances with the civil rights struggle, with the immigrants rights struggle. These are conversations we've been waiting for ... South Asians and Muslims to have for years... Those realizations are happening now in organizations and coalitions.*

Asian American assertions of racial justice increasingly reject not only anti-Black racism, but

also imperialism and war. One informant said that because the very existence of Asian Americans is the result of U.S. imperialism, we have an important role in reframing issues like immigration:

*In fact, immigration ... the ideological framing on it is really more [around] white privilege than it is around a justice framework... It becomes a U.S.-centric frame that prioritizes ... people's integration in and life in this country as the important thing... We only deserve to have worker protection because we're considered as part of the ...*



A rightwing billboard in Missouri uses an Islamophobic caricature of Barack Obama wearing a turban to drum up white resentment.

*U.S. working class. That is [a] historical vestige of colonialism and white supremacy... So I think that could be our contribution ... the question of ... "Is that framework really relevant?" ... Our historical experience ... around migration, colonialism, and integration within U.S. society is both historically relevant ... and it's more recent.*

On the topic of decolonization, Smith's scholarship shows how indigenous experiences create a basis to redefine sovereignty beyond narrow nationalistic frames. This also holds promise for the racial justice movement. Instead of relying on recognition by the settler state, this definition of sovereignty "requires a radical reorientation toward land... All are welcome to live on the land ... but we must all ... care for the land rather than control it." Rather than seeing non-Native people of color in the United States merely as settlers, such a politics "is not based on claims for special status to be recognized by the state, but on a commitment to liberation for all peoples... The 'migrant' is not the problem—the problem is commodification of land."

*The very  
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Let us be clear. At ChangeLab, we are not advocating for the dismantling of the U.S. state as a *strategy*, mainly because of the three-sided struggle. Without the state, we would be left to battle the racist right, a movement that has way more momentum and guns than we do, with no state protection. But whatever strategies we choose, we must remember that the United States is — in its history, structure, and culture — grounded in white supremacy. If our political vision begins and ends with state remedies, then, as Smith puts it, "we are left with a political project that can do no more than imagine a kinder, gentler settler state founded on genocide and slavery."

It's hard to imagine non-state-centered racial justice projects, in no small part because we've been trained to seek solutions from within a nonprofit sector that relies on the state for legitimacy. But the sector's constraints get in the way of movement building. So while we shouldn't abandon nonprofit organizations or state-centered campaigns, we do need a deeper analysis to fuel more liberatory strategies. Smith reminds us to "make the most strategic use of the political and legal instruments before us while remaining critical of how we can be co-opted by using them."

## Asian Americans & the Meaning of Radicalism

The last section of this report offers ideas for overcoming some of the most entrenched problems that our informants described. It bears mentioning that many people had a hard time naming strategies, which reflects the problem we've described. There are too few opportunities to engage in deep and ongoing thinking about current conditions, and how the racial justice movement should respond.

In a blog post on *RaceFiles* we offered the following definition of the word *radical*:

1. Of, relating to, or proceeding from a root.
2. Of, or relating to the origin: fundamental.
3. Marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional.

Uprooting racism requires radical thinking. With this report, we seek to both inspire and reflect a revitalized, contemporary Asian American politics rooted in history. The importance of being Asian American lies not in our ability to lift ourselves up above others, but in our potential to shine a bright light on the brutality of U.S. war and imperialism. The section called “Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts” explores what informants said about this.

U.S. Empire has reached new heights, and its damage is not confined to non-U.S. peoples “over there.” Compounded by the ever-growing injuries of slavery and genocide, it is also deeply affecting those of us who are *here*. Bringing this into sharper focus can only strengthen the racial justice movement. This work is already happening, but we need much, much more.

—Soya Jung & Scot Nakagawa  
Senior Partners, ChangeLab

# Our Take on What We Heard

**O**ur first report, *Left or Right of the Color Line?* focused on broad themes that emerged around Asian American identity and race politics. This report digs deeper into the challenges and opportunities for strengthening Asian American participation in the racial justice movement. Here's our take on what's going on, and what needs to happen:

- \* **We are in a three-sided war of racial ideas** between the racist right, the state, and us. State-centered solutions are necessary, but not enough to contest white supremacy. As the right continues to gain momentum, the racial justice movement needs a serious upgrade — a more robust analysis of current conditions, an expansive vision, and strategic tactics.
- \* **We need the space to try things and fail.** Organizers told us they need space and time beyond the constraints of foundations and the nonprofit sector, to build the analysis and strategies that the movement needs. Many envision an ongoing network of racial justice activists, academics, and artists from across sectors. Some described the need for “out-of-the-box” thinking, by also engaging people in the hard sciences, for example.
- \* **We need to organize people of color within and across lines of structural disadvantage.** The right has exploited the politics of whiteness to build a coalition of those who oppose the rights of people of color, women, and LGBT people. We need to push back by organizing those marginalized by poverty, war, criminalization, and gender-based oppression.
- \* **We need more effective ways to impact culture,** to create a “stream of consciousness” in our favor, as one person put it. There is untapped potential in working beyond the nonprofit sector, to engage the neighborhood businesses, religious institutions, independent media, poets, musicians, filmmakers, and artists that exist in all communities of color, but that are often overlooked in racial justice work.
- \* **All people of color experience interlocking oppressions and privileges.** Strategies for interracial solidarity must acknowledge how different racial oppressions target specific communities, but also transcend racial lines. We need new ideas and language to resist the trinity of racial bribes that white supremacy offers all people of color to participate in anti-Black racism, settler colonialism, and war/imperialism.
- \* **Asian American organizers seeking to build interracial solidarity face serious barriers.** The two main ones are a lack of understanding in the broader racial justice movement of how Asian American experience white supremacy, and a deeply problematic tendency among Asian Americans to distance themselves from race. Some organizers have responded by building relationships between low-income, first-generation Asian Americans and similarly marginalized people of color, but we need much more.
- \* **Asian Americans have critical contributions to make to the racial justice movement.** There is growing potential to reframe issues of immigration and foreign policy as racial justice fights, in solidarity with Blacks and Latinos fighting criminalization. While the prison-industrial complex is rooted in slavery, expansion of the national security state is rooted in Orientalism (the “us-versus-them” thinking that justifies war). As criminalization continues to affect growing numbers of Asian Americans, some organizers are seizing opportunities to build solidarity, but again, we need much more.

- \* **There are strong racial justice efforts happening in Asian American communities,** particularly among low-wage workers, first-generation immigrants and refugees, those targeted by criminalization, and youth. We should learn from these efforts, make them more visible, and build on them.
- \* **The existence of Asian Americans is the result of U.S. war and imperialism,** which is both an opportunity and a challenge. Imperialism has embedded deep divisions within Asian American communities, as well as between Asian Americans and other people of color. Strategies for building unity need to acknowledge these fault lines.
- \* **Asian Americans need space to have difficult conversations.** There are real, present-day opportunities to reboot Asian American identity as a rejection of Orientalism and a commitment to interracial solidarity, but there are also serious problems. We heard the need for a forum that allows Asian Americans to grapple with the real ideological and experiential differences among them. The framing of culturally appropriate services as a racial justice issue, for example, needs interrogation, given that many Asian American service providers actively distance themselves from race. These kinds of problems demand movement-level solutions.
- \* **Asian American organizations dedicated to interracial solidarity are stretched thin,** and often politically marginalized in their own communities. Building their ranks demands the capacity to “get our house in order.” Organizers told us they need much greater language capacity and political education tools to do effective racial justice base building in their communities. They also need a place for mutual support and problem solving with other organizers who are pushing inside their own communities, and getting marginalized for it.

*My people, we are a song that we can never stop singing against the silence*  
*My people, we are a song that we can never stop singing against the silence*

— Bao Phi, "For Us"

# Please, Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood: *Orientalism & Asian American Utility*

“Unlike ‘black’ and ‘white’ as racial categories, there is a greater fluidity to ‘Asian American’ that can be manipulated in particular ways to suit particular positions. It may not matter whether specific claims about Asian Americans are empirically correct or not. In fact, much of what both the Left and the Right claim about Asian Americans is contestable. Thus, the ‘truth’ of the claims is immaterial. What matters are the kinds of rhetorical constructions, and their emotional impacts, that the Right and the Left deploy.”

— Michael Omi & Dana Y. Takagi, “Situating Asian Americans in the Political Discourse on Affirmative Action”

**A**ll people of color are subject to racial stereotyping and misrepresentation. But the political utility of the *idea* of Asian Americans came up in various ways in our interviews. This section summarizes what our informants said about invisibility and misrepresentation, and the broad, negative implications of this for the racial justice movement.

The widespread lack of understanding of Asian American communities was made plain after the most recent presidential election, when media pundits responded with utter shock at the landslide Asian American support for Obama. This, despite the fact that in-language advance polling of the five largest groups of Asian Americans showed support for Obama, as well as for progressive issues like health-care reform. Progressive Asian American researchers produced and disseminated this information. But in mainstream media outlets, it was the idea, and not the truth, about Asian Americans that prevailed.

Our informants described how this problem showed up in movement work. Paralleling news coverage of the “shocking” Asian American turnout for Obama, many said that “model minority” ideas made it hard to shed light on actual struggles within Asian American communities. Beyond asserting “we-suffer-from-racism-too” arguments as a way to jockey for resources, many organizers are struggling to find real handles for building interracial solidarity and a stronger overall movement.

Informants expressed frustration over how difficult it was to explain the racial position of Asian Americans. As one person put it: “We are in positions of power and we are the most vulnerable. It’s both.” This is true not just between ethnic groups but also within them: One informant described the class differences in the Sikh community, “There’s a huge discrepancy... You have a lot of Punjabi Sikh-Americans who [have] done really well, they came pretty early, and then we have the new immigrants ... working in really low-wage jobs.”

These complexities of class, religion, immigration status, etc. are real, but there is one common factor in Asian American racialization. One African American racial justice leader put it this way:

*The reality is that Asians most certainly represent 'the other.' If we were to have a conversation tomorrow about ... who are the folks [of color] most likely to be interned or kicked out of this country, Black people would actually be at the bottom of that list... You could even make the argument that the top tier would be Arabs, Latinos and sort of Asians broadly... It really is specific to the way in which we are talking about how race plays.*

Many informants described how criminalization is affecting a growing number of Asian Americans. It is critical to understand the structural basis for criminalization in the history of slavery, and its disproportionate impacts on African Americans. But in viewing today's expansion of criminalization, war and imperialism are also driving forces. There is a historic opportunity to understand the intersections between "how race plays" for both groups. But as one person said:

*The intersection between immigration and criminal justice is a difficult one. You have lots of young Asian immigrants who are being deported because of low-level criminal activity... How do you define what your issues are when they're the same issues, you just experience them differently? And ... if you use the logic of dealing with those who are most impacted, proportionately or severely, it's usually not Asians.*

Organizers  
are  
struggling  
to find real  
handles for  
building  
interracial  
solidarity.

## Out of Sight, Out of Mind

As with all communities of color, institutional neglect of the racism that Asian Americans experience can have fatal consequences. In the case of the Sikh community, for example, community defense against racialized violence depends on the availability of statistics on hate crimes against Sikhs. As activist and filmmaker Valarie Kaur wrote in *The Washington Post* after white supremacist Wade Michael Page killed six people at a gurdwara in Oak Creek in August of 2012: "Under the FBI's current tracking system, there is no category for anti-Sikh hate crimes. The religious identity of the eight people shot in Oak Creek will not appear as a statistic in the FBI's data collection."

In the realm of crime and policing, we heard from one East Asian Bay Area organizer working with formerly incarcerated and at-risk Asian American youth. He described how difficult it was to draw attention to the needs of these constituencies:

*How do we get the adequate funding and equal funding for the API population? This is something that we always experience in our communities, because [of] the model minority myth. The city government don't understand the API community and its unique challenges. They would always say, "They don't have the problems. They don't have the*



*homicide rates... The graduation rate of the Asian Americans are high, so they don't need the same resources as the African American and the Latinos. They don't need it." So then, what is happening is that that population becomes underserved.*

*When you talk about API and you lump that together, you kind of create a disservice for the community because ... majority of people are immigrants. And the immigrants, when they come ... we have a lot of truancy issues, gang issues, drug issues, language problems, employment issues, wage-theft issues... Those are the things that people don't see, unless you are part of their community... We know what the challenges we have to deal with [are, but] because the model-minority myth, people just overlook that of the API. That is our biggest challenge. How do we be on the equal when we come to talking about services? How do we do that?*

Another organizer, also working with currently and formerly incarcerated Asian Americans, described the difficulty of knowing how many Asian Americans were actually in prison. As with hate crimes, data collection within the prison system is crucial to organizing efforts. He attributed his organization's lack of capacity to the sheer difficulty of making a case for the need.

*We're not even an organization. We don't have any kind of funding. It's all-volunteer... For the API ... folks getting out of the system, they're so invisible ... because on the box that you check in prison, it's "White, Black, Latino, Other." Even trying to get statistics of who was inside, we had to do our own survey ... with contacts that we had, because you can't go off of the statistics the institution has. And even raising awareness about this issue—"Yes, there is this within our community!"—is huge.*

Asian American experiences of criminalization came up several times, both as an area with new opportunities for building interracial solidarity, and as a problem requiring more awareness and support. This quote describes how, even as the issue had spread across geographic regions, very few people knew that it even existed:

*In New Orleans, post-Katrina, DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) really came in and did this targeted enforcement around the drug war and Black folks were selling crack, the Vietnamese were funneling in Ecstasy from Canada, and the Latinos were bringing in*



Community members gather to support victims of the deadly white supremacist shooting at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin last year.

*drugs from Mexico. It was just all communities of color under this drug war enforcement and folks were getting into the system in that way. It was all communities of color, not to mention how the Arab American communities were constantly targeted post-9/11. And then in the Midwest ... it's made me want to [say] wherever I go talk to folks, "Are you seeing this at all?" ... The Southeast Asian community in Minnesota, in the Twin Cities area, was definitely talking about gang enforcement and folks getting locked up. The prison system is such a huge part of our society and the prison-industrial complex, and so I think raising awareness around how there's definitely an intersection here within API communities, and it's not talked about at all, that is definitely a need ... more consciousness-raising and education around ... how this is happening... It's not this isolated thing... It's actually cutting across all regions.*

“Many, many Asian immigrant communities, working class communities in cities, are completely invisible.”

Beyond criminalization, informants described how the model minority trope masked other kinds of impacts. One leader of a national immigrant rights organization said:

*A real problem, despite the model minority myth of Asian students ... [is] in some areas, both rural and urban, kids [are] dropping out of high school, not getting past high school, unable to ... go past high school economically, or they're not staying in college, or just having a hard time getting through school.*

Another person, a South Asian activist, talked about how defining the most important issues for Asian American communities depended on class. From his perspective, the issue of invisibility was most pressing for working-class, first-generation Asian Americans in urban areas:

*There's the invisibility question... Asians in big cities — working-class, migrant, particularly first-generation migrants and their families — [are] totally lost in the survival world, which many people assume is entirely Blacks and Latinos...*

*Those who are more middle-class ... basically, [the most important issue is] “entryism” - how do we get jobs in institutions that previously didn't want to hire us? How do we teach Asian American Studies to college students who should know this stuff, etc? That's a big issue for that crowd. For the immigrant communities ... a huge issue is how to survive in cities that are being destroyed. Many, many Asian immigrant communities, working-class communities in cities, are completely invisible.*

Invisibility plays out profoundly among queer Asian Americans, who feel alienated both in their own ethnic communities and in broader people of color organizations. For that reason, some speculated, many queer Asian Americans feel most comfortable in queer Asian American spaces. One leader said:

*Representational issues are probably what's most important, and why, very often ... people come to [our] organization ... because it negates in part everything that has been done to us.*

Some informants said that the absence of Asian Americans in broader movement spaces was due to the insularity of Asian American organizations. One South Asian scholar criticized certain Asian American leaders for their “lack of scrutiny” of how narrow, identity-based work can create “blindness” to broader issues. The result, he said, was “[they] may not be seeing other forms of injustice that are just outside the frame, that actually deserve more energy.” Likewise, a queer East Asian racial justice activist in the South said she understood the need for Asian American or API-specific formations, but that the mindset accompanying them created barriers to coalition building.

*It's a strategy that needs to be used in terms of being like, “We're Asian American. We need these things.” [But] if you only privilege or you prioritize that kind of tactic, it makes it harder to build coalition or build movement around a shared identity as people of color in this country...*

From a different perspective, Asian American leaders of national pan-Asian American organizations expressed frustration over the challenge of representing Asian American communities in racial justice work. One main hurdle was authenticity—building and maintaining genuine relationships with diverse Asian American communities on the ground, while also participating in national racial justice coalitions, all with extremely limited resources. One person said this:

*When you're smaller, it's easier to work collaboratively because people can see the need, and also you're managing fewer voices, but as communities grow, there are more voices to try to bring cohesion to, it's harder to get to consensus, and there is oftentimes this real competition that has to be acknowledged...*

*Ironically, while Asians are very underrepresented in the [California] Trial Court level and the next level, Appellate Court, we're actually over-represented in the Supreme Court. [Asians] actually have a majority in the Supreme Court! To try to deal with the issue ... if you have Asians there, [and] if that displaces other minorities, then how do you try*



Members of One Love Movement, founded by Khmer organizers in Philadelphia to oppose mandatory detention and deportation for those with criminal convictions. Photo by Teru Hayashi.

*to make sure that you're fighting for the balance, and that the community understands what you're trying to do?*

*...There's been a lot of recognition over the last decade that African Americans and Latinos need to come together, need to try to avoid warfare between the two communities, that there are a lot of shared issues, like deep, deep poverty that quite frankly, Asians as a whole are doing much better on, so you need to have bilateral conversations between Blacks and Latinos. But how do you make sure that Asians at the end of the day don't feel excluded, and are organically part of the leadership in terms of trying to get a solution?*

*...Then, also ... we want to step up and work in coalition with African Americans on traditional African American issues, but we have very limited capacity compared to [our African American partners, who have] a budget of like \$80 million, \$90 million. I sit at the table with [them] and my budget's \$5 million. The [Latino organization's] budget is \$30 million. How can I even hope to cover the issues that I need to cover, be at the tables in terms of building relationships, given the fact that our budget and our capacity is just a fraction of the other communities?*

Changing demographics, like the growth in Asian American and Latino populations, sometimes present analytical and logistical challenges to historically Black organizations. Asian American leaders who understand this, and who want to explore solutions, said that they have few opportunities to do so:

*The African American community is shockingly extremely fragmented. The leadership isn't really fully there now on the local level, because of the demographic shift... I was talking to [leaders of two local African American organizations] and in both cases, either a majority or a significant part of the community they are serving is now Latino, so the question is coming up, here's a group that historically has been seen as African American. Are they still African American? Should they be? Should they not be, and what does that mean? So, you have a lot of transformation going on within communities, and then demographically, Asians now outnumber African Americans in California... People in their heads haven't made that shift... There was a time in L.A. where they had an African American mayor, and many African American council members and Congress members, and they're now shrinking. And Asians and Latinos are waiting in the wings, but it feels like a loss for African Americans.*

“How do you try to make sure that you're fighting for the balance, and that the community understands what you're trying to do?”

Another leader of a national organization said:

*There's so much ground to cover in terms of the issues, in terms of the geography, and the diversity within Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian and Asian American communities. We get criticized ... like, "What's going on with the Indo-Caribbean Community in Jackson*

*Heights?” ...Or, “What about the Samoans and the Tongans, you know, in Carson? What are you doing about that?” I mean, all of that ... is so important... So that’s the challenge that I think [we face] on a federal [level], having to hold so much diversity and complexity, and then [having] to be the token representational API organization.*

Many informants argued for greater inclusion not for the sake of demographic representation, but because Asian American experiences hold promise for opening up new and productive ways of thinking about race and white supremacy. These individuals said that Asian American stories of migration, criminalization, hate crimes, poverty, and other racial justice issues remained largely off the radar of many racial justice leaders, to the detriment of the overall movement.



Community members demand justice for Fong Lee, a 19-year-old Hmong man who was shot eight times by a Minnesota police officer. In 2009 the officer was cleared of wrongdoing by an all-white jury.

## Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts

*I think we’re used to talking about Latinos and social justice movements... Cesar Chavez and Che Guevarra are very common in our vocabulary, but we don’t know as much about API leaders.*

On the topic of how Asian American invisibility hindered the racial justice movement, one organizer working with low-wage Asian Americans argued that inclusion would lead to a deeper and more robust analysis of current conditions:

*I think that Chinese and other API groups ... especially working-class and low income folks, are very much invisible in the vast majority of work that’s being done around ... class and race issues alike. Whenever we go anywhere ... we’re the token Asian people. There’s just no awareness. People don’t know that there are low-income Asian people. They don’t know what are the issues that Chinese immigrants ... are facing. In terms of having a robust movement that is representative of what actually is happening, there is a huge need for the voices and stories and experiences and organizing resistance work of API folks to be part of that movement... The diversity within API communities, and the folks who have been displaced by U.S.-led wars, that also is part of just deepening the analysis of ... the system that we’re building a movement to transform ... understanding*



We heard that many first-generation, low-income Asian Americans in urban area remain largely invisible to the racial justice movement.

*all the different ways that communities have been displaced. It's not just about free trade; it's not just about cheap corn imports. There's also other parts of the story that are important as well.*

One leader at a national Asian American and Pacific Islander organization described this dynamic in a different way. More than being “missing” from movement spaces, she talked about being approached by movement leaders only to provide an API-specific perspective, not to contribute to conversations about analysis and strategy:

*Our hope is to think about what justice and equity mean in the social justice movement, which is beyond just being Asian Americans... Because we call ourselves Asian Americans/ Pacific Islanders, that doesn't necessarily immediately translate. So when people come to us, it's because ... they want to know what the Asian American Pacific Islander point of view is, not necessarily to ask us to be a part of the strategic thinking about what the results of a more just and equitable society would mean for everyone... There's an immediate assumption that we're only relevant to Asian Americans, not necessarily relevant to the overall goal of the movement.*

Likewise, the leader of a national low-wage worker organization talked about the critical contributions that Asian Americans could make to the racial justice movement in terms of analysis:

*I cut my teeth ... not just organizing ... Asian Americans ... but then seeing, “Oh! An Asian immigrant can work in Black communities. This is f\*\*king great!”...And that's where I put almost two decades of my life ... not just in Black communities but in communities outside my own... There is a contribution to be made because of the historical experience of ... Asian communities in building not just a racial justice movement... We're in a sense positioned to ... help build a global justice movement that has ... a commitment to the value of racial justice.*

One unintentional aspect of our research was that a disproportionate number of our Asian American informants in our analysis identified as queer (about one-third). Moreover, several of them were working in organizations and movements that do not lead either with an Asian American or a queer identity. One of these informants talked about the possible reasons for this, and the positive implications it could have:

*The mainstream API movement ... has been so hard to be part of, so many of us are doing work that I would say is totally racial justice work, that is totally API work, [but] within*

*other movements. We may just not be calling it that or we may not be on the same circuit ... of other folks who might get more visibility around “API work.”*

*...One example [that] comes to mind more immediately is around the Dream Act, immigration... There have been a lot of courageous young undocumented Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who have “come out” ... and shared with folks that they are undocumented. And it has really changed the type of conversations about immigration.*

One leader of a national racial justice organization said simply:

*I think there are a lot of gay Asians, and there is some opportunity there to build organizing and thinking. I think there are a lot of poor Asians, and there is opportunity there as well, to move some economic justice organizing with a racial lens. Those are two places where I think real work could happen.*

This idea that the inclusion of more Asian American voices could broaden the racial justice movement’s analytical scope came up several times, on issues of poverty, worker justice, immigration, and criminalization. One East Asian leader described the structural, or historically accrued, impacts of the racial justice issues that her organization addressed:

*I have a broad definition of racial justice. To me, because immigration is one of those structural issues, it started out historically. It was very discriminatory, so we’re still dealing with the aftermath of that reality, that until 1965 there were racial quotas, so that’s why you have these huge backlogs in the family categories, and the reason why we can’t fix it is largely because white people don’t want more people of color here. So to me, that is a racial justice question, families being able to be reunited, and having fair policies... Language access, because for the Asian community, language ability is so tied to poverty, and if you don’t have sufficient investment being made in language learning and also helping people to overcome barriers, then you’re going to end up with new structures that are going to embed racial disparities, at least for certain Asian ethnic groups. So ... one of the issues around structural racism is ... this issue of passing laws for English only.*

“The mainstream API movement ... has been so hard to be part of”

## Getting Our House in Order

*I would say that the Asian community, broadly, in my experience, actually tries to distance their justice issues from being racial justice issues. Even in the immigration debate, I would say that.*

The problem is not just in the *exclusion* of Asian Americans from racial justice spaces, but also in the self-distancing of Asian Americans from racial justice framing, which urgently demands

interventions. When we asked which Asian American communities were under-organized, by and large, the response was that they all were. Several people said this wasn't unique to Asian American communities, that, in fact, all communities of color today were under-organized. One East Asian organizer in the Midwest said:

*The [Asian American groups] that even know the words “racial justice” might be some of the advocacy organizations that tend to be run in major cities and tend to be run by people with more educational and other kind of privilege, and tend to be groups that don't have a base, that don't actually really work with people. And I think that's true for a lot of groups, too, even African American groups and then Latino groups... Civil rights is some kind of concept, but racial justice is not. And I think that they mean different things... So I think almost all sections of the Asian population are under-organized when it comes to racial justice... Also, the racial justice movement in general is just underwhelming right now.*

“All of the communities are under-organized!”

Another organizer in New York similarly said that while no community of color was sufficiently well organized, Asian American communities were particularly weak:

*I would imagine if you talked to the Hmong communities in Iowa or Idaho, that they would have a very different answer. But I guess based on my experiences in New York, I would say all API communities, and not just API communities, I'd say a lot of Latino and Black communities could still be organized much better... I do feel that the API community [has] been factionalized, and there's not enough work being done, I would say, overall to kind of bridge those gaps and to establish a common political identity.*

One leader of a national pan-Asian American organization declared, “All of the communities are under-organized!” She then went on to summarize some of the differences between the levels of infrastructure available for various ethnic groups, suggesting that there was at least some institutional foundation for greater racial justice organizing now in most Asian American communities:

*The Japanese American community is the most well organized because they're smaller, they've been in the country longer, they speak English, they went through not just the internment, but the push for redress. And while there were many factions who fought with each other bitterly in the fight for redress, at the end of the day, decades later, it was a unifying force for the community. So, they're probably the most well organized, and the most active.*

*The Southeast Asian community has a pretty good network of agencies that are focusing on resettlement, and over the last decade or so ... most of the people who need to be somewhere are here. They've turned their focus more to domestic issues, and so there is an infrastructure that was there that could then be turned. I think, though, that they're*



*still developing, because you have all these different ethnic groups within the Southeast Asian community, who are each struggling to be heard and have their own visibility. The Hmong community, the Vietnamese community are relatively organized, but the Laotian and the Cambodian and other communities are still trying to come together... The Hmong community is smaller. It's tribal. There were many national policy issues that they were organized around in the last decade or so, [so they] are among the most organized. But it's also a community that has the highest poverty and the highest illiteracy rate... The Vietnamese American community was very split by the opening of Vietnam—those few who are very anti-Communist and very against anyone trying to help Vietnam or engage with Vietnam, and those Vietnamese-Americans who wanted to engage...*

*The South Asian community really struggled after 9/11. We actually pulled together leaders from around the country, both local and national. It's very fragmented, and in the infrastructure, most of the community service agencies were domestic-violence groups, and they didn't have a lot of other kinds of community service agencies that help with immigration or help with English-language learning, or things that you would find in, say, the Chinese or Korean communities. They come from a region where there's historic conflict between Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, and then conflict even just within India between the different ethnic groups, Punjabi, Tamil, Hindu, so they've had a lot to overcome to organize here in the U.S., because you have to be able to put aside home-country issues ... you have to put aside the caste system and religious issues in order to organize broadly. I think that they have managed to come a long way in the decade that we've had since 9/11, but every community is struggling for resources ... not just for dollar resources, but for leadership that can actually bridge across the divides that exist...*

*So every community has their fault lines. Every community could use a lot more resources, but I think most now have some basic structures in place.*

Informants told us that there were many more Asian American social service organizations than base-building organizations. One national leader said:

*In the Southeast Asian community, you could say that there are a lot of mutual aid associations around the country, and so there are places for people can go and get services, etc. But is there organizing in the Southeast Asian community, outside of say, New Orleans? I'm not so sure... I don't know how much of that is happening in API communities across the board... When you're talking about community mobilization, or community empowerment, or organizations that bring people together, there's more of that going on in our community.*

“Do APIs understand the challenges they face as somehow particular to them, or tied up in broader structures?”

Similarly, one scholar on the West Coast said that often, Asian American organizations were focused on access to resources for their own communities, without looking at broader structural inequities:

*All API communities are under-organized for racial justice... I operate from the premise that just because a group says, "We're organizing to help Filipino veterans, or Laotian residents on housing," I don't think that that necessarily equals racial justice... That's the question that haunts API organizing now: Is it really about racial justice, or is it about an attempt to redirect what are a modest amount of resources? ...Another way to put it is, do APIs understand the challenges they face as somehow particular to them, or tied up in broader structures? And can one address the challenges that face Filipino veterans without thinking about broader questions?*

*Close your mind*

*Close your eyes*

*See with your heart*

*How do you forgive the murderer of your father?*

*The ink of a scholar*

*Is worth a thousand times more*

*Than the blood of a martyr*

*Anthrax lab on a West Virginia farm*

*Shorty ain't learned to walk*

*Already heavily armed*

*Civilians and little children is especially harmed*

*Camouflaged Torah*

*Bibles and glorious Qu'rans*

*The books that take you to heaven and let you meet the Lord there*

*Have become misinterpreted, reasons for warfare*

*We read 'em with blind eyes, I guarantee you there's more there*

*The rich must be blind, cuz they ain't see the poor there*

**— Lupe Fiasco, "American Terrorist"**

# What We're Up Against

"We're an organization that was shaped by a crisis... To be in crisis mode all the time ... while we're still building internally has been a real challenge... How do we build community as we're also fending off attacks on our communities?"

— South Asian organizer

**T**his section summarizes the broad themes in what people said about challenges. Many informants described how colorblind racism made it difficult to bring up issues of race. For Asian Americans in particular, it also deepened incentives to distance themselves from race in general. Another big theme was around a spectrum of violence that included hate crimes, criminalization, and war. Finally, there were many examples of how the economy was making everything harder, on issues including housing, jobs, education, healthcare, etc.

Beyond external structural conditions, we also heard that by and large, the racial justice movement, and Asian American leaders and communities in particular, were not up to speed in their analysis. There was a sense that there are opportunities to deepen the movement's analysis and practice, but that the lack of investment in infrastructure got in the way.

## Colorblind Racism: The Silencing of Race

Colorblind racism, the denial of race amid enduring racial inequities, was a key theme in describing challenges. As one person put it, the prevailing view is that "race is old — that's not the struggle." For Asian Americans, one national leader said the challenge was twofold: "a lot of pressure not to talk about [race] and a lot of pressure to disassociate from Blacks and Latinos."

The effect of colorblind racism — that pressure "not to talk about it" — came through in what people said about strategy. For example, one person involved in electoral organizing said:

*We can't just use race every single time, for every single message, because more often than not, it backfires.*

Another organizer explained how post-racialism got in the way of seizing strategic opportunities:

*For white consumers, launching a campaign around stolen tips is easier than around racial segregation or discrimination in the industry, because white people either feel uncomfortable talking about race or don't believe or understand that this kind of segregation or discrimination exists. So that is a primary challenge.*

This kind of silencing prevents organizers from even naming the problem. One South Asian leader described the problem this way:

*People are very scared about talking about race. You have to really think carefully about how you raise it... You can certainly raise it loudly and vociferously ... but probably you're not going to be successful. What is a strategic way to raise solutions that ultimately are taking power away from the people who hold power?*

## Under Attack: War, Criminalization and Hate Crimes

Violence was a strong theme in what people said about challenges. Informants described both state violence in the form of war and policing, and community-level violence in the form of racialized hate crimes and bullying. Some said that the root of the problem was in U.S. foreign policy and militarism. The following two quotes, both from South Asian organizers, were typical of this analysis. One South Asian organizer said:

*Islamophobia is huge right now. It's a scary time we're living in, the way the U.S. continues to expand its war in a lot of our home countries and the way it's impacting [us].*

Similarly, another said:

*Right now, because of where U.S. foreign policy is at, it's just a reality that [South Asian, Arab, and Muslim] communities are going to experience physical violence, or the threat of it, within the United States... Having families back in the countries that the U.S. is actually at war with is a huge problem... A change in foreign policy is a key agenda item... The decriminalization of undocumented people, moving away from deportation and detention systems, those are some of the key issues.*

“A change in foreign policy is a key agenda item...”

Comments about state violence addressed increasingly repressive forms of law enforcement in the name of national security. One Sikh organizer described the challenges she saw in her community<sup>1</sup>:

*The main issues are school bullying, workplace discrimination... TSA (Transportation Security Administration) screening and racial profiling at the airports.*

1. This interview took place before the deadly white supremacist shooting in Oak Creek, Wis. in August 2012.

In the area of immigration policing, one leader described how the threat of deportation kept people in fear:

*It could be the tenuousness of having LPR (Lawful Permanent Resident) status or not having any immigration status. We're still talking about over 10% of the [Asian American] population having undocumented status, and then mixed families where someone is undocumented puts the whole family in jeopardy.*

Another leader described the organizing implications of this:

*Even if you're a legal resident, there's this pervasive fear that the current security state creates in all of us that it's going to be taken away, which I think is a real damper on people's activism. There's a real, rightly grounded paranoia in API communities.*

Another informant shared this personal story to illustrate the problem of criminalization:

*The government was totally after my family ... saying ... that my little brother had offered material support to an organization that the U.S. had designated at the time as a terrorist organization. But really, what is that material support? It's having conversations with other Muslims over the Internet. It's talking. It's being a young guy who's exploring his religion... Taking photos and then sending photos is seen as material support... Is that really criminal? It becomes criminal because of the PATRIOT Act... But it's the policies that are criminalizing certain behaviors. The behavior itself is not criminal.*

The victims of Islamophobia are those who are perceived to be Muslim, which motivates some targeted groups to participate in Islamophobia. One Sikh organizer described the impact of this:

*One of the challenges that I face is the racism within our community... While we are a Sikh organization ... [that] is facing ... discrimination due to Islamophobia, because of mis-identity ... within our communities, they too are also reproducing Islamophobic sentiment. And their sentiment is, "We are not Muslim... We are the victims... We didn't do anything, but the Muslims did." ...despite the issues*



Khmer community members protesting mandatory detention and deportation. Photo by Vyreak Sovann.

*that our community are facing are so similar the ones the that Muslim community is facing... Having to really dissect the issues and be able to bring people to a common place of understanding ... is actually quite challenging, because of the way that Islamophobia has been embedded within our communities here in the States.*

The topic of school bullying also came up often. One leader of a pan-API organization said that for some Asian Americans, the threat of racialized violence was a lifelong reality:

*There's general racialized violence that our communities face, starting in school with bullying, all the way into young adulthood, [from] gang issues to hate crimes.*

“There’s a real, rightly grounded paranoia in API communities.”

## The Economy

As several of our informants noted, economic conditions were making things harder for everyone. For Asian Americans, particular issues included jobs, wage theft and work place conditions, access to services, housing, education, and health care. Responses often ran counter to mainstream ideas about Asian Americans, citing problems like eviction/gentrification, substance abuse, suicide, and domestic and state-based violence.

One leader of an Asian American organization said, “The stuff that we’re working on is around access to social services, housing, and immigration and police-violence work. We’re not working on jobs, but I feel like that’s a biggie.”

Another leader of a pan-API organization summed up the issues his members faced:

*We’re focused on ... the fast moving health-system reform that’s going to extend health care to 600,000 uninsured people in [our state], which includes 30,000-plus Asian Pacific Islanders... The budget for education particularly, and for TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families)... Locally, the biggest challenges are around the English-language learners in our public schools.”*

One organizer talked about health-care access among “female-bodied folks ... queer folks, trans folks in particular... Qualified care for us that could take into consideration cultural implications.”

On the issue of jobs, one organizer described the need to build unity and power among workers of color amid “attempts that employers try to make at dividing ... Asian Americans from Black people, or from Latino people.”

One Hmong leader described her base as “low-income communities who are the products of a capitalist economy.” For them, she said, issues of acculturation and access to resources were primary.

## Analysis: Not Up to Speed

Informants had much to say about the lack of a robust political analysis among Asian American leaders and organizations. Many argued that the basis for Asian American assertions of racial justice was too narrow or simplistic, and, at worst, counterproductive. Informants also criticized the sidelining of historical trauma, and how, left unaddressed, it impeded movement building.

One person said that the absence of a clear race analysis allowed certain Asian American organizations to assert to racial justice commitments, while in fact reinforcing the oppression of other people of color:

*When [a pan-Asian American organization] says, “We are now the second largest [and] the fastest growing minority group,” I understand, on the one hand, that’s an effort to say, “Look, we need to get resources and we need to be politically taken seriously.” But ... implicit in that is a suggestion like, “We’re here... Black concerns were important, but now there’s a new kid in town.” ...It’s an effort to assert what seems like a racial justice lens but actually is quite counterproductive in the long term.*

“Race is so embedded in all these other economic issues of global capitalism...”

This kind of confusion came through in our interviews. For example, this quote from an Asian American organizer in the South revealed a belief that racial justice organizing meant leading with one’s racial identity, not with an analysis of structural racism:

*In terms of working in the API community, it’s become much more issue-based. It’s not necessarily ... “Support Vietnamese people. Support this person ‘cause they’re Asian American.” It’s normally been much more around, “We need jobs, we need help rebuilding our house, or we need to fight this landfill or else this community isn’t going to exist anymore, or we need a plan for the future for our youth.” There is an ethnic component in all of that, but normally, it’s framed in a much broader, broader message. It’s much more issue-based than it is race-based.*

One leader of a national API organization talked about the strategic value of advancing a progressive economic analysis in the racial justice movement:

*I have not seen us have a really solid analysis ... of the structural conditions ... causing a lot of what’s happening within our communities... What folks who are studying the economy are saying are the main things... I don’t ... see that in our racial justice organizing... We put race at the top of everything, even though race is so embedded in all these other economic issues of global capitalism... What is the goal of our organizing? Is it representation? ...Or is it that we are part of this larger progressive movement that is calling for progressive transformation?*





The racialization of Asian Americans is rooted in the "us-versus-them" thinking that justifies western imperialism and war.

Several informants said that while the structural problems facing Asian American communities were deep and complex, the newness of those communities meant that their politics were still developing:

*The big issues that impact our work have to do with the big issues that are happening in the world — the development strategies that impact the countries people come from; the new policies toward managing migration that they're trying to adapt at a global level, which frame policies here; the economy — both its direct impact on our populations [but] also ... in terms of our ability to move policy reform in this kind of environment; and then the fact that immigration is still framed by national security... If there's a push on that from the right, and there is ... there's not going to be a push back...*

*It has a direct impact on our communities, the persistent racial stigmatization ... if you're Muslim/Arab/South Asian... And we're at a political impasse. To the extent that we're a community in [the] process of development — in organizing around self-awareness, common identification, political maturity, enfranchisement ... some level of political access to power — we're kind of at the edge.*

One interesting and unintentional aspect of our research was that many of our Asian American informants were not working in Asian American organizations or projects. This quote, from a South Asian organizer, provides a possible explanation:

*Moments of potential solidarity are clearer than they ever have been before to communities of color... The projects I've seen do that best are actually not API-specifically identified. [An organization working with immigrants facing deportation] does a really great job at looking at ... building that solidarity simply because of the issues they're working on. I'm not sure that I've seen API-specific organizations think critically enough about that.*

*I understand the importance of doing work that is rooted in identity politics ... because of the way we are labeled as 'other' along similar groupings, and so as a response to that, it's a natural place to start. But it's always been really intentional in a group like ... [a South*

*Asian organization] to push beyond that, and to not say, “This a project for South Asians to talk about the South Asian community.” That’s not enough, and that’s not going to lead to justice.*

*More people need to get smart about having an analysis... Yes, we are identified as Asian Americans, and we see ourselves in each other because of the response to racism, but how can we push past that to actually have a political analysis and a political ideology? ...I think it’s great to be queer and South Asian together; I like parties as much as anyone, but I guess my question at the end of the day is, what’s the purpose beyond having a community through which we can have friendships and feel safe, which is important? What are we structurally pushing back against in our gatherings? And if the answer is nothing, those are not groups that I want to be spending my time organizing with.*

*We saw it after 9/11. If we don’t have the backs of Black and Latino people who are criminalized and targeted by our institutions, it was often times other people of color who were committing violence against us... It’s one thing for us to point the finger ... but I think we have to ask ourselves well, where we all these years in moments of what should have been solidarity? We were often playing into oppression, if not directly oppressing those same communities. I think that’s a serious barrier to promoting true social justice within our communities. We have to raise consciousness about these issues, and then we have to make commitments to work against these oppressions, and understand how our liberation cannot just be within API community if it’s going to work. It has to be beyond that where it’s all people of color.*

“It’s a different world in a lot of ways, more complexities.”

Several people mentioned the issue of immigration as an opportunity to lift up the complexities of white supremacy. However, people said that there were varying levels of analysis among immigrant rights organizations. Some said that often, immigrant rights organizers address injustice based on immigration status without ever talking about race. One leader said this:

*We have a member organization ... which has done racial justice work ... for years. They’ve challenged racist laws at the state level and locally, across the board... And then there are newer groups like in North Carolina where people are scattered, new Latino populations in rural environments, and there’s a lot of racial discrimination going on... The perception is probably that it’s more immigration-based, but probably it’s more racially based. So the capacity to identify that, and then organize... It’s a different world in a lot of ways, more complexities.*

Likewise, one leader of a national Asian American organization described the lack of analysis and language among first-generation Asian Americans that connects race to immigration issues:

*We know that we're being treated differently... We have been conditioned to believe that the reason why ... is because we're immigrants. That's different from being treated differently because you're Black —that's racist. But being treated differently because you're immigrants is a condition of ... people's perception of your immigration status, and somehow ... that's not racist. We never created those intellectual vocabulary connections, and because [of that], then our people, including those of us who are leaders, haven't had the luxury of emotionally projecting those kind of intellectual concepts or experiences in order to call it for what it is.*

In terms of intersectionality, one activist recalled the challenges that came up during a youth-organizing project he was involved with:

*Routinely, the fight would come up on grounds of sexuality, because we were always emphasizing questions of race, even gender, and not considering questions of sexuality. It was outside our framework, and when it was brought up to the people who were running the training schools, the initial reaction was of course defensiveness, and then a little hostility.*

*That's a big problem... We've got to create the broadest planks, but have the greatest sensitivity to the special cuts that will be there.*

Gender and sexuality were strong subthemes of intersectionality, often discussed in the context of Asian American cultural norms. One person described it this way:

*A lot of API communities are very family-based... It can be an amazing thing, but it can also make it really hard for someone who is coming out, or someone who is thinking in a different way about how they fit in... How do you end that silence?*

This person recalled how this challenge came up during a gathering of immigrants and refugees:

*People felt that they couldn't be Muslim and queer, and I think that's true for other folks as well... In the API community, religion is an important part of the experience, and becomes even more ingrained when you immigrate.*

Yet another person at a pan-API organization said that her organization would not see gender justice as being a part of economic justice, even though she absolutely did:

*We have not fully evolved as a community... I would have to personally push for it and it would be seen as ... my personal pet project. They don't really embrace that that would be good for the community at-large ... that that is actually an equity agenda, that you must have a gender analysis to achieve economic justice. The amount of time and energy that I would have had to spend, they would have fired me if I kept pushing that agenda...*

“You must have a gender analysis to achieve economic justice.”

She went on to describe the implications of this in creating more work for activists:

*It's those choices you have to make... I have to pick whether I go to the women's financial justice ... roundtable or the people of color one. ...We have to make those choices because we can't be in all of those places... We're just not quite there yet on the national level... It pains me deeply... Our ability to actually execute on [gender justice] has been very difficult. I mean that's your typical women of color dilemma, right?*

This connection between the lack of intersectionality and the existence of separate identity-based organizations also came up in a different way. One queer Southeast Asian organizer said that the widespread lack of analysis around race, gender and sexuality, made it necessary for the most marginalized constituencies to organize on their own:

*[We] need to be heard. That space needed to be created... That capacity and development ... needs to be supported... We are a very small organization, so the capacity to raise funds is very limited, and there's a lot of barriers... Because we're not a 501(c)3, we don't have access to big foundations or a bigger pool of money, and we aren't as connected to people with deep pockets... Those are usually white, rich, gay men.*

“People burn themselves out in one, two, three years and then never return...”

Several people talked about trauma, including one Korean American organizer who described the need for healing and resiliency in the racial justice movement:

*The racial justice work that is being done, it's so informed by a place of trauma... We spend so much time thinking about what ... we're fighting against. I don't think we take as much time thinking about what we are fighting for...*

*I see how trauma plays out—trauma from genocide ... from ... [being] pushed out of communities, or out of our countries ... or out of our families—within not just our work ... but also our communities... People [leave] organizations because they've had personal things that happened between them and somebody else... “I can't go to the meetings anymore because we got into a fight...” These things that never get talked about ... totally impact our movement all the time. Besides burnout ... figuring out how to build resiliency and healing so we can be more sustainable. Those things are huge.*

This same person noted that while state violence was seen as a legitimate racial justice issue, the trauma resulting from such violence was not. On the topic of burnout, one Filipino organizer and artist saw it as a byproduct of consumerism:

*A lot of people burn themselves out in one, two, three years and then never return... The whole consumerist lifestyle that we're surrounded by and participate in here manifests itself in the way we organize — wanting immediate change, and if it doesn't happen, then we tell ourselves, “Change isn't going to happen, so I might as well not even try.”*

*Even the relationships that we make with other people are like, “Oh, my phone broke. Let me throw it away and get a new one... I had an argument with a fellow organizer ... F\*\*k ‘em, I’m going to another organization.” ...If we really saw it as protracted, we would do everything we can to take care of ourselves and each other.*

One informant, a South Asian organizer, said that historical trauma among Asian Americans held potential for building interracial solidarity, but that this required political education:

*To translate our own political tragedies and histories and hurts into a sense of solidarity with people that are really different than us, and a kind of respect that can only come when you have access to a whole bunch of information about what other groups have gone through ... [requires] time and attention ... Political consciousness-raising ... is really crucial, specifically around race and the economy...*

Without a shared analysis, it becomes hard to discern what the racial justice movement should be doing, which makes evaluating progress nearly impossible.

One leader of a capacity-building organization described this problem:

*Is it simply coloring up a standard evaluation metric, to be crass? Is it basically how many people of color came to your leadership programs? ...Is there a set of skills ... around racial justice? If a campaign wins, but it doesn’t name and frame race, is that a racial justice win? I don’t know... There are some questions ... that are challenging to the field.*

One organizer said that rigid ideological constraints prevented the racial justice movement from exploring new kinds of problem solving approaches, by excluding people who don’t conform to ideology.

*The sharpest minds are not always people who have much ideology... If we’re not pragmatic, then we don’t get them... We’re a bunch of ideologues in a box, and that’s not the best place to be... We need new thinking... In the hard sciences, like ... statisticians or engineers ... they just have a different kind of logic than ideologues do... [The] synergy of ideas and different forms of thinking and problem solving — we don’t have that.*

“ If a campaign wins, but it doesn’t name and frame race, is that a racial justice win? ”

# Electoral Organizing: Missed Opportunities

There were several quotes about how the challenges facing the racial justice movement led to missed opportunities, particularly in the realm of building electoral power for people of color:

The redistricting fight was a great, great, great moment in time. The Census came out, we all knew that state legislators were going to go and make terrible decisions potentially, and that given the dynamics of the elections in 2010, there was going to be a lot of Republican push... It was a moment that was completely underfunded and under-organized, because ... that conversation is so controlled by the parties and because communities of color are not engaged in the party structure... In our region ... some of the groups ... tried to do some really good work. But we simply were not ahead of the curve enough... That was an incredible strategic opportunity to talk about consolidating power for people of color, [but] by and, large most of us were not able to do anything to move the conversation.

— Asian American trainer

I want to mention the 2008 election as a missed opportunity... There was a polarization within the progressive community between, "We must support this campaign," and ... "F\*\*k that sh\*t. It doesn't matter what color the president is. This sh\*t ain't going to change."

To me ... that wasn't the way I felt. It needed to be a very calculated [assessment of] a historical opportunity to not isolate ourselves... I felt that the whole, "F\*\*k-this-election-no-matter-what" kind of thing I was hearing on one side of my ear, it was an incorrect action based on a correct analysis. But then those who [got involved], a lot of them alluded to ... a progressive, even militant analysis of race ... for the sake of this one moment, which is the exact opposite. It's a correct action, building alliances and mobilizing, based on an incorrect analysis, believing that something was going to happen out of that.

There was a missed opportunity to strategize on the historic moment ... to assert ... like, "Let's participate in this but, at the same time, plant the seeds for what we know will eventually happen," which is what did happen... The real change that everyone hoped for [did not] come... When that starts happening and people become disillusioned ... we should still be present.

— Asian American hip hop artist

## Electoral Organizing: Missed Opportunities, continued

The economic downturn and the broad public debate about the deficit and what kind of country we want to see, that is where I think [we] should be spending all our time, but we can't... Really getting the word out to our communities—"What kind of society do we want to be? What brought you here to this country? What are those values? And, are you sure you want to vote for those Republicans? If you're really that unhappy about pocketbook issues, I actually don't think so."

...A broader framing around deficit and taxes and investments in our community ... we still don't have good language to get those messages out... We are in a teachable moment if we've ever been in one before about what kind of country we want to be.

I think that the reason why we don't have enough political power is that APIs are 50/50 Republican and Democrat, so it's not worth the investment, even though we've been given evidence that we're the swing vote, you know, all that. People just still don't really believe it.

— **National Asian American leader**

There's a lot of opportunity to reach out to people of color to run for office, but no one is doing that work... There's no one reaching out actively ... and when people of color do run, they don't have a support network... They don't have access to training or access to the money or the political network. That's one thing I wish we could spend a lot more time on...

One of the things that we criticize the Democrats for is that they'll go into a community two months before an election and pour in resources, and then they pull out. We want to have relationships year-round. We want to engage people so that we're meeting their needs, not just ours... We were lucky to be able to hire [staff] for two years, but that's two years. All this work needs to be continuing... Doing the long-term field organizing and leadership development [is] also going to require staff. It's going to require funding to be successful. I think that's where we get stuck.

— **Local Asian American organizer**

## Infrastructure & Capacity: Not Up to Scale

Not surprisingly, there was broad agreement that the racial justice field overall suffers from inadequate infrastructure and capacity. Some typical quotes on this theme include the following:

*We don't have tried-and-true strategies to say, "Oh, if we do A, B and C, then we're going to get racial justice." ...It's not an easy thing that has a beginning and an end, like a regular campaign...*

*The enormity of the issues is a huge barrier, because it feels like you're tackling these things that are so ... institutional, structural, systemic and it requires a long time.*

*We need ... the space to develop real strategies, to try stuff and lose ... to actually really build something... Most foundations are not going to invest in that. They want the campaign the first year... When you're focusing on winning, you're not necessarily focusing on building... It's going to take a lot of failing and a lot of bringing new people into the field ... to build anything to scale.*

“ We can't be the progressive voice for everything, especially when our own members aren't even necessarily all the way there yet... ”

For those who are committed to interracialism, the weakness and lack of investment characterizing the overall movement create challenges beyond just Asian American communities. One Bay Area Asian American organizer said this:

*I feel very awkward in saying this but in the African American community ... there's not really ... progressive leadership. It's dominated a lot by the churches, leadership in these other sectors... We want to build relationships — multiracial, multi-ethnic, intergenerational leadership. We got a lot of work to do.*

On the question of racial justice work specifically in Asian American communities, one national leader said, “I'm hard-pressed to think of any [groups] that are sufficiently mobilized and supported for organizing, quite honestly.”

All communities of color are under-resourced, but the manipulation of Asian American identity to reinforce racist thinking, and the real ideological fault lines in Asian American communities, make it critical to have visible Asian American support in racial justice fights. Without this, assertions of Asian American complicity remain unchallenged. One organizer described how this affected her organization:

*Some [Asian American] person came out in support of [a racist law]... It was just like, oh, God. If no one else says anything, it's just going to look like Asian people are racist and f\*\*ked up and agree with this stuff!*



She went on to describe the strain that this created on her organization's capacity:

*If there's going to be a progressive view ... [it's going to be us] saying it... That's led to just craziness, because we can't be the progressive voice for everything, especially when our own members aren't even necessarily all the way there yet...*

Some informants said that the urgent need for service delivery for Asian American communities got in the way of building a greater presence in the racial justice movement:

*Everyone is bogged down in just providing the basic services for the people, and they don't have time to talk about, "Oh, how do we deal with racial justice? How do we deal with advocacy on that level?" We don't have that capacity yet... It's talked about, it's considered, but it is not necessarily implemented.*

One person described how refugee communities faced urgent, basic needs, and often relied on service organizations that actively avoided racial justice issues:

*We were working with [the] Burmese refugee community ... and one of the leaders, who's amazing ... he really gets it. He's been tortured, imprisoned... But they're so caught up in the struggles of being fed and being clothed, that they barely have time to do political education... And the social service agencies that dominate our services to API communities, they are super reluctant, if not outright resistant, to addressing racial justice.*

The challenge of capacity is even greater for those in the most marginalized Asian American communities. One queer Asian American organizer said:



Photo by Vyreak Sovann.

*We do not have the resources, the cash, to support the staff to address [what] we need to address... We get pulled into a lot of coalitions... We get asked by a number of studies, foundations, philanthropic organizations nationally to participate in interviews to talk about racial justice. That takes time...*

*When we do try to vie for support ... we are held to the same standard as the major players... Can we design*

*deliverables and policies in the same way they do? We do not have a staff of 50 people, yet we are instructed that in order to become competitive for those grants, we need to have a staff of 50 people! ...There is a reason why I have been around for 15 years and have been involved in four prior conversations on developing a national queer Asian group... There isn't the resources to ... sustain that work, so it falls apart.*

Similarly, one queer Muslim organizer said:

*It's so crazy... Every other month, there's something we need to write about or mobilize against as best as we can. But ... we just don't have the resources. There's no dedicated staff person. All of us are working or in school... There's so much that we can be doing ... to provide support to folks that are coming out or feeling really isolated, being present out there in the movement ... but we're really struggling right now in terms of our own capacity... It's hard not to get burned out.*

For communities targeted by post-9/11 racial profiling, the impacts of the economic crisis are exacerbated by the ongoing need to fend off attacks:

*The needs, like in any other community, are actually higher after the economic crisis — and within the South Asian community especially, because of the extra layer of how foreign policy has made other needs happen in our communities... Funding is less available across the board for everyone, and so things are just getting harder.*

Some interviews also revealed the importance of geography. Communities of color that are smaller and more isolated face the basic challenges of inclusion and representation in progressive organizations. One organizer in the South said:

*The Executive Director sat me down and said, "Look... Could you sit down and write me a contact sheet list of all the Asians, prominent Asians that we know?" I asked, "Why am I doing that?" And he said, "Well, if something arises, something that may impact them, then we know who to reach out to." ...It really wasn't about relationship building... It was more like, "We just need to be in touch when we need to be in touch."*

*We also have many Black immigrants here and you'll have one person on the board... Even though a third of the population here that's immigrant is from the Caribbean, you'll see ... one Haitian person who's a staff person at a community meeting... There's no women in the Asian community here ... that attend ... racial justice meetings ... nor are these organizations really reaching out to them.*

“The social service agencies that dominate our services to API communities, they are super reluctant, if not outright resistant, to addressing racial justice.”

## Surviving Burnout

We also heard how insufficient infrastructure made it difficult for such organizations to survive burnout and turnover. One person gave this example:

*There was a real lack of infrastructure. It was about this one person... When he left, it just couldn't make it to the next level... It's a lot about building capacity of ... queer folks of color to be able to lead organizations, to be able to expand those organizations, to have a sustained presence.*

One national leader said that the lack of understanding about Asian American communities made it difficult to make the case for investing in racial justice organizing in those communities. This, in turn, made it hard for those communities to be part of the broader racial justice movement:

*It's an extremely abysmal amount of funding that goes toward this work when it comes to foundations... There's not enough funding or support or training or resources... I think there's a lack of understanding about our communities generally... All of those challenges are really difficult ... when you're thinking about being part of a broader movement.*

One South Asian activist said that foundation dependency prevented the kind of capacity needed to seize strategic organizing opportunities:

*The two big places where I think we are really not able to control the conversation ... Islamophobia ... the attack on Muslims. It will come again when the tenth anniversary of 9/11 comes. That's one. The second thing I think we just lost the plot on is these vast populations that have been dispossessed... Lots of cities are being destroyed, people are being abandoned... More than a community organization organizing small protests, I have not seen a mass reclaiming of a city yet... That's where the capacity should go [but] we are held back by foundations. They audit this, report that ... so many young minds brutalized by bureaucracy.*

“ We are held back by foundations. They audit this, report that ... so many young minds brutalized by bureaucracy. ”

## The Need for Mass Base-Building

Several people talked about the need for racial justice organizations to achieve mass scale in order to build and exert power. One organizer said, “Communities that aren't at a critical mass or scale ... just become less important.” He went on to describe a potential new organizing project in the Vietnamese community, but said, “It's very dependent on staff and resources, and I don't know where those resources will come from. I don't see a major emphasis on API communities in the foundation world.”

One South Asian organizer said this about the need to scale up:

*When [Marcus Garvey] organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association, he had a base of ... five million people with no Twitter ... and a newspaper in three languages on two continents! ...He was nuts, but he also organized the biggest Black organization ever in the 1920s...*

*We're not able to organize even close to scale in any of our communities... We just haven't figured that out. Our organizations ... the majority of them have fifty members, and reach out to maybe a thousand, if they're really freaking lucky.*

## Lack of Political Education Tools

The need for greater capacity to facilitate political education within Asian American communities came up as a critical need. One West Coast organizer said:

*How do we have those conversations? How are they facilitated? What can we talk about? How do we talk about it? That's a big challenge: [doing] it in a way that respects where our community's at and also pushes them to think more forward.*

Likewise, another person said:

*It is just having the resources to engage in this conversation, to be able to talk about it in college, talk about it in high school, talk about it in a structured community setting with a facilitator and some sense of, like, progress...*

Another organizer described the need for in-language political education:

*We keep wanting to have stuff translated ... tools to help educate folks about U.S. history ... more multimedia stuff, like a [subtitled] Malcolm X speech... It's just much more powerful when people can see images... We print out black-and-white photos from our printer; that's as lively as it gets... Having some of those media tools would be useful ... condensed, concise analysis*



The United States continues to wage war in the name of "freedom" and "democracy." Political cartoon by Carlos Latuff.

*that ... can break down ... how the API concept and community is often used by the white power structure to try to ... justify racial hierarchies... There's no one doing that work.*

One person described the challenge of finding people with language skills to communicate complicated political ideas, calling it “a huge logistical challenge”:

*There are so few people with bilingual language capacities ... able to communicate complex ideas back and forth... I have the language skills of a 12-year-old ... so it's really limiting in terms of how deep you can actually go.*

Likewise, this person described the challenge of language diversity within Asian American communities:

*You can't just learn one language and have that apply to all the different API groups... If you speak the language, you're more able to communicate with the communities that you're supposed to be learning about and working with. That's just ... a more difficult process with APIs.*

*If you look at our organizing model and membership that's built up over the last two-and-a-half years, it's largely Latino in spite of all our history in other communities. There is this sense of revolution that seems to be much more dominant, prevalent... I talked a lot to our organizing director who's from El Salvador about this and he posits there's a real difference between an immigrant and a refugee. A lot of Asians came over as refugees, I don't know how much that has to do with it, but there's a different mentality that makes it a lot harder to organize and to have a racial justice lens to the work that we do. We have to tread much much more carefully.*

*Globalization is the root of the pain  
Made the reason that they left and the reason that we came*

*Catch my breath, blood pulsates my brain*

*And they called it a riot?  
Huh, I call it a uprising...*

*And they call this a riot?  
Nah, I call it a uprising*

*And they call this a riot?  
Nah man, f\*\*k that, I'm a call it a uprising*

*50,000 deep  
And it sound like thunder when our feet pound streets...*

**— Blue Scholars, "50K Deep"**

# The Way Forward

“Building collective power is just what succeeds.”

— South Asian organizer

**T**here are big challenges facing Asian Americans in the racial justice movement, but this much is clear: In responding to our own racial traumas — from war, displacement, state violence, alienation — we have the *potential* to open up more space for the overall movement to contest white supremacy. But there are also serious pitfalls — that trinity of racial bribes that white supremacy depends on. For example, when we demand culturally appropriate services as a racial justice issue, but it results in funding service providers that distance themselves from race, that’s a big problem. In this section, we begin to sketch out a way forward, but these are broad strokes. We hope it will lead to more conversations, the difficult ones we need to have, to build the authentically antiracist politics that so many of us yearn for.

## Contesting White Supremacy: New Thinking, New Language, Real Relationships & Stronger Organizing

Asian Americans today have a historic opportunity to contribute to the racial justice movement by illustrating the impacts of American Empire, both within and beyond U.S. borders. The continued expansion of criminalization, which is permanently rooted in anti-Black racism, increasingly relies on national-security rationales, which are permanently rooted in imperialism and war. This presents both a need and an opportunity to sharpen our understanding of the full force of white supremacy today.

In our introduction, we argued for the need to unite people within and across lines of structural disadvantage. The most marginalized Asian American groups include poor and working-class, first-generation immigrants and refugees; those communities experiencing criminalization; and LGBT people. But organizers within these communities seeking to build interracial solidarity face serious barriers. These include widespread misunderstanding within the racial justice movement of who Asian Americans are and entrenched insularity and race-denial among certain Asian American organizations. The roots of both are in white supremacy — its manipulation of the idea of Asian Americans, and its enticement to participate in anti-Black racism.

Overcoming barriers to solidarity demands new language to talk about Asian American identity, one that reflects authentic experiences with war, displacement and migration, criminalization, racialized violence, and poverty. There is a need to tell more stories of these experiences, and to make Asian American resistance more visible. In addition, the movement needs more ways to build genuine relationships among the most dispossessed people of color, to amass an experiential, and not just theoretical, basis for solidarity. One way to approach this is through conversations about historical trauma and resilience — as one person put it, “to translate our own political tragedies and histories and hurts into a sense of solidarity.”

One East Asian organizer said:

*We talk about different social movements, and how people have fought for justice in the past ... about slavery and Jim Crow and the work that led us to the Civil Rights Movement... We do exchanges with other organizations a lot, and seeing people who have gone through the same experience ... those are the things that have gotten people to think more, to move beyond empathy to putting faces to stories and to the campaigns that we're doing.*

There is a disturbing lack of race-consciousness in conversations about immigration. Immigrant rights advocates typically frame demands using language about the American Dream, often exploiting civil rights rhetoric while actually diminishing political space for African American liberation, lifting up images of “deserving” immigrants, for example. Race-conscious Asian American organizers want to change that conversation, to talk about immigration in the context of white supremacy. The opportunity to do this lies in centering the most vulnerable immigrants, naming the forces behind their displacement, and placing their experiences with discrimination squarely in the context of race. One national leader recalled one attempt to do this:

*In the Southeast, it was the first time [immigrants] talked about racism with African Americans. It was like, geez! Or the first time African American organizations had talked with a larger group of diverse immigrants. And it was amazing. It was great. It was like, wow, we really need to do this.*

The entrenchment of Asian American insularity and the “pressure to disassociate from Blacks and Latinos” demands intervention. We heard that today, unlike three decades ago, there is some level of infrastructure in most Asian American communities. Much of it revolves around service delivery and mutual aid, but as economic conditions worsen, there may be soft entry points to talk about race and the economy. We should seek such openings, and test culturally specific political education tools to build greater race-consciousness within these organizations and communities. One national leader described a “vocabulary gap”:

*It was a struggle to get even these community leaders and organizational leaders to articulate what race or racism was for them... They were saying no, that they don't personally experience racism, that their family has not experienced racism, that their community doesn't experience racism. But then as we get deeper into the conversation, they will start to disclose incidents that ... we would definitely see as being racially based. Yet they would [see it] as an example of community conflict or cultural conflict... We know that we experience differential treatment because of the way we look, because of the food that we eat, because of our cultural practices or our religious practices. But there's a gap between experiencing that and having a vocabulary to attach to it to say that's racist.*

Building the ranks of Asian Americans in the racial justice movement requires much greater language capacity. We need more people who can break down complex ideas in languages and terms that Asian immigrants and refugees can understand. There are also huge needs around data and research — both community-based research that tells more truthful stories about who



Asian Americans are, and data collection that documents the impacts of structural racism in Asian communities. The two areas where data collection came up most urgently were in criminal justice and hate crimes — both of which have the potential to draw connections between anti-Black racism and Orientalism.

## Working It Out

“Have difficult conversations. Be transparent with each other. Build trust. Speak truth.”

— **Asian American community organizer**

“We’re being so isolated every day by the state... We have so many things between us that we never get to talk about, because we’re always busy getting distracted by white supremacy that we don’t have time to work out the stuff between ourselves. Every single time there’s any multiracial organizing ... people are like, “There’s so much we have to work out...” but we never even get the chance to. I feel that kind of work is so key within API communities, let alone us moving outside “API.” We have so much to work out.”

— **Asian American cultural organizer**

Our research revealed a need for three kinds of networks:

### I. Building Asian American Race Politics

“These are complicated things. Privilege doesn’t mean that you’re not being subjugated in some ways.”

— **South Asian scholar**

Many people are hungry to build a more progressive, antiracist Asian American politics, and see this as a requirement for building interracial solidarity with other people of color. Organizers and leaders want and need to engage in honest and critical dialogue, to surface and address the tensions in our ideological and experiential differences. As part of building political alignment, we also heard the need for those who are pushing within their own communities to find space for support and problem solving.

One organizer described attempts to do this in one local base-building organization:

*We’ve created these spaces ... with our members trying to build grassroots solidarity and support each other in this work... It’s really hard to keep it going on top of everything else, but it’s been really powerful ... space to troubleshoot all of the crap that we deal with being ... the outcasts in our own ethnic communities ... and figuring out how we negotiate being relevant, leading with our politics still, and building a base at the same time.*

One tension is the potential for those Asian Americans with class privilege to undermine broader racial justice goals:

*There's a lot of interesting self-organizing happening among higher skilled immigrants, largely Asian and South Asian community... It made me queasy about making sure their analysis didn't mean, "This is for ourselves, the hell with the rest of the immigrant community." I haven't seen that happen yet, but those tensions are there, especially the more frustrated they get about not getting a path to permanent legal status...*

There is also a need to undo the damage of colonization in order to build a shared racial identity:

*With our own communities, we have major challenges in just bringing together Bangladeshis and Pakistanis and Indians and Hindus with Muslims ... because of the history of racial disunity since colonial times in South Asian subcontinents. So there's a lot to undo there...*

## II. Developing Ethnic-Specific Political Education Tools

Organizers working in specific Asian American ethnic communities who are working to build an understanding of race within their base need more support to develop political education tools. Some of this work is already happening, but it's unfunded and tenuous. One person described what these efforts looked like in her organization:

*People are much more easily able to grasp class and what's happening with who's controlling the economy, who's benefiting, what's up with that... For low-income people, they get it pretty immediately, and they also get as immigrants, they have the ... short end of the stick. So moving from that to really look at how, not just APIs ... but other communities of color are in the same boat as us, has been one way to engage it.*

## III. Building Movement Analysis and Strategy

Beyond the need for an antiracist Asian American politics, organizers need to think and strategize outside of funding constraints, within and across issue areas and sectors. We heard a desire to build a deeper and more robust analysis of current conditions, to address colorblind racism, and to come up with more expansive strategies.

*The work is most successful if there's a cohort or network of groups that do this together at the same time. It's just way more inspiring... You can share knowledge and resources... The fact that each community has to do it for themselves is such a heavy lift ... unless some sort of super champion does it, and then it probably burns them out... Thinking about how we can collectivize the work across regions or states ... would be a capacity piece.*

*Those organizations that are doing organizing in the social/economic justice field are so overwhelmed and under-resourced... We know it takes deliberate work to build ...*

*relationships for bigger campaigns and coalitions, and oftentimes we just don't have the capacity... We come together much more tactically than strategically... We don't have that space ... where relationships can be built more deliberately.*

## Agitating Asian Americans

Organizers are already seizing emerging opportunities to build greater race consciousness among particular groups of Asian Americans, but we need more of it. These groups include low-income first-generation immigrants and refugees, low-wage workers, those experiencing criminalization, youth, and LGBT people. Here's what informants said about opportunities to agitate and politicize Asian Americans to support racial justice, and some real-life examples of what it could look like:

### \* Worker-centered organizing

*All good organizing means starting with people on the issues that they care about most, agitating them on the issues they are angriest about, and then bringing them into a movement that helps them develop a larger analysis.*

*So I will give you an example: We have a Korean American member from DC ... who joined because he was really mad, because he didn't have paid sick leave... He contracted H1N1 serving customers with the virus, and that made him really mad. And that is what attracted him to the organization, to fight for paid sick leave for restaurant workers.*

*But once he got in, he went through a lot of political education. He became a leader in the organization. He started to come to workshops that we do on structural racism and racial segregation in the industry. He developed a real analysis around it and now he's been elected to our national board of directors. He is someone who came in for another issue, something that made him mad. And maybe inside, in the back of his mind, he knew that that was somehow connected to race, but he didn't have the analysis to connect the dots. So we helped him develop that, and now he can talk about that himself.*

Organizers need to think and strategize outside of funding constraints, within and across issue areas and sectors.

### \* Finding a cultural basis for racial justice

*It's important to just be very up-front about the fact that we're addressing these issues because we look different... When you're different, and you're discriminated against... Sikhs are not the only group that experiences that ... the LGBT group experiences that ... Jewish Americans experience that; African American organizations and other Asian American groups ... are*

*treated differently... So instead of doing silo work ... even though some policies uniquely impact Sikhs ... we have very much have gone to alliance building and working with other organizations.*

*Culturally we're ... from the state of Punjab, which is in Northern India, and then religiously we're Sikh. And in the Sikh scriptures, it basically states everyone's equal. You don't treat men and women differently. But unfortunately, the Punjabi culture comes from India where castes exist, and gender bias exists, so those things have kind of been transported to the diaspora too. So we're ... struggling with being both Punjabi and Sikh, because sometimes those are conflicting messages... The youth movement is having a really hard time with that, because we're being raised with these conflicting messages. Sometimes it's hard to stand up for something if you don't really know where it's coming from. Personally ... I definitely value the sense of unity amongst all people. It doesn't matter what group you're from... When you get to that level, you definitely just believe in civil rights for all and human rights, and I think it's easier to not feel conflicted between the culture and the religion.*

### **\* Finding a historical basis for racial justice**

*There's lots of examples of that ... the Chinese Exclusion Act ... [was] a history of exclusion... There's points of convergence, historically. And then to talk about, when you think about the future, what your hopes and dreams are. They're fundamentally bound up with the values, I think, of inclusion and democracy and opportunity. And the only way that we'll be able to achieve those is if racial justice is at the center of it... There are different ways of communicating that message that speak directly to the concerns and the hopes of Asians.*

### **\* Organizing young people**

*I would probably start free summer schools for youth throughout the country using some kind of centralized curriculum that can be tailored... There isn't a key, centralized collective through which people can put together at least a skeleton of a curriculum and then tailor it, so people are just reinventing the wheel and doing triple and quadruple the amount of work. One of the ideas ... is to ... be able to gather all these curricula, put them together and put them back out, so that we could have projects happening in more cities... Imagine if we could do that throughout all API communities and have those dialogues with each other and have some kind of national framework. That's one thing I would do if I had unlimited resources... There's a lot of potential for politicizing our young people and giving them the tools to do some pretty cool organizing.*

## \* Communicating with our people

*A lot of the work being done by these national organizations ... they are very much focused on internet-based information... But a lot of Sikh Americans, the older generation and immigrants, don't access the internet, so ... they have to [go] to the Gurdwaras ... and provide the information to them face-to-face... The other thing [that] works well in our community is Punjabi-language radio stations and Punjabi-language newspapers, which are in every household across the country now. If you speak Punjabi, if your parents speak it, they are probably going to have these newspapers or access to the radio.*

*We recently started a progressive Sikh blog ... and it's been very successful. It's pretty well read... It makes people even question their own actions. They may not think that their actions are leading to gender bias or enhancing the caste system within the community, but when we have these discussions, I think it makes people think... Then we have a lot of conferences... I think we're doing a better job of creating spaces to have those discussions.*



*There's so many institutions in our community that aren't really plugged into a racial justice lens because we're missing ... stuff that builds streams of consciousness... It's music or movies or speeches... There's a big disconnect between those institutions and the stream of consciousness that enables a racial justice lens to take hold in our communities.*

## Beyond the Nonprofit Sector

"The space to develop real strategies, to try stuff and lose ... foundations are not going to invest in that."

— Asian American organizer

While there are nonprofit organizations doing critical and effective work, there is also a need to build capacity beyond the sector in order to take risks try new ideas. While many people described this problem, there were few concrete ideas for addressing it. Organizing in high school and college campuses came up in the context of youth organizing, and religious institutions were mentioned frequently as important organizations in South Asian communities. Some people described the informal or unincorporated organizations they were working in, but it was usually in the context of how difficult it was to sustain them. By and large, they were functioning like nonprofits, but without funding.

Here's what some people said:

*We have so many ideas ... and don't have the funds or the capacity to make it happen... We are talking ... about developing an iPhone app to [let people] know what [businesses] are segregating or discriminating. We are trying to develop a ... social networking site,*

*so we can actually initiate conversations ... People ... who use these tools are younger and more open to these issues... There is a lot of opportunity for online and technology to help us advance the issue of racial justice. Like an app costs \$100k to develop and a social networking site costs about the same.*



*There are all sorts of questions for us to be asking ourselves ... about the utility of [nonprofits] as our only organizing mechanism... We need to think smarter about how we actually make grassroots organizing happen, especially after the financial crisis... Foundations are not projected to make a recovery until 2015 at the earliest. So we need to make sure that our work is still continuing, and not grant-dependent...*



*With the environmental justice movement, before the foundations came in ... there was wonderful, very powerful multiracial, multi-ethnic solidarity leadership ... fighting the corporations and holding them accountable to the toxic legacies of pollution and poverty in our communities. Then funding came in ... [and we saw] the downgrading of attention towards dismantling environmental racism, and a shift towards ... like, let's make green jobs for all ... leaving behind more of the civil rights, anti-corporate, and corporate accountability that is needed.*



*Organizations don't work together unless there is a strategic reason and/or it was in their grant report... The deliverables heavily affect what kind of work organizations do ... and ... that makes us super, super shortsighted... There are a lot of really great opportunities in what folks are doing outside the nonprofit [sector]... Working in alliance and working culturally ... is seen as, "Will it push this specific issue campaign forward?" as opposed to the bigger picture of working together, which might not have a deliverable yet, because it might be too far out.*



*There are people who can break down racial inequalities day in and day out, but they don't have a justice framework... They're not thinking about how to center those who are most vulnerable... You don't have to get a nonprofit degree or work in a 501(c)3 to be smart ... which I think is so, so important when we're talking about racial justice... [This one group is] not a 501(c)3, but they're certainly building community and building ... politicized relationships ... and doing political work. They're also doing consciousness raising, showing up at protests, collaborating with other folks... They're not necessarily, though ... going to get large grants.*



*I don't think that you have to be a c3 to do this work necessarily. I think students on a college campus can do racial equity work. I think a tenants association can do racial justice work. I don't think that you necessarily have to be a c3. And I think that it's really important, again, when individual people who are affected are building their power. That is so much more powerful than having an organization that's doing that. I think all of it has to happen together.*

# Terms and Definitions

**Race** is a political idea that classifies humanity into false categories in order to justify white supremacy. Race was used to resolve the fundamental contradiction between founding American ideas like freedom and equality on the one hand, and the use of slavery, genocide, and the exploitation of non-European people to build the U.S. economy and political structure on the other. Racial categories and their assigned traits shift over time and geography. They are defined not by science, but by laws, culture, ideas, and practices. Racism is the cumulative impact over time of systems and institutions that have used race to perpetuate white supremacy. Racial politics is the exploitation of race through political means either to reproduce or to challenge the status quo.

**White supremacy** is the ideology that supports racism. According to Native scholar Andrea Smith, white supremacy relies on various interconnected forms of racial logic that justify systems of capitalism, colonization, and war. The logic of slavery, the idea that Black people are inherently slaveable, supports the system of capitalism by treating Black bodies as property. The logic of genocide supports the system of colonization, mandating the disappearance of indigenous peoples in order to make way for non-indigenous settlerism. The logic of Orientalism supports the system of war by viewing certain people and nations as permanent threats to the project of Western empire. Peoples of color are both oppressed by white supremacy, and are participants in it.

**Asian American** is a term that was embraced by activists in the 1960s as an alternative to the term "Oriental." The Orient is a concept born of Western imperialism, and Orientalism is a worldview that justifies the subjugation and exploitation of non-Western people, their land, and their resources. Orientalism views the Orient as inferior, exotic, and threatening. Activists chose the term Asian American as a rejection of colonization, war, and racism. Historian Yuji Ichioka is widely credited with popularizing the term. As a demographic category, the Asian American population has grown and diversified over the last 50 years as a result of 1965 immigration laws that ended restrictions on Asian immigration to the United States. The 2010 Census listed the following largest Asian American ethnic groups: Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, Thai, Lao, Taiwanese, Bangladeshi, and Burmese. API is an acronym that stands for Asian and Pacific Islander. People use this term to explicitly acknowledge that Pacific Islanders are different from Asians, but also to be inclusive of Pacific Islanders in a broader political coalition. NHPI is an acronym for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, which emerged to signify the unique political conditions of Native Hawaiians. AMEMSA stands for Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian, and emerged post-9/11 to distinguish these communities for their extraordinary experiences of oppression through alleged anti-terrorism measures. Some organizations identify their constituencies using some combination of these acronyms, such as NHPI/AMEMSA/AA.

**American Empire** is the long project of expanding and strengthening the reach of U.S. political, cultural, and economic domination and control in the world. Historically and today, white supremacy has been at the center of the American imperial project. From slavery and genocide to the ongoing exploitation of peoples of color both within the United States and throughout the Global South, U.S. elites have used race as a lever to advance their interests at the expense of democracy and human rights.



Today, American Empire takes the form of neoliberalism, an idea that argues that the best way to advance human wellbeing is through strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. Neoliberalism argues that the role of the state is to create these conditions by setting up military, police, and legal structures that guarantee, by force if necessary, the free functioning of markets. Neoliberalism views labor protections, environmental regulations, welfare programs, and protective trade tariffs as barriers to human progress. Its goal is to deregulate and privatize public resources such as land, water, education, and health care in order to create new markets where they didn't exist before. Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has become the dominant way of understanding, living in, and thinking about the world. Because of the legacy of racism, communities of color have borne the brunt of neoliberalism's damage.

# Sectors of the U.S. Right Active in the Year 2012

There is much overlap and sectors are not mutually exclusive. Methodologies range from cautious moderation, to militant activism, to insurgency, to violence. Right-wing populist, apocalyptic, and conspiracist styles can be found in several sectors. Forms of oppression—racism, xenophobia, sexism, heterosexism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, Arabophobia, nativism, ableism, etc.—vary in each sector.

<b>CONSERVATIVE RIGHT</b>	<p><b>SECULAR RIGHT</b></p> <p><b>Secular Conservatism</b> (Generic) – Shares to some degree basic conservative, “Free Market,” &amp; “Judeo-Christian traditional values,” but not categorized here as part of another sector.</p> <p><b>Corporate Internationalism</b> (Neoliberals) – Nations should control the flow of people across borders, but not the flow of goods, capital, and profit. Called the “Rockefeller Republicans” in the 1960s. Supports globalization on behalf of transnational corporate interests.</p> <p><b>Business Nationalism</b> – Multinational corporations erode national sovereignty; nations should enforce borders for people, but also for goods, capital, and profit through trade restrictions. Enlists grassroots allies from Patriot Movement. Anti-Globalists. Generally protectionist and isolationist.</p> <p><b>Economic Libertarianism</b> – The state disrupts the perfect harmony of the free market system. Modern democracy is essentially congruent with capitalism. Small government.</p> <p><b>National Security Militarism</b> – Supports U.S. military supremacy and unilateral use of force to protect perceived U.S. national security interests around the world. A major component of Cold War anti-communism, now updated and in shaky alliance with Neoconservatives.</p> <p><b>Neoconservatism</b> – The egalitarian social liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s undermined the national consensus. Intellectual oligarchies and political institutions preserve democracy from mob rule. The United States has the right to intervene with military force to protect its perceived interests anywhere in the world. Suspicious of Islam, sometimes Islamophobic.</p>
	<p><b>RELIGIOUS RIGHT</b></p> <p><b>Religious Conservatism</b> – Play by the rules of a pluralist civil society. Mostly Christians, with handful of conservative Jews, Muslims, Hindus and other people of faith. Moral traditionalists. Cultural and social conservatives. Sometimes critical of Christian Right.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The sectors above this line tend to accept the rules of pluralist civil society and PRA calls them part of the “Conservative Right.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The sectors below this line tend to reject the rules of pluralist civil society and PRA calls them part of the “Hard Right.”</i></p> <p><b>Christian Nationalism</b> (Christian Right: Soft Dominionists) – Biblically defined immorality and sin breed chaos and anarchy. America’s greatness as God’s chosen land has been undermined by liberal secular humanists, feminists, and homosexuals. Purists want litmus tests for issues of abortion, tolerance of gays and lesbians, and prayer in schools. Often a form of Right-Wing Populism.</p> <p><b>Christian Theocracy</b> (Christian Right: Hard Dominionists) – Christian men are ordained by God to run society. Eurocentric version of Christianity based on early Calvinism. Intrinsicly Christian ethnocentric, treating non-Christians as second-class citizens, and therefore implicitly antisemitic. Includes Christian Reconstructionism and other theocratic theologies. Elitist.</p>
<b>HARD RIGHT</b>	<p><b>XENOPHOBIC RIGHT</b></p> <p><b>Patriot Movement</b> (Forms of Right-Wing Populism: Tea Parties, Town Hall Protests, Armed Citizens Militias) – Parasitic liberal elites control the government, media, and banks. Blames societal problems on scapegoats below them on the socio-economic ladder who are portrayed as lazy, sinful, or subversive. Fears government plans tyranny to enforce collectivism and globalism, perhaps as part of a One World Government or New World Order. Americanist. Often supports Business Nationalism due to its isolationist emphasis. Anti-Globalist, yet supports unilateralist national security militarism.</p> <p><b>Paleoconservatism</b> – Ultra-conservatives and reactionaries. Natural financial oligarchies preserve the republic against democratic mob rule. Usually nativist (White Nationalism), sometimes anti-Semitic or Christian nationalist. Elitist emphasis similar to the intellectual conservative revolution wing of European New Right. Often libertarian.</p> <p><b>White Nationalism</b> (White Racial Nationalists) – Alien cultures make democracy impossible. Cultural Supremacists argue different races can adopt the dominant (White) culture; Biological Racists argue the immutable integrity of culture, race, and nation. Segregationists want distinct enclaves, Separatists want distinct nations. Americanist. “Tribalist” emphasis echoes racial-nationalist wing of the European New Right. Often a form of Right-Wing Populism.</p> <p><b>Ultra Right</b> (Sometimes called Far Right or Extreme Right) – Militant forms of insurgent revolutionary right ideology and separatist ethnocentric nationalism. Reject pluralist democracy for an organic oligarchy that unites the homogeneous Volkish nation. Conspiracist views of power are overwhelmingly anti-Semitic. Home to overt neofascists and neo-Nazis. Ku Klux Klan, Christian Identity, Creativity Movement, National Socialist Movement, National Alliance. Often uses Right-Wing Populist rhetoric.</p>

## The Politics of Our Participants

We asked a set of questions to understand how our interviewees approached issues of race. We wanted to know not only what they thought, but also where their analytical frameworks came from.

The vast majority of people talked about race as a construct. Most people described it as a means of justifying social, political, and economic hierarchies. Many comments reflected two closely related themes, that race was a means of controlling power, and that the United States was an inherently racist society. “We’re taught that the United States is a country that is democratic for all,” one person said, “but really it’s a country that was built on racism and white supremacy. And the reason why the United States is even a global superpower is because of that history.”

The relationship between race and imperialism was a common theme. One academic and activist explained that race was created to resolve Western contradictions between Enlightenment values of freedom and equality on the one hand, and the oppression of peoples of color on the other, by asserting that only Whites had the right to freedom and equality:

*“Here is [Europe]... finding new political modalities and economic modalities of existence, which have to do with some notions of equality, some notions of representation, some notions of liberty. And at the same time, you are now starting to interact with this ‘other,’ as it were, and how do you reconcile that? ...By constructing the modern notion of race — that the gifts that are ours, they’re ours and not the other’s. Because the other is different.”*

Only one person, a Southeast Asian advocate, defined race as a biological category. She said, “I just don’t really know why it is that I don’t have a clear sense of what race means, actually... I have a good sense of ethnic identification, but not racial identification... It really doesn’t resonate for me.”

Among Asian American participants, when asked how they got involved in racial justice work and where their race politics came from, by far the strongest theme was college. Fully 60% of participants said that college was critical in the development of their race analysis. The only real demographic difference was that U.S.-born people were more likely to follow the college model than immigrants (67% versus 46%). Notably, only two people in the entire study — both Asian

American — reported that they didn’t have a Bachelor’s degree. One said he got politicized in prison, and the other said he became politically conscious in high school; one was U.S.-born and the other was not. One in five of those who said college was an important factor also cited their training by the Center for Third World Organizing as a turning point in their political development.

One participant described her political awakening during the social movements of the ’60s. “The Black Panthers and their arrival into Chinatown and their organizing efforts, the seeds that they planted were very powerful,”



Black Panther supporters hold up Mao’s Red Book, Oakland 1969.  
Photo: Ilka Hartmann

she said. “The anti-war movement was going on, the international liberation movement was starting.” She recalls the struggle to protect Chinatown and Manilatown from corporate encroachment, widespread poverty, police harassment, and racial segregation. “It was just really a moment ripe for something... The Black Panthers played a wonderful, huge role. I was part of that.”

For others, racial awareness developed through work exposure, a defining life event or community issue. Among these were the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982, Japanese American internment, and 9/11. “It stems from my family history,” said one person. “My parents were both teenagers when they were interned during World War II... [They] were both active in the Japanese American community, so I used to get dragged to their meetings when I was a kid.” On the topic of 9/11, one person said, “Suddenly your identity... goes out the window and [you’re] just another Muslim terrorist... I think that is when you start realizing that you are Brown.”

People cited bullying, domestic violence, workers’ rights, and gentrification as issues that spurred their activism. One interviewee talked about growing up in a working class neighborhood of peoples of color. “Police brutality was a major issue in the ’90s as well as the growing prison system... I started volunteering... on mainly economic justice struggles... with a strong racial justice analysis.” Citing bullying, another person described a feeling of kinship with Black identity. “I grew up South Asian but I really sort of partially identified as Black... because I was called the ‘N word’ a whole lot from first to eighth grade,” he says. “It’s sort of a cliché story, but I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, got really into racial justice... and it went from there.”

Surprisingly, although 24 of our participants were not born in the United States, only five of them said they became active because of their experiences as immigrants or refugees. One immigrant participant said. “My brother had a small garage... His house was burnt to the ground by arson, all [these] things happened.” He explained that while immigrants often experience racialized incidents, many do not immediately perceive them as such. “There’s no framework, if you know what I mean. Those sorts of things can seem accidental... I think most people saw it not as racism but [as] a price that you pay. Like there other rewards for sticking it out, so why be bothered?”

None of the three Black participants attributed their race politics to college. Two stated that being Black made their racial awareness inevitable. Both of these participants inherited family legacies of racial justice activism. “I was born Black in America,” said one of them plainly. “Sometimes it’s hard to come up with an answer more specific than that.” Similarly, another person said, “The short answer to that is that



The racially motivated murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 ignited waves of Asian American protest and activism across the United States. Chin was killed by white auto workers Ronald Evers and Michael Nitzhey, who pleaded to manslaughter and were sentenced to three years of probation and a \$3,000 fine.

I don't know how I couldn't have gotten involved in racial justice work. It's very much a part of my household... Growing up with [my parents], who were both very... racially aware, it was impossible for that not to be a regular part of my conversations."

Of the 17 interviewees who identified as LGBTQ, nearly one-third said that coming out or being involved in LGBT organizing was an important step in their political development. "I came out in a really white rural college town. And so didn't really feel that I had anything in common... with LGBT white folks," said one person. "I had recently immigrated... and didn't really think of myself as a person of color, but... finding solidarity with other folks of color who were queer is really the start of my own understanding of what it means to be a person of color living in the U.S." Another person said that both her ethnic community and ethnic-specific LGBT organizations marginalized her because of her politics. "I've always felt really out of place in the Indian, South Asian community, and then I got queer and then it was over... Even in LGBT South Asian spaces, my politics was always pretty different than a lot of the people around me."

# The Research Process

## How did we choose the interviewees?

All the participants in this project are racial justice leaders in the continental United States who are either Asian American themselves, working primarily with Asian American communities, or working with a multiracial base that included Asian Americans. We used a “snowball sampling” method, which means that participants referred us to other participants from among their colleagues and acquaintances. All participants consented to participate in the study, and were assured of confidentiality. We conducted a total of 87 interviews, and then selected 57 to include in our analysis, based on ethnic diversity, age, and geography.

It is important to note that this was not a broad survey. It was a qualitative study using in-depth subjective interviews asking the opinions of a group of people who were not randomly selected. The ethnic makeup of Asian American participants closely mirrored recent Census figures, but the sample size was too small to draw definitive conclusions about any particular demographic. Also notably, all three of the non-Asian American participants were Black. This was not intentional, and certainly not meant to be representative of the Black population. We chose these participants based on their broad-based racial justice work across racial lines. Where there were stark differences in people’s responses by demographic categories, we note them in the body of this report. While these differences may indicate themes worth exploring in the future, no definitive conclusions can be drawn about demographic groups based on this study.

## How did we collect information?

We conducted individual interviews either over the phone or in person, all in English. On average, interviews lasted about one hour. We created a set of 12 questions that asked about racial justice analysis, strategies, challenges and opportunities. We retooled the questions slightly for non-Asian participants, but kept them to the same themes.

In addition, we asked each interviewee to fill out a short survey with demographic information: state of residence, age, race, gender, sexual orientation, income, education, religion, position, sector, issue, and number of years working in the racial justice field. As in the interviews, participants could decline to answer any question and still be included in the study.

We recorded and transcribed the interviews, checked them for accuracy, added the demographic information, and cleaned them of all personal and identifying information. We then coded the transcripts, and analyzed them for common themes and ideas.

## Who were the participants? \*

- Participants mirrored Census information on where Asian Americans live, with the bulk of them living and working on the East and West coasts. Twenty-three people (40%) were from the East Coast, and 24 (42%) from the West Coast. Six were from the South, and four from the Midwest.
- Thirty-four participants (60%) were 40 years old or younger, and 23 (40%) were 41 or over. The majority of people (68%) spanned a 20-year age range from 31-50.
- Ethnic representation among Asian American participants closely mirrored 2010 U.S. Census data, with Indian and Chinese Americans making up the largest groups. See Table 1 for a complete breakdown of race/ethnicity.
- Fifty people (88%) reported being cisgendered\*\* and five said they were queer, transgender or “other.” See Table 2. Thirty-five people (61%) said they were heterosexual, 17 (30%) identified as LGBQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer), and four declined to answer.
- Twenty-four people (42%) were not born in the United States, and 32 (56%) were U.S.-born. All were proficient in English.
- Most participants were highly educated. Forty-two people (74%) had either a Bachelor’s or a Master’s degree. Five had a Ph.D. and four had a law degree. One person had HS/GED and one person had an AA. Three did not answer this question.
- A majority of participants (61%) worked in the nonprofit sector, although we also talked to people from academic institutions, culture and the arts, government, media, philanthropy, social services, and unions. See Table 3. We interviewed executive directors, teachers and professors, cultural workers and artists, organizers, trainers, funders, service providers, media and communications professionals, consultants, and department or program directors/managers.
- When asked to report which issues they were addressing, participants were able to select all that applied, so the total exceeds 57. Outside of “Racial Justice,” the three top issues were “Civil Rights,” “Immigration,” and “Economic Justice/Labor.”

\* Of the 57 participants included in the study, only 56 filled out the demographic survey.

\*\* Cisgender is a term used to describe people whose gender identity, but not necessarily their gender expression, aligns with their assigned sex at birth.

**TABLE 1. RACE**

Race/Ethnicity	Count
Black	3
Chinese	13
Korean	2
Japanese	4
Indian	14
Pakistani	2
Bangladeshi	1
Hmong	3
Filipino	4
Vietnamese	3
Multiracial Asian	7
Not reporting	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>

**TABLE 2. SEX/GENDER**

Sex	Gender	Count
Female	Feminine	30
Female	Queer	3
Male	Masculine	20
Male	Transgender	1
Male	Other	1
Female	NA	1
	Not reporting	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>

**TABLE 3. SECTOR**

Sector	Count
Academia	4
Culture/Arts	3
Government	2
Media/Communications	3
Nonprofit	35
Philanthropy	4
Social Service	2
Union	1
NA	2
Not Reported	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>

**TABLE 4. ISSUE**

Issue	Count
Anti-Violence	14
Civil Rights	30
Criminal Justice Reform	11
Economic Justice/Labor	26
Education	19
Environmental Justice	10
Gender Justice	17
Health Care	9
Immigration	26
LGBTQ	16
Racial Justice	40
Reproductive Justice	9



# Interview Questions: Asian American Participants

GOAL	QUESTION	
ANALYSIS <b>1</b>	1) How did you get involved in racial justice work? <i>Prod:</i> start working at a racial justice organization, work in an org without a racial justice focus, a particular event?	
	2a) What is your understanding of how race functions in the US? And where did it come from? <i>Prod:</i> What is your race analysis? <i>Prod:</i> Tell me why you are having difficulty answering this question.	
ANALYSIS <b>2</b>	2b) Is that understanding/analysis shared throughout your organization?	
	2b-1) <b>YES:</b> How did you achieve that? <i>Prod:</i> How was that analysis institutionalized (built and maintained)?	2b-2) <b>NO:</b> Who in your organization shares this understanding and who doesn't? 2b-2a) What are the implications of this for your work?
	2c) How does your understanding of how race functions influence what strategies you use in your work? <i>Prod:</i> Provide examples.	
	2d) How do issues like gender, sexuality, class, and ability show up in your work and how do you address them?	
STRATEGIES <b>3</b>	3) Do you work with API communities? <i>Prod:</i> How are APIs represented in your work?	
	3-1) <b>YES:</b> What does this work look like? <i>Prod:</i> APIs directly within the org or work with API orgs; if orgs, which orgs? <i>Prod:</i> How are they involved in your work?	3-2) <b>NO:</b> Why not? 3-2a) Do you want to be working with API communities? And if so, what are the barriers?

ANALYSIS

4

4a) How do APIs think about race? (Do they know what it is, do they understand it, and how does it play out?)

*Prod:* How does this play out differently among various ethnic groups within the API community?

4b) What influences the way that APIs understand race?

*Prod:* Provide specific examples where you've seen this in your work.

4c) To what extent do APIs identify with each other as a racial group?

STRATEGIES

5

5a) Is there a racial hierarchy?

5a-1) **YES:** Where are APIs positioned in the racial hierarchy?

5a-1a) Given that hierarchy, how do you think the API community is affected by racism?

*Prod:* In comparison to other communities of color?

5a-2) **NO:** Why not?

5b) What do APIs think about African Americans? Latinos? Native Americans?

5c) What influences the way that APIs think about other communities of color (African Americans, latinos, and Native Americans).

STRATEGIES

6

6) Should we build a unified API identity?

6-1) **YES:** Why?

6-1a) What are the challenges to doing so?

*Prod:* Is there a hierarchy within the API community? (What is it?)

6-2) **NO:** Why not?

6-2a) What should we do instead?

STRATEGIES

7

7) What API communities are under-organized when it comes to racial justice?

## STRATEGIES

**8**


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8a) What are the most important issues right now for the API communities that you work with?

---

8b) Do you approach these issues as racial justice issues?

*Prod:* Why or Why not? And how?

---

## STRATEGIES

**9**


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9) What kinds of messages do you believe are effective at moving APIs to support racial justice?

*Prod:* Provide specific examples.

---

## STRATEGIES

**10**


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10a) What are examples of effective racial justice strategies that people have used in API communities?

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10a-1) What makes them racial justice strategies?

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10b) Were they successful? Why or why not?

*Prod:* What are some examples of strategies that also successfully addressed class, gender, sexuality, and ability?

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GAPS AND  
CHALLENGES**11**


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11a) What kinds of EXTERNAL/INTERNAL challenges do you/your organization face(s) in doing racial justice work?

*Prod:*

External - differences in power, class, gender, sexuality, ability, culture, language, religion, and immigration status; as well as historical/current conflict, the model minority myth, and right-wing messaging, political, social, economic conditions

Internal: capacity challenges - for example, language capacity, technology access, etc.

*Prod:* How are they affecting your work?

*Prod:* How are you responding?

*Prod:* Provide specific examples.

---

11b) What do you need to overcome these challenges?

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11c) what opportunities do you see to advance racial justice that you can't take advantage of due to lack of capacity or resources?

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## END

**12**


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12) Do you have anything you would like to add about racial justice work in API communities?

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# Interview Questions: Non-Asian American Participants

GOAL	QUESTION		
ANALYSIS <b>1</b>	1) How did you get involved in racial justice work?  <i>Prod:</i> start working at a racial justice organization, work in an org without a racial justice focus, a particular event?		
	ANALYSIS <b>2</b>		
	2a) What is your understanding of how race functions in the US? And where did it come from?  <i>Prod:</i> What is your race analysis?  <i>Prod:</i> Tell me why you are having difficulty answering this question.		
	2b) Is that understanding/analysis shared throughout your organization?		
	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>2b-1) <b>YES:</b> How did you achieve that?  <i>Prod:</i> How was that analysis institutionalized (built and maintained)?</td> <td>2b-2) <b>NO:</b> Who in your organization shares this understanding and who doesn't?  2b-2a) What are the implications of this for your work?</td> </tr> </table>	2b-1) <b>YES:</b> How did you achieve that?  <i>Prod:</i> How was that analysis institutionalized (built and maintained)?	2b-2) <b>NO:</b> Who in your organization shares this understanding and who doesn't?  2b-2a) What are the implications of this for your work?
2b-1) <b>YES:</b> How did you achieve that?  <i>Prod:</i> How was that analysis institutionalized (built and maintained)?	2b-2) <b>NO:</b> Who in your organization shares this understanding and who doesn't?  2b-2a) What are the implications of this for your work?		
	2c) How does your understanding of how race functions influence what strategies you use in your work?  <i>Prod:</i> Provide examples.		
	2d) How do issues like gender, sexuality, class, and ability show up in your work and how do you address them?		
<b>3</b>	3) Do you work with API communities? How are APIs represented in your work?		
	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>3-1) <b>YES:</b> What does this work look like? (APIs directly within the org or work with API orgs; if orgs, which orgs? How are they involved in your work?  3-1a) What are the most important issues right now for the API communities that you work with?  3-1b) Do you consider these to be racial justice issues? Why or Why not?  3-1c) What have you found to be effective RJ strategies in working with API communities? What makes them effective? Do these strategies also address class, sexuality, gender, and ability? How?</td> <td>3-2) <b>NO:</b> Why not?  3-2a) What do you think are the most important issues for API communities right now?  3-2b) Do you consider these to be racial justice issues?  <i>Prod:</i> Why or Why not? And how?  3-2c) Do you want to be working with API communities? And if so, what are the barriers?</td> </tr> </table>	3-1) <b>YES:</b> What does this work look like? (APIs directly within the org or work with API orgs; if orgs, which orgs? How are they involved in your work?  3-1a) What are the most important issues right now for the API communities that you work with?  3-1b) Do you consider these to be racial justice issues? Why or Why not?  3-1c) What have you found to be effective RJ strategies in working with API communities? What makes them effective? Do these strategies also address class, sexuality, gender, and ability? How?	3-2) <b>NO:</b> Why not?  3-2a) What do you think are the most important issues for API communities right now?  3-2b) Do you consider these to be racial justice issues?  <i>Prod:</i> Why or Why not? And how?  3-2c) Do you want to be working with API communities? And if so, what are the barriers?
3-1) <b>YES:</b> What does this work look like? (APIs directly within the org or work with API orgs; if orgs, which orgs? How are they involved in your work?  3-1a) What are the most important issues right now for the API communities that you work with?  3-1b) Do you consider these to be racial justice issues? Why or Why not?  3-1c) What have you found to be effective RJ strategies in working with API communities? What makes them effective? Do these strategies also address class, sexuality, gender, and ability? How?	3-2) <b>NO:</b> Why not?  3-2a) What do you think are the most important issues for API communities right now?  3-2b) Do you consider these to be racial justice issues?  <i>Prod:</i> Why or Why not? And how?  3-2c) Do you want to be working with API communities? And if so, what are the barriers?		

## ANALYSIS

## 4

4a) Is there a racial hierarchy?

4a-1) **YES:** Where are APIs positioned in the racial hierarchy?

4a-2) **NO:** Why not?

4b) Given the hierarchy that you just described, how do you think the API community is affected by racism?

*Prod:* In comparison to other communities of color?

4d) What is your understanding of the “model minority myth”?

*Prod:* What is it, where did it come from, who does it refer to?

*Prod:* How does it play out? Who does it benefit? Who does it harm?

4e) What do APIs think about African Americans? Latinos? Native Americans? And vice versa?

4f) What implications does this have for RJ movement building as a whole?

4g) What influences the way that APIs think about other communities of color (African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans). And vice versa?

## STRATEGIES

## 5

5a) In your experience, how do APIs think about race and racism?

*Prod:* systemic (structural) vs. individual

5b) To what extent do APIs feel solidarity with other communities of color?

*Prod:* What brings you to that conclusion?

5c) Do you think APIs believe the racial discrimination they experience is the same as the experiences of other people of color?

Why or why not?

## STRATEGIES

## 6

6) Do you think about APIs as a unified racial identity?

6-1) **YES:** Why and who is included in that identity?

6-2) **NO:** Why not?

6-2a) What should we do instead?

6b) Is there a hierarchy within the API community?

6b-1) **YES:** What makes you think so? What is it?

6b-2) **NO:** What makes you think there is not one?

---

STRATEGIES

7

7a) Do you believe there is an API Racial Justice agenda?

7a-1) **YES:** What is it?

7a-2) **NO:** What leads you to this conclusion?

7b) What API communities are under-organized when it comes to racial justice?

7c) What would be possible if there were a stronger presence these communities in the RJ movement? What do you think it would take to do that?

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GAPS AND CHALLENGES

8

8a) What kinds of EXTERNAL/INTERNAL challenges do you/your organization face(s) in doing racial justice work?

*Prod:*

External: e.g., differences in power, class, gender, sexuality, ability, culture, language, religion, & immigration status; historical +/- current conflict, model minority myth, and right-wing messaging, political/social/economic conditions.

Internal: capacity challenges – e.g., language capacity, tech access, etc.

*Prod:* How are they affecting your work? How are you responding?

*Prod:* Provide specific examples.

8b) What do you need to overcome these challenges?

8c) What opportunities do you see to advance racial justice that you can't take advantage of due to lack of capacity or resources?

---

END

9

9) Do you have anything you would like to add about racial justice work in API communities?

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# Sources

In shaping our political framework and baseline understanding of Asian Americans and race, we read a lot of literature. Following is a partial list of some of the most influential sources:

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