

How Does the Model Minority Myth Mute Our Voices?

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Asians4BlackLives marches throughout the streets of Brooklyn, New York, demanding #Justice4Akai on May 18, 2018

Regardless of your political party or personal opinion, one cannot deny that Trump has wrought division within America. His rigid stance on undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers has enabled a litany of racists to exit the underbrush and reveal their bigotry without fear of consequences. Of course, all American citizens do not stand behind these policies and ideologies. Yet, despite the fact that the outrage generated by ICE's separation of migrant families and their children may have flooded the news cycle, detention centers continue to expand and even profit.

On the other hand, there *is* pushback against Trump in an increasingly intolerant climate. The midterm voter turnout in 2018 was the highest it had been since 1966. A record number of women are serving in the 116th Congress (102, if you were wondering). Despite the unexpected surge in political participation and

representation, there is an undeniable scarcity of Asian American involvement in social justice movements. As an Asian American myself living in Southern California, I am aware that there is not an absolute absence of Asian American activists. While I may be surrounded by civically engaged peers, “[Asian Americans, the popular conception goes, don't protest](#)” (Salesses). This begs the question: *Why?* And, this time around, I’m here to talk to you and to our community.

So, why aren’t more Asian Americans involved in social justice activism?

The hard truth is that many fail to see that it is possible to be the oppressor while also being oppressed. Again, I’m not denying the existence of any Asian American activists or our ability to rally for causes directly pertinent to us. But, what I’m getting at is the unwillingness to become involved if we are not plainly affected. The most clear-cut and relevant example is the reluctance of Asian Americans to align themselves with Black Lives Matter (BLM). Because Asian isn’t included in the movement’s title, many make the lazy, short-sighted assumption that BLM has no tie to the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. *What about us?* Yes, we *do* face racism. But, our lives are not at stake or being targeted right now. In the same manner that feminism may be centralized around women, its ultimate objective is equality (Wang). The same is true of BLM.

By hiding behind the Model Minority Myth and the small safety afforded to us by white hegemonic power structures, we uphold the system that continues to oppress us all (Lee).

“It is too easy for us to be pitted against black and brown people as the Model Minority or even to just ignore current problems and be safe in the bubble of college-educated, suburban, professional, safe America, not realizing what we are quietly sacrificing for this ‘comfort’” (Wang).

—blogger [Grace Hwang Lynch](#).

Why should we challenge the Model Minority Myth if we benefit?

The Model Minority Myth hurts everyone. Since it suggests that one minority (typically referring to Asians) performs better than others, it subsequently denigrates other minorities and blames *them* for systemic issues. Stemming from World War II, the concept came about when it was used to question why African Americans were “failing” to overcome their circumstances while Asian Americans were succeeding. The characterization of Asians shifted from sexually deviant gamblers to passive, submissive, and weak. By framing Asian Americans as the model minority, African Americans were thus defined in opposition, which also diminished “the potential impact of the civil rights movement” (McGirt). Meaning, the comparison between Asian and African Americans undermined the

claims that there were systemic obstacles inhibiting the socioeconomic success of African Americans. Thus, the myth was perpetuated in order to help mask the inherent racism in societal and governmental institutions.

Today, Asian Americans are often heralded as the model minority because they are still collectively viewed as non-threatening and high achieving. While it may be perceived as a “positive stereotype” (a paradoxical phrase in itself), it propagates generalizations about an entire diverse race. This also disregards the divergence in statistics of socioeconomic status and academic achievement among different ethnicities. For example, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Americans experience poverty more overwhelmingly than any other Asian American community. Not to mention the lack of attention given to the Pacific Islander demographic.

The Model Minority Myth is another generalization that fails to encompass the experience of the entire AAPI community. And, we can’t continue to employ a tactic used by white supremacists. Ultimately, a “system that doesn’t value Black or Brown lives doesn’t value Asian lives either” (Lu).

I don't support Trump, so why is it wrong if I just stay quiet?

Being apolitical is being complicit (Fun fact: Complicit was actually the one word chosen by Dictionary.com to describe 2017, which was [Trump's first year in office](#)). The ability to choose to not get involved in politics is born of privilege. The privilege lies in being able to remain silent because your life or livelihood is not at stake. While you may think neutrality is innocuous, not making a choice is, in fact, making one. It is choosing to preserve yourself and remain silent in the face of blatant injustices.

As mentioned previously, if we, the Asian American community, are able to benefit from the system and/or the Model Minority Myth, it is at the expense of others who are unable to succeed (or simply survive). While some of us may not support Trump’s policies, our inaction and silence both enables these transgressions to persist and normalizes them. In the simplest analogy, a bystander is not much less guilty than the perpetrator. Or, even consider the fact that we *still* ponder how we managed to let the Holocaust occur. We must ask ourselves—how extreme must things become for us to *finally* speak up?

Kayla Chadwick puts it best in her straightforward piece: [I Don't Know How To Explain To You That You Should Care About Other People.](#)

But isn't my participation detracting from those who should be in focus?

Movements are “race based but not race bound” (Chun 924). Let’s go back to BLM as an example. Black voices should remain central to the movement, so we can best help by allowing their voices to be heard. Interracial Solidarity is a vital component of intersectional activism. Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term intersectionality to describe the study of how intersecting systems of “oppression, domination, or discrimination” function to subjugate black women in America (“Home”). And, I believe we can learn from this study and apply it to our own activism. We must recognize how, not only race but, sex, gender, and class construct different filters of oppression that converge to create conditions of life (“Home”).

If we critically analyze the ways these filters affect demographics differently, we can acknowledge what is broken, how we can support others, and to then address the inequalities. Moreover, I use the phrase intersectional activism to refer to how our awareness will allow us to find commonalities in other movements that aren’t necessarily about us. By fighting against the prejudices others face, we take one more step closer towards dismantling an archaic, repressive culture that restricts us as well.

There is power in numbers and in unity, as opposed to the divisiveness distracting us from the constant string of scandals and missteps. It is regressive to allow discord to disconnect us and pigeonhole us into racial categories. Movements gain traction and incur change when there are educated voices to carry them. While our voices should not amalgamate nor our causes be singular, our fundamental goal is the same: Make the American Dream accessible to *all*.

How do we help then?

We need to show up for other minorities, too. If we look back in history, we can easily recall transgender activist-icons Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera as impassioned advocates in the gay rights’ movement (although, it was one that failed to be inclusive of transgender rights) *and* as the central catalysts for the Stonewall Riots. More recently, a protest in Westminster against Trump’s push to deport Vietnamese war refugees boasted a blend of white, Latinx, and Asian attendees collectively thrusting “Pho-get Trump” signs into the air.

Look, this obviously isn’t a simple question with an equally simple fix. There’s the history of anti-blackness and the performance of blackness among Asian Americans that must be addressed, but that’s a whole other can of worms that deserves its own thorough unpacking. But first, we can start by being a good ally. Primarily, a good ally must make sure not to speak *for* others. You are not expected to be an expert or to be perfect, but it *is* up to you to educate yourself (Here’s an easily accessible [Guide to Allyship](#)). Know not only your history but that of others. Learn how your narrative fits in with theirs.

Our solidarity with other marginalized groups is the only way we will effectively enact change and attain true equality. If they're showing up for *us*, then we must show up for *them*. This fight is our fight, too. Should we not be rising up against our oppressor together, as opposed to each other? We must not be defined and constrained by antiquated labels. We can not be restricted by this myth, as a model minority. We have to negotiate our own identities and navigate society as we deem fit. We are *not* quiet. We are *not* meek. We are *not* acquiescent. We have to vote. We must use our afforded privilege to uplift those without. We have an obligation to use our voices for those who have been silenced. We *must* speak up.

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