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Celina Su  
*City University of New York*

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# We call ourselves by many names: storytelling and inter-minority coalition-building

Celina Su\*

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**Abstract** Scholars debate whether new immigrants will join minority native-born groups, especially African-Americans, in battling racial disparities, income inequalities, and discrimination in the United States. Although scholars have investigated *inter-minority coalition-building* in the context of electoral politics, a substantial share of newer immigrant social and political action has not been formalized. *Social change organizations* play an integral role in less formalized politics. The article draws upon ethnographic data on two case study organizations to investigate how they built coalitions between immigrants and non-immigrants. It pinpoints the ways in which they engaged in *storytelling* to emphasize *multiple identity* – namely, how any single individual might concurrently have many identifiers based on race, class, gender, and other factors – and elicit complex life narratives that help groups to find overlapping interests and form cross-cutting alliances. The strengths and weaknesses of these organizations' efforts have implications for coalition-building efforts in other multi-racial settings as well, especially those with large immigrant populations.

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In the United States, urban coalition-building between immigrants and non-immigrants, especially non-whites, is more important than ever. The media is filled with headlines of conflict between these groups. 'Some Blacks join with [nativist, armed] Minutemen', announces the CBS Evening News (Hughes, 2006). Another wave of headlines speak of 'racial hate' between African-Americans and Latinos in Los Angeles (Archibold, 2006). These pervasive narrative tropes in popular media

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\*Address for correspondence: Celina Su, Department of Political Science, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, 2900 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11210, USA; email: celinasu@gmail.com

make it seem as if conflicts between immigrants and non-immigrants are straightforward and inevitable. Yet, current conflicts arise from complex phenomena, including a changing urban racial and immigrant landscape, fluctuating social, economic, and political distributions of power, and welfare retrenchment and de-industrialization since the 1980s.

In response, social change organizations attempt to address these complex phenomena and build coalitions between immigrants and non-immigrants. In this article, I draw upon ethnographic data on two successful case study organizations to investigate how they do so. Both organizations participated in a competitive program on social change in the United States. Brotherhood/Sister Sol works with low-income Latino and African-American youth in New York, and Great Leap engages participants of all racial/ethnic backgrounds<sup>1</sup> in theater, music, and dance performances. I examine how these organizations engage in storytelling to emphasize notions of ‘multiple identity’ – namely, the ways in which any single individual might concurrently have many identifiers on the basis of race, class, gender, place of residence, and other factors – in their work.

Storytelling elicits complex life narratives that help groups to find overlapping interests and form cross-cutting alliances. These efforts are essential to building the foundation for multi-racial social movements that address more diverse policy and demographic landscapes than those tackled by the African-American Civil Rights movement. Nevertheless, challenges remain in helping constituents to translate visions of social change into concrete proposals for action.

## Issues of immigration and coalition-building in the American post-Civil Rights era

With some notable exceptions, urban American history was primarily analyzed via a Black-white binary until the 1960s (Myrdal, 1944; Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Takaki, 1998). Yet, even in the state of California, where racial politics have never been Black and white, the magnitude of recent Latino and Asian immigration is new (Chang and Diaz-Veizades, 1999).<sup>2</sup> Los Angeles

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1 Although this article treats race as an irreducible social phenomenon, I also acknowledge it as ‘an unstable and “decentered” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle’ (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 55). ‘Ethnicity’ tends to be associated with an emphasis on political–historical characteristics, but race and ethnicity are both contested terms and have often been used interchangeably (Oppenheimer, 2001). A Latino identity, for instance, is sometimes seen as an ethnic identity, and other times as a racial one. I use the term ‘race/ethnicity’ to emphasize that both ethnicity and race inform collective identities.

2 The US Census does not categorize Latinos as a separate racial group, but as Whites, Blacks, or others with Hispanic ethnicity. Yet, many scholars, and the interviewees in this article’s fieldwork, speak of Latinos as a separate racial group (even if a contested one) because of their distinct cultural,

and New York are now both roughly half foreign-born, first-generation immigrant (Lyman, 2006). In the United States as a whole, racial minorities constitute 43 percent of Americans under the age of 20 (Roberts, 2008).

Scholars debate whether new immigrants will join minority native-born groups, especially African-Americans, in battling racial disparities, income inequalities, and discrimination (Marable, 1994; Rich, 1996; Rogers, 2004). For example, Cho and Kim highlight how 'education, one of the preferred routes to social mobility by immigrants, does not appear to have been a requisite with first-generation Europeans in the nineteenth century . . . these newcomers gained economic security first, then through education assured their children's mobility to become professionals' (1996, p. 72). In contrast, educational institutions have not accommodated the needs of racial minorities since then.

Nevertheless, non-white immigrants and African-Americans have not always joined forces in combating these educational inequities. In some neighborhoods, African-Americans are concerned that Latino electoral representation might threaten their hard-won electoral power, and that Asian-Americans seem to have achieved greater socioeconomic success as a whole (Chung and Chang, 1998; Zia, 2001). Immigrants, in turn, have reported unfavorable views of African-Americans. Notions of American meritocracy and socioeconomic mobility prevail, and many do not grasp the full history of African-American oppression (Chung and Chang, 1998, p. 86). For instance, an anthropological study of more than a hundred interviewees in New York found that 'Korean immigrants share a conception of US society based on the conviction that "I will be rewarded in proportion to how hard I work"' (Park, 1997, p. 205).

Coalition-building has also become more difficult since the 1980s, with working- and middle-class groups suffering from welfare retrenchment and growing socioeconomic and residential segregation (Omi and Winant, 1994; Oliver and Wong, 2003). Department of Justice's investigations of civil rights violations, pro-minority business programs, and social services have been curtailed. In this context, such policies have 'sparked a debate on the parameters and purpose of government programs intended to assist minorities' (Jaynes, 2000; Jones-Correa, 2001, p. 5). Alongside de-industrialization, these policies exacerbated conditions for low-income immigrants and their potential allies.

In 1992, the 'not guilty' verdict of police officers involved in the brutal beating of African-American Rodney King in Los Angeles led to days of violence, 51 deaths, 1419 injuries, 4536 fires, 4393 arrests, and over \$1

billion in property damage, roughly half of it sustained by Korean-owned businesses (Cho and Kim, 1996; Dreier, 2003). The boycotts and civil unrest in Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere in the late 1980s and early 1990s spurred researchers to re-examine these inter-minority tensions (Baldassare, 1994; Chang and Diaz-Veizades, 1999).

### The role of social change organizations

Despite very real structural pressures on inter-ethnic relations in metropolitan areas, diverse participation in social and political life helps immigrants and non-immigrants to find non-violent solutions when tensions do arise (Grenier and Castro, 2001; Jones-Correa, 2001, p. 10). Although coalition-building is often investigated in the context of electoral politics, a substantial share of newer immigrant social and political action has not been formalized (Delgado, 2003; Rogers, 2004). Because undocumented workers are less likely to be protected by the state, their activities lie outside the purview of traditional politics. In what has been called 'liminal participation', or 'in between' politics, scholars have begun to note how recent immigrants engage in the public sphere (Jones-Correa, 1998).

Thus, grassroots organizing plays an important role in mobilizing minority communities to tackle 'stereotypes held among minority groups and those promoted by the white majority [that] obviate chances for creating coalitions', and to work towards policies that address urban impoverishment and disenfranchisement (Rich, 1996, p. 2; Dreier, 2003). As Saito notes, 'The lived experiences of everyday life are a critical site of observation. They link the micro-level with the macro-level and reveal how institutional structures . . . enter into and affect daily life and, in turn, how people understand, accept, and/or contest such social structures' (1998, pp. 5–6).

Social change organizations – grassroots organizations embedded in local communities and working towards systemic social change – play an integral role in less formalized politics. They often operate outside of established social movements, such as those of women's rights or the environment; their activities often defy categories such as social services delivery, advocacy, or community organizing. Indeed, despite their explosive growth in the United States, they remain under-examined by scholars (Chetkovich and Kunreuther, 2006). Thus, much of the relevant literature on coalition-building has focused on electoral politics or mass social movements.

In the past, organizations pursuing so-called 'cultural' approaches – emphasizing shared ideologies, identities, and attitudes – in coalition-building were contrasted with those pursuing 'interest-based' approaches

and criticized for ignoring power inequalities (Davis, 1991; Chung and Chang, 1998). For instance, in *Black Power*, Carmichael and Hamilton contended that most coalitions would not help African-Americans to truly bring about social change (1967). Instead, 'political relations are based on self-interest: benefits to be gained and losses to be avoided . . . not . . . consciences' (75). Often, the 'universal' ideals adopted were those of dominant groups, much in the way that facially neutral, colorblind equality actually perpetuates existing racial inequalities (Delgado, 2003).

The importance of interests in building coalitions is captured by the quip that 'talk alone is not enough'. The demise of the Black-Korean Alliance in Los Angeles, for instance, was attributed to the group's lack of ability to ease very real economic obstacles for both merchants and poor residents (Chang and Diaz-Veizades, 1999). The alliance's appeals to conscience were simply not enough without an alternative vision for shared interests. In contrast, a study of the more successful Koreatown and West Adams Public Safety Coalition suggested that Korean-Americans were more willing to make compromises if they could garner political support from African-Americans in return (Chung, 2001). African-American residents partly compromised in order to receive finances from the wealthier Korean-American community. Although all parties also made efforts to collaborate for humanitarian reasons, their political and financial stakes in a community policing station also acted as incentives.

However, some scholars suggest that the dichotomy of interest-based versus cultural approaches is a false one. After all, groups must construct collective identities before articulating interests (Sonenshein, 1993, 2005; Klandermans, 1997; Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Bernstein argues that social movement scholars 'must not take the public claims . . . organized around status identities at face value' (Bernstein, 2005, p. 67). Even when organizations seem to rely on essentialist assumptions, researchers must still investigate 'how activists themselves understand the sources of their identities' (ibid.).

Because notions of self-interest are not distinct from group perceptions of race/ethnicity, changing how groups see themselves will also shape their needs and interests (Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sonenshein, 2005). As Lichterman asks, 'Must identity politics devolve into group selfishness? Can people make political claims as African-Americans or as lesbians without narrowing their concern for the greater good?' (1999, p. 101). Social change organizations claim that the answer is 'yes'. For example, in response to the backlash against Muslims after the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance held frank discussions of 'mutual suspicions' for all drivers. As a result, non-Muslim members, such as most Latinos, protested the racial profiling of mostly South Asian

Muslims by refusing to reveal their nationality or religion when stopped by police officers (*Leadership for Change*, 2005).

More recently, cultural approaches have also encompassed a focus on multiple identity, the specific oppressions of different groups, and how individuals have layered, perhaps even shifting, identifiers along many axes – class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. (Park, 1997; Chung and Chang, 1998). For example, second-generation immigrants in the United States often view their interests differently and more broadly and hold fewer stereotypes of non-immigrants than their parents did (Chung, 2005; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters, 2004). In both immigrant and non-immigrant communities, men and women often become politically socialized in different ways (Robnett, 1997; Jones-Correa, 1998). These divisions illustrate ways in which no racial community can be assumed to be monolithic (Rogers, 2004).

In other words, social change organizations help to build social capital (Putnam, 1993, 2000), especially bridging social capital – norms and values of trust and reciprocity between members of different well-defined groups (Woolcock, 1998; Warren, 2001). They play an important role in harnessing multiple identities and helping groups to define their collective identities, ‘political purpose’, and positions vis-à-vis social and economic structures (Marquez, 2001). Social change organizations help constituents to interpret opportunities for coalition-building, identify potential allies, mobilize participants, and weave stories about their struggles (Morris and Braine, 2001). How they do so remains understudied, however (Polletta, 2006; Su, 2007, 2009). This article attempts to highlight one key collective practice, story-telling, in efforts to join immigrants and non-immigrants.

## Methods

This paper draws upon data collected for the Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) program.<sup>3</sup> Each year, the LCW project chooses 17–20 awardees from among 1000–1500 nominees. Besides ‘bringing about positive change’, these leaders meet selection criteria of ‘tackling tough social problems with effective, systemic solutions’, being ‘strategic’, and bringing ‘different groups together’. Once awardees are selected, researchers collect data from these leaders and leadership groups.

The research evolved from works that emphasize leadership as ‘a collective achievement rather than an individual property’ (Schall *et al.*, 2004).

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3 This program is a partnership between the Ford Foundation, the Advocacy Institute, and the Research Center for Leadership in Action at New York University.

Key questions were developed collaboratively and focused not on individual leaders' characteristics, but on collective practices in the organizations. Awardee leaders, community members, board members, volunteers, collaborators, and other allies were also interviewed.<sup>4</sup>

This paper is the product of two main stages of analysis. First, I reviewed and coded data for the 40 organizations from the first two years of the LCW program, to examine significant themes in the different organizations' approaches to issues of race/ethnicity.

Building upon themes derived from the first stage of analysis, I developed interview protocols that directly addressed issues of race/ethnicity and coalition-building. Organizations for this second stage of data collection and analysis were chosen from the third, fourth, and fifth years of the LCW program. Fieldwork data for this article were collected via semi-structured interviews and direct observation (Yin, 2003). Eighteen people from four case study organizations were interviewed in semi-structured interviews, in periods of two to four hours each. Some were interviewed more than once, in both one-on-one and group settings. Also, I conducted site visits that included participant observation, organizational tours, workshops, and informal conversations with staff, board members, and other participants. I then examined the case study data for emerging themes, and the practice of storytelling in coalition-building emerged in all four case studies.

Finally, for this article, I focus on the two organizations that work towards sustainable coalition-building, rather than 'terminal coalition-building' in specific policy campaigns, where 'collaborating groups . . . dissolve after a single distribution of resources gained in the contests' (Rich, 1996, p. 6). Names of individuals have been withheld for confidentiality reasons.

## Social change organizations and storytelling

As per the methods outlined earlier, this article's focus on storytelling did not emerge from the academic literature, but from questions plaguing the social change organizations' leaders and allies. In doing so, participants draw upon a long tradition of storytelling as social change work. Stories told by marginalized communities serve as counterpoints to dominant myths and stereotypes, but they must be strategic to work (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Stone-Mediatore, 2003). Thus, there remains room for analyses on how storytelling mobilizes identities, bridges or exacerbates differences, and advances new policy proposals or gets dismissed as 'just telling

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4 For a full description of LCW methods, see <http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/about/methodologies.html>.



tales' (Polletta, 2006). I focus on two organizations that practice storytelling and tackle urban inter-minority coalition-building in the United States. I discuss each case study in turn.

## **Naming, empowering ourselves: The Brotherhood/SisterSol**

### *Our long narratives bring us together*

The Brotherhood/SisterSol (Bro/Sis) works in Harlem – a disproportionately low-income, African-American and Latino neighborhood in upper Manhattan, which is otherwise the wealthiest borough of New York City – to provide Black and Latino youth with the mentoring and peer support necessary for effective coping mechanisms in the face of adversity, and for critical analysis in both everyday and monumental life decisions.

One director asserted that Blacks and Latinos share concrete interests in American society because of 'the way people of color are treated . . . most of us are either within the 100-block radius . . . we all know what it is to grow up in this [largely racially segregated, economically impoverished] community'. This does not necessarily mean that they share identical experiences, however. She continues,

What binds us together is just recognizing all the differences among us, even in being Black and Latino. Sometimes people feel like . . . it means one thing to be a Black person . . . another thing to be Afro Latin or Latin . . . so many different things that are going on there . . . language, just different traditions and values. And, people being able to appreciate that and accept it and not say, well, oh, that's not Latin. Or, that's not Black.

What joins immigrants and non-immigrants at Bro/Sis is not just Black or Brown skin *per se*, but resistance against generalizations of Black or Latino youth. The trust and empathy necessary in coalition-building at Bro/Sis is realized via intensive, multi-year processes of self-determination through the narration of one's life and aspirations. In the Rites of Passage program, each participant joins others in his or her cohort early on in secondary school to, first, name their group, and, second, write mission and vision statements for themselves as individuals and as cohorts. These formal essays involve multiple iterations of writing, reflection, and revision; some of these eventually lay the foundation for university entrance essays.

In addition, the teenagers attend multi-day retreats where they share stories around the proverbial (and sometimes figurative) campfire and present and critique both oral and written narratives. Part of the grunt work at Bro/Sis involves encouraging the teenagers to think analytically and introspectively. The 'short answer' is reductive at best; it is only by telling more complex stories that the youth recognize how the immigrant

community is not monolithic and how statistics fail to capture the nitty-gritty details of lives patterned by multi-faceted, dynamic social and historical forces. One mentor told of how,

sometimes [the teenagers] feel the need to have to peg themselves in one place, and I think of all the different parts that make them whole . . . Just feeling okay, because everybody says I'm Black then I need to pick out Black and stick to that as opposed to . . . giv[ing] them that whole long story: *My family's from here. I was born here. I identify as this . . .* As opposed to . . . *I'm Black, or I'm Latin, or I'm African-American, or I'm Dominican* and that's it.

The organization's activities touch upon wide-ranging themes such as misogyny, racism, and colonialism. The stories told by the participants highlight the many types of oppression that exist, and that each individual's situation is different and historically embedded. At the same time, no one is immune from these forces, and each individual embodies multiple identities. The participants question where they belong, and by extension, who belongs with them. In the young women's groups, for instance, 'It never fails about Sisterhood. Does a Sister have to be your blood sister?' Thus, Bro/Sis can welcome a young man or woman who might otherwise be marginalized, from a 'really poor struggling immigrant family who had to escape wherever, to be here, and feel safe'.

The work at Bro/Sis reflects the power of dialogue and storytelling, and this can begin at a tender age. One illustration lies in an encounter between three eight-year-olds who attend an after-school program at Bro/Sis. A staff member recounted how a first girl, who is an African-American, asked a second, a recent immigrant from Ecuador, 'How come you act so silly here . . . and you were quiet all day today in [an] after-school [meeting with the larger group]?' The other girl responded that she did not know, and the first demanded *why* in response. 'She sits there . . . quiet and she was like, *You all let me talk. You don't mind the way I sound . . . nobody's saying come on, hurry up . . . if they're reading out loud and she's struggling . . . she has a very heavy accent . . . I think that's what she was getting at*'. Through the process of self-determination with youth, the Bro/Sis shows how each person's standing matters most in relation to others.

Bro/Sis urges Latinos and African-Americans to build an interdependent power base with overlapping interests, despite their distinct histories and languages. This overturns prevailing public discourse of the 'natural' antagonism between Blacks and Latinos. As one staff member noted, 'Having young people sit down and analyze [the immigrant phenomenon] and . . . think about, *Where do you see immigrant workers; who might be undocumented?*

*Where do you see them? What do you see them doing?* Having them critically think about [it . . . not] work against each other because we want to build the coalition, we want to build a community’.

Another staff member asserted, ‘One of the things that we do . . . is bring the realities of outside into the group. Having them realize . . . how the media can put us against each other, how . . . one . . . block has Dominicans . . . [In] the environment, how people are separated’, analyzing the effects of urban disinvestment and segregation overall rather than scrutinizing the residents of a particular city block. She noted that she, too, grew up with negative stereotypes about African-Americans, that they did not work as hard as immigrants:

[With] the immigrant mentality—from my experience . . . We’re always told . . . forget about the situation you’re in . . . Regardless how poor you are . . . Whatever it is you want to do, you can attain it, as long as it’s hard work . . . Even if I knew that things were . . . not fair from the get-go . . . Now . . . not only am I going to continue to work towards my goal, but I’m going to see how I can also change this situation . . . because it shouldn’t be this hard.

Her work at Bro/Sis convinced her that popular narrative tropes about interest conflicts between Latinos and African-Americans are wrong. It was through engaging in storytelling with other constituents that she gathered enough evidence so that she could ‘poke holes’ into the stereotypes her parents repeated throughout her childhood.

Finally, Bro/Sis links Latino and Black youth from New York with social change organizations throughout Africa and Latin America, helping them to explore pan-African and Latino identity, analyzing similarities and differences in their postcolonial histories. One staff member recalls ‘not knowing where to belong . . . but finding out that . . . there’s actually people who talk about . . . African Diaspora in Latin America and getting to meet them’. This experience forced her to rethink her own identity as a Dominican immigrant with dark skin and African features, and to more deeply examine her role as a ‘bridge’ between two racial categories.

#### *Articulating individual and collective responsibility*

Storytelling enables Bro/Sis’ teenaged participants to set personal goals for themselves and their peers, write compelling narratives that will help them gain admittance to university, and establish the sort of trusting, deep relationships that strengthen grassroots policy campaigns, such as those for school reform. Further, by engaging marginalized, low-income Black and Latino youth, Bro/Sis helps these participants to gain a better sense not only of themselves, but of others as well. Along the way, it engages

and trains at-risk students who may not have finished high school otherwise, let alone become politicized in collective as well as individual struggles.

Although individual transformation constitutes the core of Bro/Sis' work, these youth also recognize and articulate their potential roles in larger social movements and policy reform campaigns: 'Sure . . . we'll get a group of young people together and members and staff and Board to go . . . to a rally, whether it's the Immigration Rights Rallies or the End the War Rallies or whatever, that we move away from just going to rallies, but really actually doing something with other collectives in other groups around these different issues'. For instance, Bro/Sis' Tenant Protection Campaign documents the displacement, social, and economic effects of rapid gentrification on Harlem residents, and its Ujima 'Build Me' Campaign seeks to transform an abandoned school building nearby into a thriving community center. It also contributes to campaigns launched by the Urban Youth Collaborative, a city-wide alliance that attempts to secure a decent, university preparatory education for all New York City students. This coalition is racially diverse and includes groups from all over the city, with participants like Desis Rising Up and Moving, Esperanza del Barrio, and YouthCAHN (of the City AIDS Housing Network).

### **Lean on me: Great Leap**

*If all the world's a stage, we're the movers and shakers*

Without specific campaigns, common issues, or even neighborhood boundaries joining the participants, Great Leap relies on cultural work in its coalition-building of immigrants and non-immigrants. It was founded in 1979 as an Asian-American arts group. Over the years, it has increasingly worked with groups and individuals of all racial/ethnic backgrounds in storytelling workshops and performances nationwide. The stories performed are always those of participants, often painstakingly developed from scratch. In 1992, for example, after increasing tensions between African- and Asian-Americans, Great Leap built a large coalition of residents to stage a touring show, *A slice of rice, frijoles, and greens*. Recent productions have reached over 20,000 public school students and an additional 10,000 adults and children nationwide. In addition to conducting interviews, I participated in a weekend-long workshop called 'Weaving the Faiths', part of a larger Great Leap project that focuses on coalition-building via the lens of spirituality and religion. This section therefore draws from personal observation as well as interview data.

One participant contrasted the workshop with his own work on coalition-building on university campuses. He spoke of how earlier attempts at coalition-building had failed:

By advancing the stories and histories and cultures of people of color, like Latinos, Asian-Americans and African-Americans in fairly large numbers, little bit of Middle Eastern . . . there was really no effort to reach out to white students and include them in the discussion. The early multicultural movement was to celebrate the histories and cultures that had been left out of the discourse . . . [But] it seemed to be backfiring.

Great Leap's projects provide an evocative contrast of how cultural approaches can incorporate more than verbal dialogue or didactic lessons in coalition-building. In these cases, the active, participatory process of storytelling is as important as the substantive lessons to be learned.

Most of the activities in Great Leap's Weaving the Faiths workshop avoided traditional storytelling sessions, with content dictated by preset themes. Some participants, such as this article's author, were initially a bit resistant to the weekend's premise, fearing that it would be composed of light, 'touchy feely' dialogue about creating a better world, without adequate acknowledgment of different political, economic, and social realities. In other words, I worried that a 'Californian' approach would be 'more concerned with self-liberation than with political change and more interested in how things "feel" than what they can accomplish' (Polletta, 2002, p. 198). In reality, participants were forced to utilize all senses, not just speech, to fully contribute to the weekend. These multi-faceted activities prevented participants from resorting to generic platitudes, even when overarching policy concerns were not immediately apparent.

In one exercise, participants in groups of eight or so walked in a circle as music played. Each of us was required to be touching at least one other person at all times, and to freeze whenever the music stopped. As the exercise continued, additional criteria were added so that eventually we were told to walk higher or lower than we usually would, in different directions, always touching someone, always looking someone in the eyes, and always having at least one foot off the ground. We were literally leaning on one another. Later that day, we went outside into the courtyard in connected snakes of six; everybody's eyes were closed except for the first person's. We explored the yard by weaving around trees and temple columns, as well as up and down steps. As participants included the elderly as well as the young, we were held physically responsible for one another's well-being, to ensure that no one got hurt. Contrasting Los Angeles' car-oriented sprawl to the dense, bustling landscape of New York City, one participant noted, 'In California . . . we're really separate. We're not riding subways

and rubbing shoulders with each other. We don't touch each other . . . So what Great Leap does, the exercises that we did . . . we had to touch, we had to share our own experiences. That was really powerful'.

Dialogue at Great Leap accrued meaning in the context of specific spaces, physical activities, rituals, and practices. Without the exercises, the subsequent storytelling might have felt sentimental or clichéd. The physical intimacy of leaning on one another, holding one another's gaze, and ensuring everyone's safety, however, knocked participants off their guard. As another leader explained, Great Leap helps participants to build community and recognize shared interests – in one another's physical safety, for example – along multiple avenues, 'through the storytelling . . . through movement . . . attending various physical places and spiritual celebration[s]. These are all incredibly cross-cultural. By having the body lead the way . . . it's done together and it's done without pointing fingers. It's done shoulder to shoulder'.

Interspersed between physical exercises, individuals shared narratives about themselves and their backgrounds, whether geographical, cultural, religious, or otherwise. Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, native American, Buddhist, Catholic, and other, less denominational rituals were presented along the way. For example, early morning Muslim and native American prayers were shared first thing on Sunday morning, whereas Buddhist rituals in meal preparation and clean-up were shared during lunch. The workshop took place at a Buddhist temple and a community center on one day, and at a nearby masjid the next. Along the way, participants recognized that overlaps, similarities, and contrasts between cultural traditions rarely feel into easy patterns.

As with the youth at Bro/Sis, naming processes are significant. One deceptively simple exercise asked each participant to call out their names in three different ways. For some, these instructions were taken literally. One immigrant, for example, went by a typical 'American' name until she discovered that her Japanese name was not her middle name on her birth certificate, as she had once assumed, but her real first name. For a native-born African-American woman with a Francophonic last name, her given name was only her first. She later adopted a Muslim name, rejecting the name inherited from the 'colonizers', but recently changed her name back as a means to pay homage to her family's legacy, however complex. For others, their presented names alluded to mispronunciations, attempts at assimilation, nicknames, or personality traits. Further, participants were also required to set the scenes of their stories, with short descriptions of places and dates. Via these stories, participants come together in unexpected ways. One noted, 'We have our separate journeys, but we all have a shared experience in being, I hate to use the word "minority", but we

are'. Some instances of one's 'minority' status would have not been discovered without both physical and verbal exercises.

*Towards a social movement*

What do Great Leap's arts workshops and performances lead to? The organization's leaders care about leadership development and reaching as many people as possible. Leaders are justifiably proud when a past participant, a young Latina, went on to form her own storytelling workshops with incarcerated and gay and lesbian youth, or when another young leader founded the country's first Vietnamese-American theatre group. Still, the sort of fundamental social change the organization envisions is best constructed via social movements and cross-cutting alliances, rather than single organizations or campaigns. Interviewees struggled to articulate how they might apply the workshop's lessons in immediate political campaigns or policy proposals.

It seems apropos, then, that participants felt that Great Leap did 'not [form] a community in the normal sense that the sociologists or anthropologists would look at it, I think. It might be closer to the kind of community you'd imagine in theological studies. "We're all members of the Methodist church" or something like that'. Like social movements, religious communities allow participants to come and go without being core leaders. Yet, they also operate with a significant set of core values.

Great Leap's participants noted that the organization's work would be left incomplete if existing income inequalities, corporate power, and exploitation of developing nations continue to dominate the international economic scene. One participant commented that, 'you're also providing a counter-model to US rugged individualism.... A free market capitalist society doesn't really want ethnic culture, so it doesn't want cooperation; it wants people to compete and to fight for their individual increase in pay so that they can get a BMW before somebody else'. Even though the participants would probably not object to, say, more progressive taxation, Great Leap's goal is not one of immediate policy change. Rather, it seeks a shift in mainstream values, in its moral code and sense of 'us' and 'them'.

Interviewees were adamant that large-scale structural changes would be impossible without the cultural work like that performed via Great Leap. They doubted that inter-racial electoral coalitions, for instance, would last long otherwise. As one participant commented about white leaders, 'You know, the stereotype would be that "Oh, well, they don't know anything about our issues and you know, why are they here?" But it's really important to reach across the table, so to speak, so that those people understand the issues'. This is especially vital when options in the official political arena seem unpalatable; one woman noted that, 'Personally, I'm frustrated



because I'm not finding that leadership in the political arena, so I think Great Leap offers a good alternative in terms of reaching out to people'. To participants, Great Leap enables them to be in the struggle for the long haul, to slowly build a grassroots base with which they can demand democratic accountability from the bottom-up.

## Conclusion

These case studies suggest that storytelling is a potentially powerful tool for social change organizations adjudicating relations between immigrants and non-immigrants. Namely, it helps individual participants to articulate multiple identities, engage in dialogue, and collectively recognize overlapping interests in an increasingly diverse and complex civil society.

Although it is not unusual that Bro/Sis and Great Leap have helped African-Americans, Latinos, and others to build bridging capital between racial/ethnic groups, storytelling is essential to the depth and strength of their bridging capital. Granovetter emphasized the importance of weak ties, people you barely know but who lead you to entire new social circles, so that your social network quickly becomes that much bigger (1973). Weak ties are particularly helpful when social change organizations aim to help members share tips and resources, and when they wish to focus on large turnouts at political events, such as rallies. Yet, Bro/Sis and Great Leap work not to build weak ties among members of different groups, but strong knots.

Storytelling thus helps to build bridging social capital that is not about pooling and sharing resources *per se*, but about connecting worldviews that make further collaborations possible. The two case studies suggest that social change organizations interested in incorporating storytelling into their work should consider the following.

First, face-to-face dialogues must include strong participatory components. In both case studies, participants themselves forwarded the storylines and themes that mattered most to them; facilitators provided key questions and enough assignments to get discussions going. At the same time, facilitators never articulated generic messages that 'we should all get along'. Instead, the storytelling exercises were more explicit, i.e. asking for mission statements and short-term collective goals at Bro/Sis, or multi-faceted analyses of one's name at Great Leap. These assignments demanded specific stories and descriptions of real-life circumstances – especially ones that reflected larger social and political problems – from participants. They were also designed to engage everyone, not just those with articulated grievances.



Second, rather than building on existing groups of friends, storytelling compels participants to rethink what their sociopolitical spheres might look like. Both organizations reached out to and engaged the 'hardest-to-reach', individuals not already embedded in social networks, i.e. at-risk youth at Bro/Sis and non-believers at Great Leap's Weaving the Faiths workshop. These constituents are often overlooked by larger social change organizations, and their stories sometimes challenge or complicate the stories of other participants from the same racial/ethnic group.

Third, the sort of intensive storytelling practiced by Bro/Sis and Great Leap cannot be made to fit into already existing political campaigns. They required time, space, and intense interpersonal contact – full weekends at Great Leap, and regular meetings over a number of years at Bro/Sis. The themes that emerged from participants' stories were often surprising. Polletta argues that storytelling is especially helpful in allowing the marginalized to introduce new issues and voices into the policymaking arena, but that it is sometimes less successful in formal policy discussions on issues such as transportation, housing, and economic development, where technocratic discourse continues to dominate (2006). Can social change organizations help constituents to translate their diverse stories into concrete grievances and policy proposals? The success of Bro/Sis participants in fighting displacement in neighborhood gentrification and school overcrowding suggests that it is possible.

Important questions remain, however. First, a focus on coalition-building between immigrants and non-immigrants might minimize the continued significance of the Black-white binary in the United States. The fact that Latinos and Asians still lack access to the sort of political power and social dominance accorded to whites suggests that the Black-white binary may have become more nuanced, but it is not gone.

Second, the case study organizations are, by definition of being LCW program awardees, successful. Thus, case selection did not allow us to examine whether social change organizations that adopt storytelling are more successful than ones that focus on other coalition-building practices. Specifically, further research might investigate the extent to which storytelling is useful when few overlapping concrete interests are apparent between groups, and where social change organizations would like to focus on longer term commitment. It might also consider the sociopolitical context of each social change organization. Can these lessons be applied to urban racially/ethnically diverse and heavily immigrant cities in other countries? Ideally, a study would include several coalition-building efforts within each city of interest.

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*Celina Su is with the Department of Political Science, City University of New York, Brooklyn, NY, USA.*

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