



# Unlearning Scarcity, Cultivating Solidarity

## [Condensed Part 1]

A condensed version of our toolkit for Asian-identifying individuals to harness their sphere of influence and set the groundwork for a more unified future.

[Full toolkit here.](#)

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### What Is Scarcity Mentality?

Scarcity mentality is the idea that **everyone exists within a spectrum of competition**. This mindset assumes there are finite resources and assets (tangible *and* intangible), and that every resource obtained by one person or group comes *at the expense of* another. Therefore, resources should only be reserved for those in our closest circle(s).

We all experience some level of scarcity mentality at both an individual level ("I want to have this for myself") as well as a group level ("I want *us* to be successful, not *them*"). The latter is a function of tribalism, a primitive aspect of human evolution that helped us build the necessary group cohesion to compete against others for resources. We create these in-groups using shared identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity) as well as common backgrounds, behaviors, and beliefs.

However, the unique ways in which marginalized individuals and groups experience scarcity are not due to self-prioritization or tribalism alone. With the onset of capitalism in the 1600s, the **idea of scarcity was intentionally weaponized by dominant groups in power** to justify the unequal distribution of resources. Most notably, this was done **through the construction of race** (under the false pretense of biology) to systematically exploit groups seen as "others". As Ruth Wilson Gilmore eloquently states, "*Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.*"

As a result of the dominant group consistently limiting the ability of marginalized individuals to thrive within existing social structures, scarcity has evolved beyond a fight for survival and into an **omnipresent socialization that we as marginalized identities are "not enough"** and, as a group, can never acquire enough to access the full spectrum of opportunities available to the dominant group. This then leads to self-defeatist in-fighting

within and between different groups, further perpetuating the cycle of injustice and maintaining existing power dynamics.

## **Manifestations of Scarcity Within the Asian American Identity**

### **Exploitation**

Asian Americans have long been exploited as workers in the United States, from Chinese laborers who were hired [to undertake the most dangerous work](#) of building the transcontinental railroad, to American colonizers [establishing English-language nursing programs in the Philippines](#) in order to “civilize” them.

However, even though it is the “foreignness” of Asian Americans’ ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds that pose barriers to their acceptance, those same attributes are often *appropriated* by the white dominant culture for profit (e.g. hula dance, [Mongolian headdress](#)).

### **Marginalization**

Marginalization refers to the prevention or limitation of full participation in society. This can be observed through *overt* exclusions, such as from employment opportunities, as well as through *covert* pressures to hide aspects of one’s authentic self and doubting one’s own abilities and opinions.

Marginalization is also reinforced by racial quotas. Our Salon participants pointed out how white-dominant platforms only allow a small number of racial minorities to be simultaneously present as [tokens](#) of racial equity within the team, organization, or industry.

### **Powerlessness**

Powerlessness is the deprivation of a person’s ability to make decisions about their living or working conditions. One Filipinx participant described the stratifications of powerlessness through “**lines of safety**” -- that is, comparing their relative freedom traveling through TSA screening lines, to the experience of their Indian American friends who are almost always stopped.

This sense of powerlessness is also reinforced by discriminatory policies. For example, the San Francisco Plague of 1900-1904 saw quarantine measures that allowed European Americans to leave the affected area, while Chinese and Japanese Americans required a health certificate to leave the city, confining them in already poor living conditions as the plague occurred mainly in Chinatown.

## Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism refers to the value, or even idolization, of the oppressor's culture, norms, and characteristics. One prominent example is colorism among Asian communities where light skin sets the beauty standard.

For immigrant families in the U.S., the myth of the American Dream glorifies capitalistic meritocracy, while rewarding material consumption as “proof” of success. This *fallacy of abundance* can lead to beliefs that engaging in materialism and overconsumption are effective ways to stop and prevent scarcity.

## Violence

Violence is more than physical harm; it can also be emotional, verbal, or ideological. Societal norms, institutionalized structures, and governmental policies that condone violence, or make it difficult for victims to seek justice, are also forms of violence and oppression.

Seeking acceptance in predominantly white societies in order to avoid future violence can result in Asian Americans' internalized racism and self-inflicted violence. Examples of these methods include the use of derogatory terms like [“fob” \(fresh off the boat\)](#) to delineate different types of Asian Americans and ongoing attacks against [Asian women in relationships with white men](#).

It is by design that this violence is often not fully understood, reported on, legally battled, or properly addressed. For example, many medical assessments like PTSD are based on white subjects. Given the lack of studies centering the specific struggles of Asian Americans, it is unsurprising that Asian Americans are the [least likely to seek professional mental health help](#).

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## The Social & Structural Weaponization of Scarcity

The scarcity mentality is not only a painful relic of oppression, but also a framework actively wielded by the dominant group in order to maintain power. In effect, scarcity results in a system in which one non-dominant group can oppress another non-dominant group.

The false narrative of always-finite resources and the corresponding scarcity mentality around the distribution of these resources has been routinely weaponized throughout U.S. history by the group(s) in power to:

1. **Stoke strife and hamper cooperation** between marginalized groups

2. Obfuscate the bigger issue of ongoing (and increasing) **inequality in allocation of resources** between the dominant group(s) and *all* marginalized groups
3. Encourage one marginalized group to **support the oppression** of other marginalized groups

## The Model Minority Myth and Scarcity

The term *model minority* was first used in 1966 by William Petersen to laud Japanese Americans for achieving success despite having “been the object of color prejudice”. He contrasted them against African Americans who, despite being “thoroughly American” had been unable to overcome racial and other structural barriers.

Now, the model minority myth has expanded to include the overlapping myths that:

1. Asian Americans are a highly successful, upwardly mobile group that have outperformed other racial minorities
2. The success of Asian Americans is due to innate ability and/or cultural norms
3. Because of this collective success, Asian Americans are no longer facing racial discrimination
4. Since Asian Americans are no longer facing racially-charged obstacles, they do not need additional government or societal support

For Asian Americans, these false assumptions of socioeconomic success, self-sufficiency, and “overcoming” of racial issues undermines the very real need for dialogue and analyses centering Asian Americans’ unique challenges. This only serves to exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and scarcity when facing continued discrimination, prejudice, and limited opportunities.

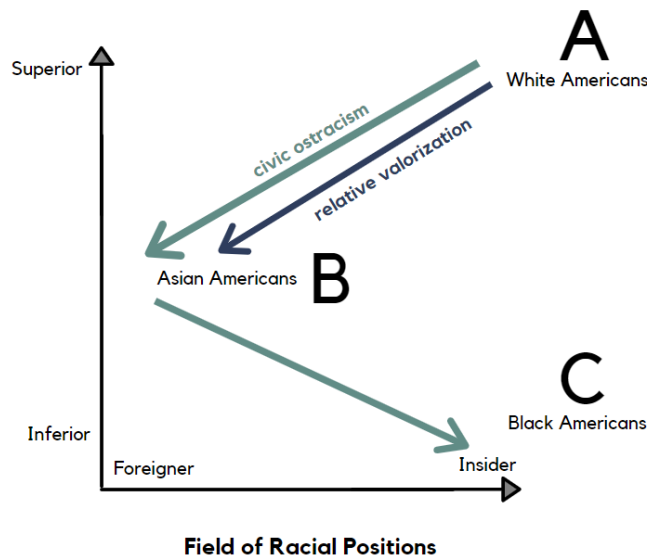
For other marginalized groups, the implication of the model minority myth is that *despite* limited resources and high obstacles for marginalized groups, Asian Americans have succeeded -- therefore, **it is not the scarcity of resources that is the problem but rather others’ inability to use those scarce resources effectively.**

## How the Model Minority Myth Fits Into Racial Triangulation

The model minority myth and its continual harm to both Asian American and other marginalized communities is best understood through the framework of [racial triangulation](#), a term coined by Claire J. Kim where she describes how:

1. Dominant group A (white Americans) will use the process of *relative valorization* to **portray subordinate group B (Asian Americans) as superior to subordinate group C (Black Americans)** on certain cultural or racial grounds

2. White Americans will **paint Asian Americans as unassimilable** (“perpetual foreigner”) to ostracise them from being part of political and civic membership
  - For example, [candidates rarely attempt to win Asian American votes](#)
3. With #1 and #2 working in tandem, white Americans are able to wield cultural, racial, or political power over both groups while ensuring they do not work together to change the oppressive system



The position of Asian Americans within this racial triangle has been manipulated by the dominant group to:

1. Offer certain privileges (namely the absence of oppression and scarcity in certain arenas) to Asian Americans, best described by the term **white adjacency**.
2. Perpetuate a [false belief](#) in Asian Americans that whiteness (or total acceptance by the dominant group) is achievable within our current societal structures

Instead of **recognizing the ulterior motives (primarily, subordination of non-white groups) that drive these shared privileges or common goals**, Asian Americans also engage in oppressive behaviors such as anti-Blackness, colorism, and racism against other racial minorities in attempts to “secure their spot” amongst white Americans.

In addition to perpetuating racism against other minorities, Asian Americans also marginalize and oppress identities within their own communities by adhering to predominately white, male, heteronormative, cisgender, able bodied, and other dominant identities.