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1 With Kaleidoscope Eyes

The Potential (Dangers) of Identitarian Coalitions

Any exploration of the ways in which South Asian Americans do or do not "fit into" Asian America invokes complicated array of difficult issues. The assumption of the set "Asia" is itself historically conflicted, and the notion of representational identity is increasingly seen as largely phantasmatic. To be sure, "map" names facilitate group-based social activism and make visible various and variously disenfranchised constituencies within the ongoing scene of conflict politics in America. To pursue these purposes in the absence of a historical and theoretical framework, however, is to ask for confusion on the one hand, and to promote an inherently divisive political maneuver on the other. This essay explores the shifting paths of (South) Asian American histories in the context of the temporaneity and historicity of identitarian coalitions in the United States, while suggesting that the challenges in the next stage of cultural politics are many. They include the need to investigate the potential of strategic interethnic coalitions while resisting spurious sociological solidity and the erasure of historical differences; to recognize that in such projects self-definition takes shape not simply against the center but against other marginals; to acknowledge that identity politics is a potent weapon for the right as well as the left; and to consider the historical specificity of the moment in which identity-based maneuvers become available, even sanctioned by the mainstream, as strategy.

While the affiliation of South Asians (a category whose tenuous nature has not prevented it from achieving late-blossoming but clear validation in its own right) with better-represented Asian Americans is understandable in a climate governed by the ideology and politics of difference, it must be underscored by a better understanding of their historical and cultural distinctions along with the commonalities that make for progressive and radical coalitions. The general move toward "making room" for underrepresented Others within this configuration might also serve as a useful strategy in exploring the potential for coalition with similarly segregated groups. The variant migratory patterns and economic profiles of different sorts of Asians ("the strangers from a different shore" in Ronald Takaki's words), the place of these strangers among other alienated groups

already present in North America, and the recent experiences of interethnic conflict in the United States—these are some of the historical realities that must inform any further developments in the discourses of difference.[1] With kaleidoscope eyes, we might then see how dangerous it can be to forget how some achieve coalitions while others have coalitions thrust upon them by interested parties, how coalitions shift in the winds of historic forces, and how important it is to assess these forces as strategies are developed for the future.

The search for common cause that fueled the early movement did not ensure participation or representation of all the groups we might think of as constituting Asian America. If one lesson of early coalitions is that difference could be overlooked in the interest of visible interests, another points to the difficulty of understanding and representing differences more inclusively. As important as it is to catalog the history of who struggled and in what cause, it is equally important to ask, who did not speak and why? The relative invisibility—not absence, but invisibility—of South Asians, for instance, among the early pioneers of Asian American activism might be, as I have suggested earlier, usefully investigated as a more inclusive coalition is proposed. The "South Asian" case, if one might call it that, might in fact be examined closely because it may point to the complexities of Asian American coalitionism and its contemporary problematic. Invoking past and present histories, this essay will explore the many differences among those labeled "Asian American," and investigate the principles on which a coalition among them might be said to rest in the academy and other public arenas. Eventually, I will outline what might be the beginning of the development of a kaleidoscopic perspective that allows us to apprehend the benefits of coalitionism while retaining a focus on the dangers of identitarian constructions.

Important to any discussion of identitarian movements is an understanding of memory, both collective and personal, constructed and erased, as well as of the narratives shaped and obscured in its mobilization to service identity affirmation. The role of memory in constructing identity is by now so clear to social historians as to scarcely merit restatement.[2] Less often is one reminded of the role of *identity*, or what is thought to be cohesive identity, in constructing memory, although this is hardly a novel observation. It is nevertheless and precisely the strategic re-memorying and un-memorying involved in infusing identity with political charge that should concern us when engaged in positing new identitarian coalitions. While recovering and uncovering the shared memory of oppression and alienation—a primary modus operandi in creating identity-based groups—it is important to resist the eclipse of memories of difference and of privilege relative to other members of the group seeking consolidation as well

as to other groups in general. To paper over these cracks and fissures in the interest of forging a new collective memory is to risk their widening over time. Nor can a gap be effectively bridged until its measure is known. Quite apart from its dubious logic and morality, the denial of history implicit in provisional and unreflective integration is not merely a hypothetical risk but a risk that relentlessly and unavoidably concretizes itself in the materiality of quotidian conflict over resources and power; "how one is categorized," as Omi and Winant remind us, "is far from a merely academic or even personal matter" (3). Efforts to mobilize and expand notions of Asian American identity must therefore be investigated against a backdrop of some of the issues raised above, if such a move is to be valuable. R. Radhakrishnan reminds us that "we live in a society that is profoundly anti-historical" and that capitalism, assisted by technology, has the capacity "to produce a phenomenology of the present so alluring in its immediacy as to seduce the consumer to forget the past and bracket the future" (225).

One might begin by raising the much-touted question of historicity. Issuing from an acceptance of cartographic historiography, the notion of "Asian" identity, constructed or otherwise, itself depends on a constructed and perhaps empty and arbitrary signifier. I have suggested that the assumption of the set "Asia" is historically conflicted; it would be useful to explore how this is so and what its implications might be in manufacturing coalition. In his *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, K. N. Chaudhuri deconstructs the concept of Asia, reminding us that "there is no equivalent word in any Asian language nor such a concept in the domain of geographical knowledge, though expressions such as the 'Sea of China' or the 'Sea of Hind' held certain analogous meaning in Arabic and some of the Indian languages" (22). As it turns out, the word "Asia" may have been derived from the Assyrian *asu*, meaning East, or it may have been the local name given to the plains of Ephesus, later extended to encompass the land mass further east. Whatever the origin, it was used by the Greeks "to designate the lands situated to the east of their homeland" ("Asia" 128). The use of the terms "Asia" and "Asiatic" (later "Asian") functioned less to accurately identify or explain a more or less homogenous group than to consolidate the notion of "Europe" on the basis of the latter's cultural homogeneity and difference from "non-European." The inversality of "Asia" with Europe is rendered historically significant if one considers that in the fifth century B.C. Herodotus provides accounts of rivalry between Europe and Asia, albeit within a much more limited context than one normally would assume when speaking of the two continents today (Thomson 426).

Of course, Chaudhuri tells us, "besides being non-European, Asia is also non-African, non-American and so on"; but significantly, "there is a sequence of exclusions of which non-European comes first" (22–23). Derived from the principles of contradiction and isomorphic mapping, "Asia" assumes in the European imagination the structural unity thought to belong to the first category, "Europe." Meanwhile, encyclopedia entries on "Asia" routinely suggest that there are multiple Asias, that it is impossible to generate a classificatory system adequate to cope with the heterogeneity of Asia, that it is more a terminological convention than a homogeneous continent, that the term is of marginal worth to serious scholars, and that it is best studied in its very different parts.[3] But, of course, one might argue, every such name is a mental construct, so why quarrel with map names? The genealogy and spirit of these usages, one responds, have had widespread ramifications in the annals of cultural history. The production of a-history [*sic*] is the issue under contention here. The examination in the latter half of this century of the self/other dichotomy in a great deal of postmodern, feminist, and minority discourse has served as clear-sighted recognition of the uses to which such a-historical isomorphism has been put, particularly in the context of colonialism.[4]

This discussion would be pointless if it did not explore the concomitant notion of "l'idée européenne"; it would be futile if one did not remember that "all the continents are conceptual constructs, but only Europe was not first perceived and named by outsiders. "Europa," as the more learned of the ancient Greeks first conceived it, stood in sharp contrast to both Asia and Libya" ("Europe" *The New Encyclopaedia* 522). Interestingly, while encyclopedias categorize discussions on Asia in spatial terms (dividing it according to geographic regions that are to be considered more or less culturally contiguous, however qualified this assertion might be), Europe is treated in chronological and temporal terms to suggest a progressive narrative marked by dynamic change. It is the totality of its cultural heritage that is to separate Europe from its lesser "counterparts." The notion of a unified Europe has persisted throughout both ancient and modern history, powered in the former period by vigorous empire building and in the latter by the pervasive influence of Christianity; more recently, stemming in part from the anxiety generated by the economic and political dwarfing of European nations when contrasted with the United States, Japan, and other mushrooming powerhouses in the erstwhile Third World, the idea has been resuscitated with renewed vigor. The idea of Europe necessarily raises the question of contrast and comparison, of its own cohesive superiority to others' lesser cultures; as expressed in French in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*: "l'idée européenne . . . [evoque] le problème de savoir si . . . il n'éxiste pas une 'communauté supérieure' distin-

guant des continents massifs qui, de près ou de loin, l'entourent" ("Europe" 36).

My discussion of the "idea of Europe" has not taken into account the heterogeneity that inevitably exists in any hypothetical conglomerate; this is not so much because it is difficult to find but rather that *Europe* does not see the fractures that threaten its sense of a unified whole or the "16 million non-white Europeans who reside in Europe" and continue to be excluded from it (Alibhai, quoted in Reiss 19).[5] The variations that have existed over time and those being introduced by new immigration are still measured against a congealed sense of "Europeanness." The extension of "l'esprit européenne" to include its newest partner, the United States, completes the grand Western narrative that distinguishes itself by differentiating itself from formulated constructs like "non-Western," which are as intellectually vague and geographically imprecise as "Asia" and "the Orient." This, then, is the pseudonymic and paleonymic history of the names Asians employ to counter the very tendencies that generated them in the first place. This is the threshold obscured and made invisible in the hunger for consolidation. Those who pose "Asian" identity in opposition to the West *without* a sense of its conflicted and contradictory overtones not only purchase the false homogeneity conferred upon them but also fail to make "West-ness" visible as a construct—a far greater challenge and one that has never been seriously attempted in the context of self-affirmation narratives by cultural Others resident in the West.

While one is busy conceiving of memory and identity as a set of kinetic transformations that will contour and flesh out the invisible and relegated Other in affirming an inclusive "Asian American" identity, it is important to be aware of the static structuralism, implicit in the above-mentioned formations, that has permitted this discussion in the first place. To fail to recognize this is to deny the historic roots of contemporary problems of selective differentiation and undifferentiation.[6] To acknowledge this is to teach ourselves to examine more closely the principles by which we organize in the interest of better understanding and representing ourselves, while illuminating that what is also validated in positing Asian American identity is the empty projection of a prior identity. The chain of validation suggested in embracing further abstractions like "South Asian" and "East Indian" must also be confronted and dealt with, as must the enthusiastic acceptance of the concept of identity, which is generally thought to be peculiar to the modern Western world. Misnaming and preoccupation with identities that arise from misnaming should both be cause for concern for those attempting to make Asian American studies useful. It is tempting to wander off here into a discussion of the conceptual and transactional misunderstandings occasioned by other accidents of history—the

misnaming of the native tribes of the Americas as "Indian," or the synonymification of "American" with the United States, but I will confine myself to the observation that pseudonymy functions as a potent metaphor for the a-historicizing of non-Western cultures by the West. The collusion of the non-Western world in these ventures cannot be allowed to pass unnoticed. Suffice it to say for our discussion that it is one thing to appropriate strategy consciously and another to lapse into it because it is already available. Put in their historical place, the categories available to us can be investigated to see whom they best serve. The more recent history of the usage of "Asian" as a denominator in the United States might suggest that it may have served a purpose similar to its earlier imperialist one of clumping, when convenient, and denying homogeneity or promoting division when such a "cluster" threatened to become potent and combative. The latter is an issue I will address at length later; it may be useful first to explore the principles used by groups at the center and the margin to constitute notions of identity.

All categories depend on the principle of organization; in the context of this discussion, it is necessary to examine the bases and assumptions of coalitional identity formations. Chaudhuri's invocation of set theory in his discussions on Asia before Europe might be valuable here. Georg Cantor's conception of set theory relied on the fundamental principles of differentiation, integration, and the principle of ordering or succession. The derivation of a set was, however, so enormously complex, and the search for solutions so difficult, that Cantor went insane.[7] Bertrand Russell, who subsequently continued Cantor's analysis, came to the conclusion that intuitive notions of class, sets, truth, and so forth, were, in fact, self-contradictory. Identitarian grouping, however, demands a moment of stasis, of acceptance, however apologetic, of essentialist typology, even as the group itself is struggling against it. What, then, is to be done with our analytical methods and our ideological and political quests if we are to keep our wits about us? It would be presumptuous to suggest an answer, but perhaps not unreasonable to advocate a method of coping with the numerous possibilities that confront us. In the process of systematically investigating the shifts and transformations, the continuities and ruptures in narratives of identity in general, and Asian American identity in particular, one may find, if not the answer, then at least a way of engaging contemporary issues meaningfully.

The overwhelmingly "nationalist" overtones of identity, enunciated in temporal (historical) and spatial (geographical) terms, keep returning us to national roots. "China" thus precedes the hyphenated construct "Chinese-American" (even when the hyphen is suppressed, its trace remains as the sign of hegemonic notions of national identity posing an implicit challenge