

# TOWARD ASIAN ARGENTINE STUDIES

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*Abstract: Asians in Argentina have received little scholarly attention despite the current proliferation of studies on Asians in Latin America. Asian Argentines' absence from academic research reflects, in part, their marginality and presumed foreignness in Argentina's past and current national narratives. Existing scholarship frames Asian descendants predominantly as members of single-ethnic colectividades (communities) illustrating ties to co-ethnics and country of origin. To broaden this perspective, I examine the possibilities of a panethnic and domestic "Asian Argentine" approach. Conceptualizing an Asian Argentine category can be problematized by ongoing theoretical discussions regarding the limitations of multiculturalism and nation-based inquiries. Situating these critiques in Argentina's particular context—from its historical insistence on whiteness to its newly ethnicized political arena today—I argue that an Asian Argentine approach can be a useful analytical and political tool to understand this group's position in Argentina and serve as a starting point to challenge the discourses that marginalize Asian Argentines as nonexistent or irreversibly foreign.*

In her 2009 essay "Multiculturalism in Latin American Studies: Locating the 'Asian' Immigrant; or, Where Are the *Chinos* and *Turcos*?" Evelyn Hu-DeHart (2009, 237) observed that a new group of scholars was correcting the long tradition of "glaring inattention to Asians in Latin America." The reversal has continued with the emergence of an array of monographs, edited volumes, special journal issues, conferences, and new journals that address Asian peoples of Latin America from both national and transnational perspectives. Reflecting scholars' interest in carving out a space for the study of Asians in Latin America that would resist mediation by more established fields such as Asian American studies but also transcend boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation, this emerging field encompasses multiple geographic, disciplinary, and conceptual lenses—from transpacific studies to studies of Asians in the Americas, Asian diaspora studies, Asian Latin American studies, and Latin American, Luso-Hispanic, or hemispheric orientalisms.

Despite this growing interest and Asians' increased visibility in Argentina's public spaces and popular imaginary, Asian Argentines have received little scholarly attention outside the small group of works stemming mostly from history and the social sciences. The historical inattention to people of Asian descent is not surprising, especially in the Argentine context, where a dominant national narrative obliterated racial differences to promote the idea of a homogenous whiteness; but the absence of Asian Argentines from academic research today is at odds with their striking visibility and changing symbolic meanings in contemporary culture. Moreover, the underdevelopment of Asian Argentine studies is inconsistent with the expanding research on Argentina's race and ethnicity.

Up to now, much of the existing scholarship frames Asian Argentines as

members of ethnic *colectividades* that are deemed distant from the majority population, alien to Argentine nationhood, and separate from one another.<sup>1</sup> By tracing histories and patterns of migration and settlement, as well as issues of ethnic identity or group formation, these works lay the foundation to understand the largest Asian groups in Argentina—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. More recently, scholars have taken a diasporic approach, expanding established ethnic scholarship to include transnational connections (Higa 2002; Mera 2006; Onaha 2011; Trejos and Chiang 2012). While scholars often assert the bicultural or fluid identities of Asians in Argentina, most works lean heavily on relationships to countries of origin and among co-ethnics, with little attention to connections between Asian communities or their participation in domestic Argentine issues. In other words, notwithstanding recent efforts to question the boundedness of Argentina's Asian communities by considering them part of broader transnational diasporas (e.g., Korean, Nikkei<sup>2</sup>), membership in distinct *colectividades* continues to inform the ways scholars and the public alike understand, imagine, and interpellate Asian Argentines.

Scholars' approaches to Asian Argentines as members of clear-cut *colectividades* mirror, in part, the marginality and presumed foreignness of Asians in past and current national narratives. Historical views of Asian Argentines as outsiders endure even with Argentina's enthusiastic embrace of multiculturalism, which resulted largely from the 2001 economic crisis that shattered the myth of Argentina's racial and economic exceptionalism. Concentrating on Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples, this multiculturalism challenges previous claims of Europeaness to adopt a populist and emphatically Latin Americanist position that mostly overlooks people of Asian descent. Furthermore, multiculturalism's inherent politics of recognition—fundamentally dependent on identifiable differences—locks Asian Argentines into essentialized performances of Asianness, distancing them further from Argentine nationhood (Ko 2014, 2543).

The dominant ideology has demanded that Asians—like all other immigrants—adopt, as Marcelo Higa (2002, 262) writes, "'Argentineness' as the first principle of identification." As he goes on to say, even "a descriptive term such as 'Japanese-Argentine'" has been rejected by the demands of assimilation. At the same time, however, dominant definitions of nationhood that automatically exclude Asian descendants have prescribed their strict belonging to presumably "foreign" *colectividades*. Following this cultural dictum, people of Asian descent betray no greater acceptance of the category Asian Argentine than does the dominant sector itself. In this sense, the lens of ethnic *colectividades* offers a crucial understanding of the strong ethnic ties, economies, and associative lives that Asians in Argentina have built as a response to a dominant discourse that rejects and erases them. Nonetheless, Asians' ethnic and diasporic ties should not preclude an inquiry into their participation in the Argentine national space or their activities beyond the boundaries of the *colectividad*.

1. The term *colectividad*, used both by community members and the broader Argentine society, connotes an ethnic difference from the Argentine nation (Gómez 2013, 161).

2. Nikkei refers to Japanese emigrants from Japan and their descendants living abroad.

This article asks: Can we move beyond the framework of *colectividades* to talk about an Asian Argentine category and examine both its panethnicity—the shared experiences and connections between Asians of different ethnicities—and Asian Argentines' connection to and participation in the Argentine nation? Is a panethnic Asian Argentine approach possible when, unlike in the United States, Asians in Argentina have not apparently formed panethnic coalitions? Furthermore, if Asians in Argentina self-identify and are externally identified as belonging to distinct communities, would an Asian Argentine approach amount to obliterating local racial meanings and committing scholarly imperialism, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999, 43–46) once charged?

This article explores the possibilities of an Asian Argentine perspective by comparing how a pan-Asian identity in the United States and single-ethnic Asian identities in Argentina resulted from distinct national narratives and racial structures but a shared orientalist ideology. I suggest that if, in the United States, panethnicity was a way to contest explicit racial categorizations, in Argentina, panethnicity can be a way to contest a historical lack of recognition. Examining Asian Argentines' position in Argentina's emerging multiculturalism, I argue that the embrace of diversity elevates their visible presence, but it maintains the hegemonic racial order and national narrative through official and cultural discourses that reinforce their status as outsiders whose inclusion is at the will of the dominant subjects. Finally, I examine some potential concerns about an Asian Argentine perspective that arise from broader theoretical debates: the limitations of panethnic and nation-based inquiries, and the lack of official and self-recognition of the Asian Argentine category. Putting these critiques in conversation with Argentina's particular context, I argue that conceptualizing a domestic and panethnic Asian Argentina can be a useful political and analytical tool in understanding this group's relationship to the Argentine nation, and can serve as a starting point to challenge the notions of Asian Argentines' inexistence or irreversible foreignness.

#### ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES AND ASIANS IN ARGENTINA

Asians in the United States, like Asians in Argentina, are often perceived as foreign because of their phenotypical difference (Chang 2010; Tsuda 2014). But Asian American movements and studies have used a panethnic strategy to claim their space as a major national minority. Asian Americans' panethnicity and claim as Americans present a stark contrast to Asian Argentines, who have formed strong ethnic ties without publicly asserting their belonging to Argentina or forging a pan-Asian solidarity. We can attribute these differences to the smaller number of Asian immigrants to Argentina but also to the distinct racial practices and orders found in these countries. The United States imposes white hegemony through explicit racial exclusions and classifications, while Argentina imposes white hegemony through the omission of racial classifications and a discourse that insisted on a homogenous European ancestry.

Yen Le Espiritu (2008, 119) identifies the root of Asian American panethnicity "in the racialization of Asian national groups by dominant groups and in Asian

Americans' response to those constructions." Panethnic consciousness and solidarity formed at the intersection of explicit racial exclusions (e.g., the Immigration Act of 1924, Japanese internment camps), cultural discourses that homogenized and denigrated Asians as "Asiatic" or "Orientals," bureaucratic lumping, and the sustained growth of Asian populations that made them important political actors (Kibria 1998, 943–944). Le Espiritu (2008, 121) indicates that Asian American consciousness emerged in the 1960s, when US-born Asians began to share English as a common language, and the civil rights and global anticolonial movements "enabled diverse Asian American groups to understand their 'unequal circumstances and histories as being related [to those movements].'" Hence, the Asian American concept was institutionalized in the US racial system not only by state practices but also by the group itself, which utilizes it as the basis for antidiscrimination efforts, access to government resources, and participation in the multiculturalist movement (Kibria 1998, 943).

Nazli Kibria (1998, 946–947) underscores that "common interests" arising from the "exigencies of U.S. racialization" creates a "racial collectivity" of Asian Americans rather than a "culturally bonded entity." Asian Americans' strategy was not to present themselves as a homogenous group but to highlight shared historical experiences of discrimination, racial violence, and poverty and to bond with other oppressed groups. Changing global and domestic conditions have tested and shifted the boundaries of Asian America. The 1965 Immigration Act greatly diversified the Asian American population, which had been primarily Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese (Hu-DeHart 2000, 7), raising questions about the boundaries of this category. Diversification likewise reveals its internal hierarchizations, which tend to privilege English speakers and those of East Asian descent (Le Espiritu 2008, 134; Kibria 1998, 948).

Hu-DeHart (2000, 7) also describes the emergence of a new Asian American narrative in the late twentieth century. The social ascent of Asian Americans converged with the rise of Asian nations as global economic powers, linking Asian American success to an essential "Asianness" consisting of "discipline and hard work, devotion to family, communitarian ethos, and reverence for learning" (Hu-DeHart 2000, 7–8). Hu-DeHart (2000, 9) argues that Asian Americans assumed a new role as "bridge-building transnationals" charged with facilitating US-Asian connections. She adds, however, that only a privileged class of Asian Americans has access to such a role.

The concept of Asian America has been challenged by the much debated risks—of exclusion, homogenization, and essentialization—inherent to the concept of panethnicity and the emergence of transnational perspectives. Nonetheless, national inclusion has not ceased to be an important part of the Asian American project as Asian Americans continue to seek entry into the American mainstream (Hu-DeHart 2000, 10).

The dominant attitudes of the United States and Argentina toward people of Asian descent share common ground in what Erika Lee (2005, 237–238) terms the "global dynamics of Orientalism." Lee focuses on how a hemispheric circulation of the notion of yellow peril racialized Asians as "dangerous and unassimilable foreigners" in the United States, Canada, and Mexico during the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. She also identifies a common notion that “Chinese immigrated in great numbers, were purportedly indistinguishable from each other, and brought economic competition, immorality, filth, overcrowded housing, disease” (Lee 2005, 240). A century later, Argentines have perceived waves of Korean and Chinese immigrants as a continued social problem and have framed the threat in similar terms. However, a global orientalism is simultaneously circulating in present-day Argentina that imagines Asians as a version of the successful transnational model minority that Hu-DeHart describes.

Argentina did not institute legislation that explicitly restricted or promoted Asian immigration. Asian immigration to Argentina began in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of a small but constant flow of Japanese immigrants until the 1930s. There was a second wave of Japanese immigration between World War II and the 1960s, when Japan emerged as an economic powerhouse (Higa 1995, 471). While Argentina’s constitution has specifically encouraged European immigration since 1853, and some marginal voices, influenced by the yellow peril alarm traveling from the north, raised concerns over the potential racial threat of the early Japanese arrivals (Higa 1995, 482; Gómez 2011, 6), these concerns did not yield active restrictions. The earliest Korean immigrants came to Argentina in the 1960s, and the military dictatorship’s efforts to stop the flow of unskilled and dark-skinned migrants from neighboring Latin American countries in favor of investor migration (Novick 2008, 139) possibly contributed to a wave of Korean and Taiwanese immigrants. A 1985 agreement between Argentina and South Korea, for example, brought soaring rates of immigrants, who were required to deposit US\$30,000 in Argentina’s Banco Nacional. It is commonly estimated that at their peak in the 1980s and 1990s, Korean and Taiwanese communities each surpassed 40,000 members.

Argentina’s Korean and Taiwanese communities shrank considerably after the 2001 economic crisis as their members left the country. But the first decade of the millennium brought a wave of Chinese immigrants, becoming today the fastest growing immigrant group in Argentina with an estimated population of 120,000. Progressive legislation passed in 2004 encouraged immigration generally. The new law considers migration a basic human right, ensures universal health care and education notwithstanding legal status, and facilitates residency.

The increase of Chinese immigration has coincided with the emergence of China as Argentina’s second-most-important trade partner. The new partnership has not only transformed Argentina’s economy but also its geophysical landscape through the introduction of soy (Paz 2014, 153–154). With the new crop occupying 64 percent of the planted area today, Argentina has become a leading producer of soybeans and soy products, most of which are exported to China (Laufer 2013, 126). Growing economic relationships with China fostered unprecedented cultural initiatives as well, including the first Chinese-Spanish bilingual public school founded in 2014 through a collaboration between the city governments of Buenos Aires and Beijing, and the establishment of the Instituto Confucio in two major national universities offering Chinese language classes, cultural activities, and scholarships. But, as I will examine, China’s position as key economic partner has not yet undercut the racist discourses that discriminate against and mock

people of Chinese descent. In the Argentine context, China's growing "economic capital is not directly related to cultural capital" (Kim 2015), as was perhaps best exemplified by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's tweet mocking Chinese pronunciation during a 2015 state visit to China (Osno 2015).

Until the recent embrace of multiculturalism, Asian Argentines faced a national project that denied the existence of nonwhites and that "prohibited" ethnicity from political language (Grimson 2006, 73). A systematic omission of race and ethnicity from institutional life supported the popular claims that "no hay negros en la Argentina" (there are no blacks in Argentina) and "los argentinos descendemos de los barcos" (we Argentines descend from ships), hinting at an exclusive European ascendancy. The equation of nonwhite with extinct or foreign legitimized the belief that indigenous populations live conveniently outside Argentina's borders and that the dwellers of the proliferating *villas* (slums) during the 1990s were all *boliguayos* (a pejorative for Latin American migrants) (Ko 2014, 2533). Fears of an "oleada amarilla" (yellow wave) of Koreans in the 1990s and Chinese immigrants today also gained currency. In contrast to the United States, then, racialization and exclusion did not occur through institutionalized racial categories but through an overwhelming absence from institutional practices and official articulations of nationhood. Furthermore, cultural discourses and everyday interactions play a crucial role in producing orientalist and xenophobic meanings that support the exclusion or erasure of ethnic Asians.

Notions of the "yellow peril" particularly affect Korean and Chinese immigrants. The establishment of Baek-Gu, the Korean neighborhood, and an expanding Chinatown in Buenos Aires reinforces the perception that Asians cluster culturally and geographically because they have no interest in integrating with the larger Argentine society. Japanese Argentines dispersed throughout urban areas to set up their dry-cleaning businesses (their niche occupation since the 1950s) at a distance from one another, which lessens the stigma (Laumonier 2004, 171). But despite their "positive" stereotype, which to a certain extent arises from their low profile, Japanese Argentines are considered equally foreign and often indistinguishable from Koreans and Chinese.

Facing these discriminatory and orientaling discourses, Asians in Argentina have forged strong ethnic communities and connections to their countries of origin. Furthermore, in a context that associated Argentineness with whiteness and nonwhiteness with foreignness, but that also demanded assimilation, Asians in Argentina have not articulated explicitly binational and "hyphenated" identities. Although no research has addressed the formation of a pan-Asian consciousness at the individual level, the lack of panethnic organizations suggests that Asians in Argentina, like pre-1965 Asian American communities, remain separate without responding to dominant discourse as a group (Kibria 1998, 943).

#### ASIANS IN ARGENTINE MULTICULTURALISM

A paradigmatic shift to multiculturalism and its attention to nonwhite peoples have notably increased Asian visibility. The 2001 economic and identity crisis that

collapsed the state and shattered the myth of Argentina as a white and middle-class nation accelerated the renegotiations of the meaning of Argentineness that had begun during the postdictatorship years (Adamovsky 2012, 345). Although Argentina's multiculturalism focuses predominantly on indigenous and African heritage, it has also opened up official spaces—ethnic parades, festivities, and government Web sites—for the re-ethnicization of people of European descent and has increased the visibility of other, less prominent groups, including Asians. Asian Argentine associations have become increasingly active in advocating their interests and promoting their culture to members and the general public in this new climate.

Despite their increasing visibility, people of Asian descent continue to be marginalized by official discourses, orientalized by cultural discourses, and victimized by racial violence. At the core of these official, cultural, and racist practices is the undisturbed notion that they are quintessentially foreign and numerically insignificant. The very multicultural efforts that attempt to recognize people of Asian descent suggest that they cannot “become” Argentine due to their insuperable foreignness. For example, because the multicultural project of recognition depends fundamentally on defining distinct cultural differences, it further essentializes Asian Argentines by depicting them wearing kimonos, performing the dragon dance or a taekwondo kick. Moreover, official processes of legitimation as national subjects, now open to Afro-Argentines and indigenous people, still omit Asian Argentines while xenophobic and orientalizing cultural discourses or social interactions have remained unchecked.

#### *Asian Argentines' Absence from Official Discourses*

Aside from token inclusion in platforms showcasing immigrant groups—such as ethnic parades or the “Observatorio de colectividades,” a government Web page that celebrates Buenos Aires's “waves of migration [*oleadas migratorias*]” (Gobierno 2015)—official multicultural projects to rearticulate Argentina as diverse have mostly excluded Asian Argentines. We can mention, for example, their absence from the 2010 Bicentennial National Census—a groundbreaking effort to count Afro-Argentines and indigenous peoples—or any other form of sustained institutional data. Scholars, media, and even government agencies rely on a combination of inconsistent and often outdated sources to estimate the population of Asian Argentines. This replicates a circular strategy of omission and minimization of Asian populations that, according to Mara Loveman (2014, 200), “both rested upon and reinforced the presumption of their insignificance to the demographic development of national populations.” Scholars and community associations today estimate that there are 120,000 people of Chinese descent, 60,000 people of Japanese descent, and 30,000 people of Korean descent, along with smaller communities of South Asian and Southeast Asian origin. Because of the lack of official data, these estimates derive from a combination of sources—community associations and Argentine and Asian government agencies—that can be outdated or limited in scope. For example, community estimates possibly overlook those who

do not actively participate in ethnic associations, the Argentine government only counts foreign-born Asians, and Asian governments tend to focus on their overseas citizens, potentially undercounting Asian populations as they ignore people of mixed descent and Argentine nationals (Ko 2016, 272). Asians' persistent statistical uncertainty allows opposite presumptions to coexist: one that minimizes the Asian Argentine presence and legitimacy, and another that triggers the rhetoric of an Asian invasion.

In another example, the massive antidiscrimination campaign of INADI (Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia, y el Racismo), whose goal is to educate people that racial minorities actually exist in Argentina and promote tolerance, largely obscures Asian Argentines. Its video campaign, which addresses a wide array of minorities and their legitimacy as Argentines, only features one ethnic Asian in a short animated clip that portrays a Japanese character dressed in kimono with chopsticks in her hair (Ko 2016, 270). Other antidiscrimination efforts also overlook and then emphasize the permanent foreignness of Asians. The Plan Nacional contra la Discriminación proposes to "support the festivities and celebrations of *foreign* cultures" (my emphasis) as a major solution to the long history of anti-Asian racism. Although the promotion of different cultures is in itself laudable, the proposal takes for granted the necessary foreignness of Asians while imposing the performance of such foreignness as a solution to racial intolerance.

#### *Asian Argentines in Cultural Discourse*

If up to the 1990s the few cultural representations of Asians were limited to hyperorientalized or unappealing secondary characters, in recent years, Asian Argentines have taken central roles in films, literature, and television. The popular television series *Los graduados*, which aired in 2012, for example, included a major Asian Argentine character named Walter Mao. Chang Sung Kim, who portrayed the *lunfardo*-speaking Walter Mao, told an interviewer he was relieved to finally get a break from playing "oriental" characters who do not speak Spanish (Scanarotti 2012). Despite this headway, negative portrayals of Asians persist, as evidenced by the recent revival of the character "la coreana" popularized in the 1990s in the television show *Juana y sus hermanas*. In 2013, the comedian Juana Molina returned "la coreana" to the screen as part of an advertisement campaign for the telecommunications company Claro. Played by a yellow-faced Molina, the commercial's main laughing point, as in the original show, was Asians' accented Spanish and love of a good bargain.

At the same time, however, Asian Argentines have become key symbolic figures, especially in cultural manifestations that attempt to work out issues of national identity following the 2001 economic crisis and the nation's emerging multiculturalism. While not entirely escaping stereotyped or orientalized visions of their Asian protagonists, novels by writers of Asian and non-Asian descent have explored the position of Asians in Argentina's literary and national narratives in such titles as *Gaijin* (2002) by Maximiliano Matayoshi, *Flores de un solo día*

(2002) by Anna Kazumi Stahl, *María Domecq* (2007) by Juan Forn, and *Un chino en bicicleta* (2007) by Ariel Magnus.<sup>3</sup>

The frequent representation of Asians in cultural products today—in contrast to their absence from official discourses—has to do with their symbolic flexibility in the popular imaginary. Instrumental to a multicultural ideology, this imaginary vacillates between the impetus to transcend a failed national narrative but still preserve the nation, and to be more inclusive but maintain the hegemonic racial order (Ko 2014, 2544). Unlike the rather fixed positions of traditional minorities—Afro-Argentine and indigenous—in class hierarchies (belonging to the lower classes) and historical imagination (as *patrimonio nacional*), Asian characters can equally embody “hypertradition” and “hypermodernity” (Lesser 2007, xxvii), or the highbrow cosmopolitan subjects described by Hu-DeHart (2009, 9) and unrefined working-class immigrants. Moreover, the assumed understanding of these characters’ foreignness by the Argentine public—evoked through language barriers, orientalist representations, or phenotypical differences—turns their inclusion or exclusion into a question of choice and condition at the hands of the dominant sector. Cultural representations of Asian Argentines create the leeway to set the terms of inclusion while reaffirming the boundaries of the pre-existing nation, in contrast to matters of minority rights and historical reparation that the multicultural ideology cannot deny in relation to indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants.

In three recent films, for example, Asian characters ensure the continuity of the Argentine nation and its traditions through their roles as outsiders (an outsiderness instantly recognized by Argentine viewers) and play out the rules of what is acceptable and unacceptable for the newly multicultural nation. The noble samurai morphs into a gaucho in *Samurai* (Scheuer 2012). The infantilized Chinese immigrant arrives looking for a family member, not a job, and helps the Argentine protagonist of *Un cuento chino* (Borensztein 2011) to reconcile with a nation that sent him to the War of Malvinas. The fully assimilated government official of Chinese descent battles against a Chinese mafia that is endangering Argentina’s urban, rural, and moral landscapes in *Mujer conejo* (Chen 2013). All these characters meet certain conditions for inclusion into the nation, symbolizing Argentina’s move beyond its intolerant whiteness without seriously threatening the hegemonic racial order and national identity.<sup>4</sup>

### Racial Violence

The casual use of the term *oriental* and the interchangeability of *chino*, *coreano*, and *japonés* in everyday language signal Asian Argentines’ continued margin-

3. See Hagimoto (2014) for an analysis of the representation of identities that transcend hyphenated homeland/host country binaries in *Flores de un solo día* and *Gaijin*; see Ko (2015) for an examination of *Un chino en bicicleta* and *María Domecq* in the context of Argentine multiculturalism.

4. See Ko (2016) for a thorough analysis of the role of Asian protagonists as mediators of the nation in these three films.

alization despite their presence in mainstream culture and efforts to promote diversity. Cases of racial violence against Chinese supermarkets, which came to national attention at the height of the 2001 economic crisis, however, are the most alarming. Today, with Chinese immigrants and their descendants owning 80 percent of neighborhood grocery stores, the “chino,” as the stores are called, has become a physical and symbolic site of contention that materializes racial tensions against a group presumed to be foreign, unethical, and in control of Argentines’ access to basic nutrition.

In 2006, after a violent altercation in which a Chinese grocer shot a truck driver, the truck drivers’ union staged a national boycott against Chinese supermarkets, refusing to deliver goods. The boycott took a highly racist tone when a union delegate declared, “El italiano es jodido. El gallego es jodido. El judío es jodido. Pero con ellos nunca tenemos los problemas que hace tiempo tenemos con los chinos.” (The Italian is screwed up. The Galician is screwed up. The Jew is screwed up. But with them we never have the problems that we have been having with the Chinese for a while) (Delfino and Martín 2012).<sup>5</sup> Pablo Moyano, the union’s leader and a major public figure, added, “Son los chinos que se tienen que adaptar a nosotros, porque están en nuestro país. Si esto hubiera pasado en China, el que lo hizo terminaba en el paredón.” (It is the Chinese who should adapt to us because they are in our country. If this happened in China, whoever did it would end up against the firing wall) (Delfino and Martín 2012).

More recently, violent lootings and mass calls on social media against Chinese supermarkets (one call, purportedly, “to have a good time”) have been increasingly frequent. These calls have forced supermarkets to shut down and beg for police protection and even led the Chinese government to intervene. Widespread accusations of greed, unethical business practices, and connections to the Chinese mafia support acts of violence against Chinese. A myth has circulated, for example, that Chinese grocers turn off their refrigerators at night, endangering their customers’ health. These rumors spread so widely that the association of Chinese grocers signed an agreement with the government of Buenos Aires to install temperature-detecting chips in the refrigerators of all Chinese-owned markets.

Present-day attacks on the Chinese community resemble the anti-Korean attitudes of the 1990s. While Koreans’ arrival initially coincided with a positive image as hard-working “orientales,” negative perceptions dominated as they gained economic capital and clustered in their ethnic neighborhoods (Mera 2007, 7). Koreans’ visibility, affluence, and presumed lack of assimilation triggered a xenophobic discourse that constructed them as greedy and lawless—evading taxes by hiding money under their mattresses and exploiting their workers. As with Chinese supermarkets, the notion that Koreans accumulate wealth without giving back to Argentine society, or even at the expense of Argentines, resulted in targeted robberies of Korean homes and businesses. Today’s anti-Chinese sentiment, exemplified by the attacks on Chinese supermarkets, affects other Asian Argentine communities as Argentines often overlook ethnic distinctions. For ex-

5. My translations.

ample, in 2006, the truck drivers also boycotted some Korean businesses that had no involvement with Chinese supermarkets (Delfino and Martín 2012).

#### TOWARD ASIAN ARGENTINE STUDIES

Asian Argentines are caught at the crossroads of an incipient multicultural ideology: on the one hand highly visible as instrumental symbols of diversity, but on the other hand considered outsiders by a multicultural imagination that draws a line between national minorities (Afro-descendants and indigenous) and foreign Asians. Their position as outsiders, according to past and current national narratives, reveals the limitations of multiculturalism as a way to transcend the intolerance of the “white” nation. Scholars have widely pointed to multiculturalism’s failure to overcome hegemonic power structures, emphasizing that multiculturalism’s essentialization of culture creates new forms of racism and that ethnocultural recognition does not directly address socioeconomic inequalities. In this sense, then, these shortcomings affect all minorities, not only Asian Argentines. Multiculturalism’s focus on the symbolic is palpable, especially in the major achievements of Afro-Argentine and indigenous activism—national commemoration days and official recognition of their existence. Notwithstanding the limitations of the multicultural model, symbolic legitimation has advanced more tangible group demands, including antidiscrimination laws, minority rights, and land reparation.

Given the persistent marginalization of Asians in Argentina, existing scholarly approaches that view ethnic group formation as resistance to dominant discourses are greatly significant. Without ignoring these important contributions, I argue that taking an Asian Argentine perspective fulfills two major aims. The first is to explore and ground in Argentina’s particular context the shared experiences of Asian Argentines through the lens of panethnicity. Their marginalization by a triad of discourses that constantly cancel each other out leaves them at a sort of ontological impasse. On the one hand, the exigencies of assimilation conflict with the discourse that Asian Argentines will always be essentially foreign—chino, coreano, or japonés. On the other hand, however, the discourse of homogeneity that treats all Asians as indistinguishable from one another—as evidenced by the fact that the term *chino* can encompass Asians of all nationalities, and by the interchangeable use of *chino*, *coreano*, and *japonés*—in turn cancels the discourse of ethnicity. A solution to the impasse is to conceptualize panethnicity, which can help us make cross- and panethnic connections against a discourse of continual unrecognition and misrecognition. The second goal of an Asian Argentine approach is to nationalize the discussion and challenge the notion that Asians are foreign and therefore irrelevant, a presumption that not only impedes a symbolic sense of belonging but that can have political and material consequences, especially with the current emergence of ethnicity as a key tool for political action in Argentina (Grimson 2006, 81) and when its multiculturalism extends to resource allocation.

Given recent critical trends to transcend groupist and national frameworks in favor of transnational diasporic perspectives, a focus on a panethnic national

minority might seem outmoded. Nonetheless, Argentine scholars have noted a “resurgence of nationalist discourse” in contemporary Argentina as a result of the 2001 economic crisis (Page 2009, 6). Joanna Page (2009, 6) argues that “the Crisis delivered a hefty blow to Argentina’s First World aspirations, reinforcing at the same time the specificity of national experience” and triggering rearticulations of national narratives. These rearticulations have dismantled myths of Argentina’s Europeaness, moving the country toward a populist politics and the celebration of nonwhite heritage. Unfortunately, as the rising “calls for civilizing and genocidal violence” against “negros de mierda” (and, we should add, “chinos de mierda”) reveal, rearticulations of the nation have also triggered widespread rage “at the evidence that Argentina is *not* a white nation” (Gordillo 2016, 243).<sup>6</sup> The boundaries of the nation, then, including the symbolic and the material conditions of racialized peoples, continues to be a high-stakes issue in Argentina. In this context, the Asian Argentine framework presents an analytical and political tool to contest marginalizing discourses and racist practices that rest largely on an exclusionary definition of the nation. Aside from delivering numeric presence against the statistical invisibility of Asian Argentines, framing an Asian Argentina reveals the contradictions of the triple discourse through which Argentina has framed and negated it.

I will address some concerns regarding panethnicity, self-recognition of Asian Argentines, and the limitations of the national framework as they possibly lie behind the persistence of *colectividades* as a scholarly framework. These include the idea that treating Asian descendants as a homogenous group disregards cultural differences and the often conflictive histories between nations of origin. But scholars have also emphasized that panethnicity functions as a political and scholarly strategy to confront shared processes of racialization rather than as a cultural bond (Lopez and Espiritu 1990; Kibria 1998). Regarding Asian Americans, Dina Okamoto (2003, 835) illustrates that “ethnic and panethnic organizing” has been historically “mutualistic, not competitive.” In other words, framing an Asian Argentina does not imply an exclusive and essential Asian Argentine culture, but it can shed light on how orientalist ideologies have historically blurred heterogeneities and on Asian Argentines’ shared victimization by racism. Furthermore, as Lisa Lowe (2000, 439) observes about Asian Americans, critical discussions about such groupings can simultaneously reveal their “internal contradictions and slippages” in order to insure that “essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower.”

Argentina’s racial order has relied overwhelmingly on the reasoning that Argentina is white, there are no nonwhites, and therefore, racism is not possible, allowing implicit (e.g., diffusion of the idea of whiteness) and explicit (e.g., violence against nonwhites) racist practices to operate unchecked. Thus a primary goal of ethnic activists and scholars has been to assert the physical and historical presence of nonwhites through such efforts as inclusion in the census and historical revi-

6. *Negro de mierda*, literally meaning “shitty black,” is a pejorative term widely used to refer to dark-skinned people or members of the working class. The pejorative *chino de mierda* is commonly used to refer to people of Asian descent notwithstanding nationality.

sion. Alejandro Frigerio and Eva Lamborghini (2010), for example, indicate that because of the predominant idea of whiteness, the first order of Afro-Argentine activism was to establish their presence in the popular imaginary through cultural performances. These communities have raised concerns about group definition and disregard for internal heterogeneity, as well. Frigerio and Lamborghini (2011) trace the conflicts between different members of the larger Afro-Argentine community: multigenerational Afro-Argentines, who often self-denominate as “afroargentinos del tronco colonial” (Afro-Argentines of the colonial branch) to emphasize their national rootedness, and Afro-Latin Americans and African immigrants who settled in Argentina more recently. Even as disagreements over who rightly belongs to Afro-Argentina continue and as organizations that represent these different factions proliferate, the term *afrodescendiente*, inclusive of African descendants of all origins, has gained currency. Frigerio and Lamborghini (2011, 148–149) explain that Afro-descendants recognize that a larger coalition strengthens political claims against deeply rooted notions of inexistence. An Asian Argentine perspective would also harbor internal heterogeneities while serving as a crucial political tool against invisibility. Furthermore, Asian Argentine scholarship can highlight how dominant discourses have marginalized a diverse group of people as an indistinguishable “oriental” unit, rather than allowing the homogenization of this group.

Another concern relates to the *national* dimension of the Asian Argentine perspective. Both state discourses and scholarly research have perpetuated the assumption that Asian descendants have no wish to claim Argentina. While the state depicts them as unequivocally foreign, researchers have focused heavily on Asians Argentines’ relationship to co-ethnics or countries of origin (Ko 2016, 273). Scholars such as Higa (2002, 262) have described Japanese Argentines’ prioritization of their Argentineness over connections to Japan, but few works have explored how Japanese Argentines have negotiated Argentine citizenship or participated in the broader Argentine society.<sup>7</sup> Contradictory and generalizing assertions of assimilation and rejection reveal the complexities and differences of Asians’ attitudes toward the host nation, as well as the significant scholarly gap that exists regarding their relationship to Argentina. A serious Asian Argentine studies would not conceptualize nationhood (Argentine or Asian) as essential but, following Lowe (2000, 429), would aim to critically understand this group by considering its heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity. This framework allows us to examine, for example, how differences in national origin, generation, gender, and class have influenced Asian Argentines’ material conditions or their positions toward Argentine citizenship; how they have dealt with the changing demands of the Argentine and Asian states through World War II, the Cold War,

7. Silvina Gómez (2011) explores Japanese Argentines’ agency in their self-invisibilization as a strategy to counteract their racial visibility and integrate to Argentine society. Gómez’s (2013) research on the multiple orientations of Japanese Argentine associations—toward the group itself, Argentine society, other Japanese Argentine associations, and Japan—is an important new contribution. Chie Ishida’s (2015) paper breaks ground by examining the *desaparecidos* of Japanese descent during Argentina’s military dictatorship.

military dictatorships, and neoliberalism; and how local and global orders—political, racial, or economic—have shaped their experiences.

A final concern has to do with the self-recognition of Asians in Argentina. According to Bourdieu (1991, 224), the power of “officialization,” or the public act of naming by the state, plays a primary role in the construction of ethnic groups. He remarks, however, that a group cannot exist without self-recognition by the members of the group themselves. The idea—stemming from the broader notion of the social constructedness of race and ethnicity—that self-conscious membership is crucial to the formation and legitimacy of ethnoracial groups is widely accepted. Hence, that Asian descendants do not explicitly self-identify as binational (e.g., Korean Argentines) or panethnic (e.g., Asian Argentines) should be taken seriously to avoid “nominating into existence” nonexistent peoples from a position of power (Brubaker 2009, 33). Nonetheless, interpreting—without embarking on a serious inquiry—the absence of hyphenated categories such as Korean Argentine as a wholesale rejection of Argentine nationhood risks complicity to the hegemonic order. Informal distinctions—used by Asians and non-Asians alike—such as the doubly emphatic “coreano coreano” to refer to a Korean, versus “coreano,” to refer to an Argentine of Korean descent, hint of different degrees of affiliation and cultural affinity. Not claiming *argentino* as part of their identity may also reflect the historical and systematic distancing of Asians from Argentine nationhood—for example, in everyday interactions that require Asian descendants to identify their “true” nationality, by a media that labels Asian Argentines as *chino* or *japonés* regardless of citizenship, or that makes them represent entire nations with descriptions such as “un oriental del país de la Gran Muralla” (an Oriental from the country of the Great Wall) that frequently accompany news about Asian Argentines. Invoking an Asian Argentina does not attempt to ignore the self-identification of this group or its resistance to the dominant culture. Rather, the aim is to critically understand the multiple modes of self-identity that can exist beyond assumptions about Asians dictated by the dominant sector. An Asian Argentine concept, because its very absence betrays Argentina’s forceful invisibilization of race, can redirect our attention to Asians’ on-the-ground experiences. In other words, an Asian Argentine approach reveals what the dominant discourse conceals by drawing attention to the mechanisms of a national discourse that eludes Asians to organize a racial order based on their presumed absence.

#### CONCLUSION

Despite Rhacel Parreñas and Lok Siu’s (2007, 3) seminal call to expand the study of Asian diasporas to “the place-specific/cross-ethnic (e.g., racialization of Indonesians and Filipinos in Taiwan) and the ethnic-specific/transnational (e.g., racialization of Chinese in Nicaragua and Panama),” studies on Asians in Argentina have maintained their ethnic-specific and “homeland” focus with some additions in transnational diaspora studies. The hesitation to explore cross- or panethnic and domestic dimensions may derive from current theoretical discussions that I illustrated above: vigilance about imposing a seemingly “imported”

Asian Argentine category, growing criticism of the multicultural paradigm, and the limitations of nations as units of analysis.

I have outlined the different racial systems that Asians in Argentina and the United States confronted. In the United States, both the state and the populace institutionalize Asian American panethnicity through bureaucratic practices, an explicit racial order, and as a form of group resistance to such racialization. Argentina's historical denial of racial difference, conversely, made Asians (and other nonwhites) statistically, culturally, and politically invisible. But contrary to Argentines' insistence that there is no racism in Argentina because everyone is white, cultural discourses and everyday practices produced a firm racial order. An Asian Argentine category admittedly sounds close to Asian American, and we should be mindful of the global dynamics of multiculturalism as much as the global dynamics of orientalism. Nonetheless, considering the growing significance of race and ethnicity in contemporary Argentina as a way to participate in the political arena (Grimson 2006, 89)—and not simply as a cultural claim—conceptualizing Asian Argentina can open the possibilities of a pan-Asian coalition that challenges the power of a state that refuses to acknowledge Asians. Furthermore, the orientalist ideology shared by the United States and Argentina indicates that substantial similarities may materialize between Asian America and Asian Argentina, helping us examine how orientalist ideas, as well as current conceptions of multiculturalism, circulate hemispherically and globally.

As critics have questioned the validity of multicultural recognition and raised concerns about the limitations of nations as analytical units, scholarship on Asian Argentines and their right to national inclusion can appear retrograde. Critiques against the privileging of national units and of current forms of multiculturalism, disputing how they dictate and essentialize acceptable and unacceptable modes of alterity, are most valid. I have attempted to put these critiques in conversation with the most salient and problematic aspect of Argentina's national construction—the near absolute erasure of nonwhites. Hence, while multiculturalism maintains white privilege by giving whites the power to grant cultural recognition, as Frigerio and Lamborghini (2011, 103) note, in Argentina's predominant narrative of whiteness and homogeneity, "opening the definition of the nation to include other ethnoracial groups . . . is in itself an important way to build counterhegemony."<sup>8</sup> Such a counterhegemony aims not only to defy the "white" nation but also the current instrumentalization of nonwhites by the multicultural ideology. Similarly, while multicultural orders—as we have seen with Asian Americans—attempt to control and organize minorities through lumped categories, Argentina's denial of ethnic categories impedes group formation and political participation. In this sense, even as ethnic studies, including Asian American studies, moves toward a self-critique of nation-based perspectives or multicultural rights, I argue that in Argentina's particular case, a panethnic approach should join ethnic, transnational, and diasporic approaches as a means to overcome the circular discourses

8. My translation.

of hyperethnicity, foreignness, and inexistence that marginalize Asian Argentines while preserving the nation's whiteness.

Borrowing from Sau-Ling Wong's (1995, 18) concerns about the denationalization of Asian American studies by diaspora studies, in which she argued that ceasing to "claim America" can have a depoliticizing effect, I conclude by suggesting that beginning to "claim Argentina" or nationalizing the discussion to examine the *Argentine* aspect of Asian Argentine experience can have a politicizing effect. Especially in light of Argentina's newly ethnicized political arena, a decidedly panethnic and domestic Asian Argentine concept can forge new solidarities. Through it, Asian Argentines will have the possibility to participate in ongoing debates of nationhood and realize lines of affiliation to other emerging ethnic groups to pose a strong challenge to the hegemonic order.

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