



TOURO UNIVERSITY
JACOB D. FUCHSBERG LAW CENTER
Where Knowledge and Values Meet

Touro Law Review

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 11

1999

Race as Resistance: Racial Identity as More Than Ancestral Heritage

Chris K. Iijima

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/lawreview>



Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), and the [Fourteenth Amendment Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Iijima, Chris K. (1999) "Race as Resistance: Racial Identity as More Than Ancestral Heritage," *Touro Law Review*. Vol. 15: No. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/lawreview/vol15/iss2/11>

This The Salience of Race: Race in America is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Touro Law Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Touro Law Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Touro Law Center. For more information, please contact lross@tourolaw.edu.

RACE AS RESISTANCE: RACIAL IDENTITY AS MORE THAN ANCESTRAL HERITAGE

*Chris K. Iijima**

There are many kinds of conversations – conversations among family and friends, intimate ones, public ones. Moreover, the nuances of dialogue are inevitably influenced by who is speaking to whom about what.

There are Socratic dialogues in which one is led through the process of recognizing one's own ignorance to reach a higher truth.¹ There are dialogues that are exchanges among equals to reach an amicable agreement.² There are scripted dialogues that occur between characters in a play. There are dialogues that cannot happen even with the best intentions because there is no shared language. The "national dialogue" about race, however, seems to be a monolithic (and fictitious) construction encompassing only one definition of dialogue in which whites have knowledge of the effects of white racial supremacy equal to people of color; in which all people of color share the same vocabulary of racial discourse; and in which the communities of color have articulated within our own communities our concerns and misconceptions about ourselves.³

*Assistant Professor of Law and Director of the PreAdmission Program, William S. Richardson School of Law, University of Hawai'i-Manoa. The author would like to thank Professor Deborah Post of Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center for her insightful comments and suggestions.

¹ See Peggy Cooper Davis & Elizabeth Ehrenfest Steinglass, *A Dialogue About Socratic Teaching*, 23 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 249, 252-60 (1997) (discussing Socratic dialogue and its relationship to legal pedagogy).

² See WEBSTER'S COLLEGE DICTIONARY 372 (1991).

³ The failure to frame the nation's racial discourse as conversations to explore racial subordination and white supremacy are evident in President Clinton's televised "town hall" forums about race. For example, in the third and last meeting, Clinton focused on the need to "celebrate differences" rather than explore whether institutions and social structure support and promote racial subordination. See Peter Baker, *Final Forum in Dialogue on Race Finds Solutions Remain Elusive*, WASH. POST, July 9, 1998, at A4. Indeed, it is noteworthy that an Asian American woman, along with the dean of the school

Indeed, much of the white population in America engages in racial discourse with the assumption that it has knowledge of race and racism equal to the knowledge communities of color have. Thus, until they understand that conversations about race are ones they engage in to learn rather than to teach (which is their historical and customary position), real and meaningful conversations cannot happen.

As Paulo Freire once wrote:

[D]ialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming – between those who deny other men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.⁴

I prefer to focus on conversations about race among people of color and other marginalized groups. At least we share, I hope, an understanding. While we know what subordination is, we do not always know how it is manifested within and among ourselves.

I cannot remember when I was not “the enemy.” Shortly after World War II when I was born, the “Japs” still were the enemy. Not long after that it was the Red (Communist) “Chinks” and the North Korean “gooks,” and then the Southeast Asian “gooks.” At one point, Americans were afraid that the Japanese would take over the United States, and now it is the “Chinks” campaign contributions that pose a national threat.⁵

I was the “Indian” when we played cowboy, the “Jap” when we played war, the “bad guy” when we played Batman

of government at Pat Robertson’s Regents University, was chosen to voice the conservative position at the forum.

⁴ PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* 76-77 (1971).

⁵ For a discussion of how Asians historically have been turned into domestic enemies, see Natsu Taylor Saito, *Alien and Non-Alien Alike: Citizenship, “Foreignness,” and Racial Hierarchy in American Law*, 76 OR. L. REV. 261, 301-07 (1997).

(sometimes I got to be Robin), and I got to be Superman only when I played alone.

As a child growing up in New York in the late fifties, I remember a time when I wanted to be Puerto Rican; feeling uncomfortable being Asian because there was a lack of hipness about it. The Asian stereotype had no machismo -- a critical element of hipness to a young boy in the fifties. Being Asian was the laundryman with the "funny" accent down the street, or the cartoon Japanese with the buck teeth and thick glasses, or Fu Manchu and Ming The Magnificent, the evil geniuses, or Charlie Chan at best. And even though my consciousness of race was inchoate, I knew enough even then to realize that being Black in this society was problematic. (There was another time later when I wanted to be Jewish -- but that was related to an intense high school crush and is another story altogether.)

My recollection of my racial identity back then -- before there were "civil rights" or "people of color empowerment" -- was a composite of impression and self-doubt.⁶ These impressions were

⁶ In fact, when I was young much of the make-up of the Asian American population was Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino. And we even had a different stereotype then -- before we were the so-called "model minority," we were the "silent minority." See, e.g., BILL HOSOKAWA, *NISEI: THE QUIET AMERICANS* (1969). The legacy of racism -- of internment and ghettos and lynching and ostracism -- had left many of us with the conviction that it was better to be invisible. And those of us around before there was an Asian Pacific American consciousness will remember how we used to try to downplay our Asianness in larger society. How it was part of the Asian American culture of many in my generation not to rock the boat -- to be invisible and at the margins. Michi Weglyn articulated the legacy of the relocation camps with respect to the Japanese American generation before me:

A bitter evacuation legacy shared by ex-inmates in varying degrees is a psychic damage which the Nisei [second generation Japanese American] describes as "castration": a deep consciousness of personal inferiority, a proclivity to noncommunication and inarticulateness, evidenced in a shying away from exposure that might subject them to further hurt. . . . The sense of *giri* [obligation] handed down to them by their parents, to clear their name of insult and shame, became the Nisei's driving force. . . . The goal of jettisoning their Japaneseness and of assimilating themselves into the

created by the people around me, during the traditions of daily familial interaction. I and other Asian Americans were taught how to live in societal and psychic margins because back then being "of color" was essentially an exercise in survival. Only later -- after Malcolm -- did race become an exercise in personal definition and affirmation.

Now, we live in an era when the demographers have predicted a future in which the United States majority is made up of people of color. The possibilities -- the very notion of what it means to be "of color" -- take on a significance that has been unimagined until now.⁷ But I have a vague anxiety about this coming majority of color. I'm worried that we could screw it up.

I am of the Baby Boom generation. In the sixties I watched and participated in the exercise of self-exploration and revelation by my generation. I watched this self-awareness degenerate in the eighties into an unparalleled self-indulgence and materialistic consumerism. The generation that initially distrusted anyone over thirty, moved beyond thirty, elected Ronald Reagan and made Ivan Boesky a rich man, thereby proving the prescience of its youthful judgment.

larger society became a near obsession for them in the early postwar years.

MICHI WEGLYN, *YEARS OF INFAMY, THE UNTOLD STORY OF AMERICA'S CONCENTRATION CAMPS* 273-74 (1976). This is similar to Frantz Fanon's observation of colonized mentality:

I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world. . . . Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human.

FRANTZ FANON, *BLACK SKIN WHITE MASKS* (Charles Lam Markmann trans., Grove Press 1967).

⁷ About 73% of Americans are non-Hispanic whites. By 2050, that percentage will drop to below 50%. See William Frey, *America's True Colors; On A National Level*, THE ORLANDO SENTINEL, Aug. 9, 1998, at G1; see also Brad Edmondson, *The Minority Majority in 2001 in AMERICAN DEMOGRAPHICS*, 16 (October, 1996) (after year 2050, Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans will attain a majority population).

I remember how my generation, particularly the young whites, marched against the War in Vietnam, but allowed the slaughter of Black Panthers.⁸ I remember how the young white men of my generation questioned authority until they had it. Now, in their middle age they have elected a Republican Congress and called for an end to affirmative action.⁹

I have seen it happen to Asian Americans as well. I have a friend who used to work with Asian Americans involved at high levels in major philanthropic organizations. She saw her job as providing links between such organizations and grassroots organizations that deal with fundamental social and political issues affecting poor communities of color, and poor Asian communities in particular. I listened to her frustration with "successful" Asian Americans who showed no real sensitivity, awareness, or concern about the conditions of their struggling brethren, had an absolute aversion to the political risks that need to be taken to address it, and who lacked the vision needed to deal with inequity or injustice.

It occurs to me that faces of color in high places have somehow become the hallmark of social progress for people of color. Progress is not thought of as the results they might achieve by exercising the power that comes with the economic success or fame they have attained. There are many "professional Asian Americans" who profit from a greater acceptance of Asian American identity, but who have no interest in other Asian Americans beyond professional self-interest.¹⁰ As one commentator has observed:

⁸ The "Black Panthers" is a militant African-American association advocating the rights of black Americans. The Black Panthers were subject to severe police brutality during the 1960's and demanded "that the United Nations investigate the slaying of Black Panthers by police officers on the ground that their slaying constituted genocide" 132 CONG.REC. S1253-04 (daily ed. Feb. 18, 1986) (statement of Sen. Ervin).

⁹ In 1996, California citizens voted on Proposition 209 to ban state-sponsored affirmative action, and the referendum passed by an overwhelming majority. Robert Pear, *In California, Voters Bar Preference Based on Race*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 6, 1996, at B6.

¹⁰ Russell Leong notes:

Who is being empowered? In the late 1960s and 1970s, activists focused on bringing "power to the people" -- the most disenfranchised of the community, such as low-income workers, youth, former prisoners and addicts, senior citizens, tenants, and small-business people. In contrast, the "empowerment" of young professionals in Asian American communities marks the decade of the 1980s.

* * * *

[D]espite their numbers, workers in the Asian American community during the past decade [of the 1980s] have become voiceless and silent. Today, in discussions about community issues, no one places garment workers, nurses' aides, waiters, and secretaries at the forefront to define priorities.¹¹

I became a lawyer when I was about forty and an academic in my mid-forties. Most of my adult life I worked as an elementary school teacher, and immediately prior to becoming a lawyer, I was a musician, bartender and then a youth worker. None of these jobs guaranteed life-time tenure. I spent much of my early

Because academics and other Asian Americanists -- including myself -- "pimp off" the community in varying degrees, I feel it is our responsibility to return some of the profits (at the very least) to the community. In the 1960s and 70s we used "pimping" to refer to a class of native professionals involved in community "poverty programs" whom we felt were exploiting or taking advantage of the community.

Russell Leong, *Lived Theory (notes on the run)*, in *Thinking Theory In Asian American Studies*, 21 AMERASIA JOURNAL, v, ix (Michael Omi & Dana Takagi eds., 1995). Leong defines "academic pimping" as utilizing community resources and experience to get tenure, promotions, grants, royalties, status, without giving anything back to the community. *Id.* at ix. I recall that the foci of many early Asian American activists were the older and more conservative Asian American organizations that we called upon to take more progressive political stands.

¹¹ Glenn Omatsu, *The Four Prisons and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s*, in *THE STATE OF ASIAN AMERICA* 41, 53 (Karin Aguilar-San Juan ed., 1994).

post-college adulthood organizing and participating in the nascent Asian American movement. In other words, I was chronically unemployed. Now I have a job that has a lifetime guarantee.

In the intervening years between my youth and middle age, I have watched with both pride and apprehension the evolution of the generation after mine. Despite the obstacles of continued racial and gender subordination, and despite the fact that many issues confronting Asian American communities remain unresolved, I have witnessed a change in consciousness among younger people about being of color. Younger professionals of color – particularly Asian Americans – occupy the twilight position in the economic center. They are still on the cultural and normative margins, but are more at ease with the rhetoric of racial identity. But I wonder whether they understand the politics from which it arose. Many have grown up with a sense of entitlement, but their professional concerns, magnified by limited social interaction, overshadow larger societal ones. For some, the world of food stamps, of makeshift childcare and no health insurance inhabited by other Asian Americans and people of color is an abstraction. Their middle class proclamations of racial pride are aimed at their own advancement to positions of even higher economic status rather than as an attack on a system that creates conditions of poverty.¹²

I marvel at the growing consciousness of Asian American identity but wonder when racial identity became synonymous solely with celebrations of one's ethnic and racial "heritage."

¹² See, e.g., AN INVISIBLE CRISIS: THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN YOUTH 3 (Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy ed. 1997) (emphasis original):

Overall, 14 percent of Asian Pacific Americans live below the poverty line, compared with 13 percent of the U.S. population. Although aggregate statistics place Asian Pacific Americans at the top of *family* income charts, data are misleading unless the number of wage earners per family, the average per capita earnings, and the poverty level within a community are taken into account. Poverty levels are disproportionately high among Asian Pacific Americans from Southeast Asia. Additionally, Asian Pacific Americans are discriminated against on the basis of race and immigrant status, and are frequent targets of bias-motivated violence.

The construction of racial identity, the rejection of subordination, originally was meant to invoke

a common political understanding of the need to organize around common interests. In essence, the recognition and proclamation of racial identity -- at least in the contemporary context of Asian Americans -- was originally a means to a political end and not the end itself. Asian American "identity" was not meant to be a synonym for "heritage." It was a means to identify with others who shared the experience of subordination. Understanding and proclaiming one's heritage was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for building one's racial identity.¹³

It was a way to identify in a profoundly personal way not only with our own "heritage" but with the struggles and aspirations of other subordinated people. Indeed, there has been much discussion about going "beyond the Black/white paradigm" to deal with issues of race and beyond simplistic binary constructions when considering other categories.¹⁴ But there is far too little discussion about what the exercise in shifting paradigms and creating new definitions ultimately means in concrete political terms for those who live on the social, political, and economic margins. Increasingly sophisticated articulations and conceptions of racial identity alone cannot change the complexion of those in power or the way power is exercised.

¹³ Chris K. Iijima, *The Era of We-Construction: Reclaiming the Politics of Asian Pacific American Identity and Reflections on the Critique of the Black/White Paradigm*, 29 COLUM. HUM. RTS. L. REV. 47, 54 (1997). The article explores the construction of racial identity as a political statement.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Robert S. Chang, *Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-Structuralism, and Narrative Space*, 81 CAL. L. REV. 1241, 1265-67 (1993); see also Frank H. Wu, *Neither Black Nor White: Asian Americans and Affirmative Action*, 15 B.C. THIRD WORLD L.J. 225, 248 (1995); Stanley Crouch, *Race Is Over*, N.Y. TIMES Sunday Magazine, Sept. 9, 1996, at 170 (discussing mixed race and culture in contemporary American society).

Nor can the point of gaining greater political power simply be to have those who govern be of similar racial or ethnic background; not if they make no changes in how and why we are governed.

This is particularly important to Asian Pacific Americans. I feel defensive about the relative success of other segments of our communities. The poverty and powerlessness in many of our communities is or has been made invisible. Asians are viewed with racist condescension by whites and with suspicion by other people of color. I am embarrassed by the Asian "Uncle Toms" who dance a minstrel-like jig to the "model minority" tune.¹⁵ Indeed, some of us celebrate the reparations given to Japanese-Americans for our internment during World War II, but worry about its effect on present race relations in general.¹⁶ I identify with the struggle of Korean merchants trying to eke out a twenty-four hour a day living, but also understand the frustration of many in the African-American community around them, and worry about how to resolve the inevitable conflicts.¹⁷

There is a subtle reordering of racial hierarchy going on. Indeed, the forces of racial subordination are going beyond "the Black/white paradigm." As demographics change, a growing Latino and Asian presence has meant that the traditional mechanisms of racial domination no longer operate as effectively.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the "model minority" stereotype, *see, e.g.*, Frank H. Wu, *supra* note 14, at 236-47; GABRIEL CHIN, SUMI CHO, JERRY KANG & FRANK WU, *BEYOND SELF-INTEREST: ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS TOWARD A COMMUNITY OF JUSTICE, A POLICY ANALYSIS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION* 17-19 (1996). It is significant to note that contrary to the prevalent stereotypes, some Asian groups have a significantly lower percentage of college entrants than African-American and Latinos. *See also* Karen W. Arenson, *College Minority Enrollment Slowed in 1995*, N.Y. TIMES, May 19, 1997, at A15 (reporting the findings of a 1997 report by the American Council on Education).

¹⁶ *See, e.g.*, Eric K. Yamamoto, *Friend, or Foe or Something Else: Social Meanings of Redress and Reparations*, 20 DENV. J. INT'L L. & POL'Y 223 (1992).

¹⁷ *See generally* Lisa C. Ikemoto, *Traces of the Master Narrative in the Story of African American/Korean American Conflict: How We Constructed "Los Angeles"*, 66 S. CAL. L. REV. 1581 (1993) (analyzing the ideological subtext of the Black/Asian conflict in Los Angeles).

Contemporary American racism has altered perceptibly with the changing political conditions. We are entering into a brave new world with a majority people of color that will be accompanied by white minority backlash and attempts to consolidate power.¹⁸ That is, the Second Millenium in the United States may usher in a society that will look increasingly like pre-Mandela South Africa with a racial white minority holding disproportionate economic and political power.¹⁹

Whites in America are already visualizing themselves as a racial minority.²⁰ They fear their traditional privileged status is eroding.²¹ Thus, the imperative of continued racial subordination by an increasingly isolated white minority will require simultaneously sophisticated mechanisms of racial stratification and control, and the maintenance of stereotypes to monitor and suppress dissatisfaction by those who are subordinated.²² There will continue to be subordinated people of color -- African-Americans and some Latinos -- at the bottom level. However,

¹⁸ I explore this topic further in a piece entitled, *Reparations and the "Model Minority" Ideology of Acquiescence: The Necessity To Refuse The Return To Original Humiliation*, 19 B.C. THIRD WORLD L.J. 1 (1998).

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ While the actual percentage of white population in the United States is about 74%, whites believe the percentage is under 49.9%. While the actual figure for blacks is about 12%, the white estimation was about 24%. See Priscilla Labovitz, *Immigration -- Just the Facts*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 25, 1996, at A15.

²¹ A poll found that 58% of whites felt that blacks had jobs of equal quality or better than those held by whites (46% of whites felt that blacks had jobs of equal quality to those of whites, 6% said blacks had jobs that were "a little better" than whites and 6% stated that blacks held jobs that were "a lot better."). See Richard Morin, *A Distorted Image of Minorities; Poll Suggests That What Whites Think They See May Affect Beliefs*, WASH. POST, Oct. 8, 1995, at A1. Moreover, fears that immigration is producing economic hardship for the United States are unfounded. See Karen Brandon, *Foreign-Born Help U.S. Economy, Immigration Group's Study Says*, CHI. TRIB., July 8, 1998, at N8 (stating that "the nation's 25 million immigrants, legal and illegal, are a fiscal bargain for American taxpayers and . . . their presence enriches American society.").

²² See Yamamoto, *supra* note 16, at 238, n.67 (Asian Americans could reinforce a racial hierarchy in which there was "yellow in the middle.").

there will be a middle tier in which a subordinated “model minority,” will be given some racial and class privileges in return for being used as both a buffer and diversion.²³

The entire trend toward a “multiracial” category captures this “new” racial structure.²⁴ The category assumes a number of false premises -- that there is a “pure” African-American or Latino race that is “unmixed” by other races, and that individuals are free to choose a racial designation unaffected by how they are perceived in the larger society.²⁵ The political effect of such a new category is to create an illusion. The solution to racism is not dismantling a system of dominance and subordination, but simply a matter of individualized self-naming.²⁶

The other response to the change in American demographics relates to the two major species of American racism. There is the more familiar, obvious and virulent kind manifested by those

²³ See, e.g., Natsu Taylor Saito, *supra* note 5, at 311-314 (exploring Asian Americans as occupying a middle position in a tiered racial hierarchy); see also Natsu Saito Jenga, *Finding Our Voices, Teaching Our Truth: Reflections on Legal Pedagogy and Asian American Identity*, 3 UCLA ASIAN PAC. AM. L. J. 81, 83-84 (1995); cf. Kevin R. Johnson, *Racial Hierarchy, Asian Americans and Latinos as “Foreigners,” and Social Change: Is Law the Way To Go?*, 76 OR. L. REV. 347, 360-62 (1997) (questioning whether the model of racial hierarchy is too static a model for the shifting complexities of race relations). For a discussion of both these approaches, see Iijima, *supra* note 13, at n.103.

²⁴ See also Tanya Kateri Hernandez, “Multiracial” Discourse: *Racial Classifications in an Era of Color-Blind Jurisprudence*, 57 MD. L. REV. 97, 121-36 (1998) (discussing “multiracial” categories and racial tiering in the United States and comparing it to racial hierarchies in Latin America).

²⁵ Children of mixed race couples are often “raced” as the darker parent if they have dark skin color. For example, Tiger Woods is usually referred to as being African-American irrespective of the fact that his mother is Thai. See, e.g., Richard E. Lapchick, *Lessons of Tiger Woods Will Not be Easy Ones*, N.Y. TIMES, May 18, 1997, § 8, at 8.

²⁶ See Hernandez, *supra* note 24, at 102-03 (citations omitted). Professor Hernandez observes that:

Multiracial discourse misconstrues the meaning of race used in the group measurement of racial disparity, with an individual-focused assessment of fluid cultural identity. Such a view of race negates its sociopolitical meaning and thereby undermines effective legal mechanisms to ameliorate racial discrimination.

Id.

human vermin who wear the sheets over their heads and swastikas on their arms, who desecrate and burn churches, and commit crimes against people of color solely because they are of color. This is the kind of racism that some in white America will admit to. It is the purposeful racism of Fourteenth Amendment jurisprudence. It is the racism of Jim Crow and Japanese-American concentration camps.

But the second kind of racism, equally as virulent but not as obvious, that white America will *not* admit to, exists in myriad of normative attitudes rooted in racial stereotypes.²⁷ It is the racism that manifests in a proclamation of “colorblindness” without the commitment to change the societal conditions that would make the proclamation real. Indeed, the proclamation perpetuates its opposite. In a previous article, paraphrasing Neil Gotanda’s and Charles Lawrence’s observations about “colorblindness,” I wrote:

Unfortunately, the colorblind myth of racial vision confuses the ideal of an end to racial hierarchy with what already exists. That is, the prescriptive ideal of a “colorblind” society in which racism and White supremacy are eradicated, has been transformed by judicial fiat into “a condition of societal denial” creating the illusion that racial hierarchy has been already eliminated. Indeed, “denial is a pervasive symptom of contemporary American racism.” And, of course, the denial of reality merely perpetuates the condition of racial subordination.²⁸

²⁷ See, e.g., Peggy C. Davis, *Law As Microaggression*, 98 YALE L. J. 1559 (1989). Professor Davis defines microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders . . . [carried out in] automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion [stemming from] . . . the mental attitude of presumed superiority.” *Id.* at 1565-66 (citations omitted).

²⁸ Chris K. Iijima, *Swimming From the Island of the Colorblind: Deserting An Ill-Conceived Constitutional Metaphor*, 17 LOY. L.A. ENT. L. J. 583, 591 (1997) (citations omitted) (quoting Charles R. Lawrence, III, *The Epidemiology of Color-Blindness: Learning To Think And Talk About Race*

At least for Asian Pacific Americans, how we define ourselves is intimately tied to the political purpose of our racial identity. This creates the political necessity of talking across racial, gender and class lines. Because we are all infected by the racial stereotyping of the larger society, it is imperative that people of color identify with each other's past and present so that we may identify our future as shared.²⁹ The new realities of racial subordination also create a condition in which we do not have the luxury of defining ourselves without considering the impact of that definition on political and economic power and/or our will to effect material social change in society. The root of much conflict between people of color lies in our mutual internalization of dominant stereotypes and in mutual assumptions that any share of the wealth is both fixed and small.³⁰

The solution to that conflict is as simple and as difficult as establishing trust. But trust, particularly for people of color whose history is one of broken promises, cannot be blind. Our strength lies in political unity; in the political understanding that one group's long term self-interest is not necessarily mutually exclusive of another's.

There is a growing consensus that there is no essentialized Asian Pacific American, or Latino/a, or African-American.³¹

Again, 15 B.C. THIRD WORLD L.J. 1, 5, 6, 8 (1995); and Neil Gotanda, *A Critique of "Our Constitution Is Colorblind"*, 44 STAN. L. REV. 1 (1991)).

²⁹ See Charles R. Lawrence, III, *Foreword: Race, Multiculturalism, and the Jurisprudence of Transformation*, 47 STAN. L. REV. 819, 835 (1995) (observing that many people of color adopt the belief systems of white society). As Paulo Freire articulates it:

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything -- that they become sick, lazy, and unproductive -- that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.

Paulo Freire, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*, at 49 (Myra Bergman Ramos trans., Herder and Herder 1972).

³⁰ See Ikemoto, *supra* note 17.

³¹ See, e.g., Iijima, *supra* note 13, at 49 n.1.

Many of us agree that one person's experience cannot be representative of everyone else's experience even when our race is the same. Moreover, since we look at life through different individual prisms, our conclusions about how to effect change in our collective condition may differ. Indeed, our perception of our collective condition itself may differ.

Thus, racial unity cannot be built on solely shared culture, language, history, or even skin shade since those factors themselves sustain a myriad of different intersecting identities. The racial category of "Asian Pacific American" is a recent phenomenon, surely based less upon a shared Asian cultural heritage than a common American racial experience, and is less a community bonded by ethnic sameness than by a common political interest and fate. The unity of Asian Pacific Americans, and ultimately the unity of African-Americans and Latino/a Americans is not that we are "the same," but that in our shared understanding of similar kinds of pain and outrage, we desire similar things for ourselves and our families. And for these similar aspirations to be more than clichéd and tired catch phrases, they must be given concrete form by manifesting as political goals and programs. It is from the discussion of what those goals are, and how to achieve them that we can and should continue to construct ourselves, our consciousness, our particular racial identities, and our shared future.

Epilogue

When I was about eight years old I remember being alone in an elevator when an elderly white lady came in. In those days it was customary for young men to remove their hats when an older woman entered. I was wearing a cap, and I remember looking up and in a moment of existential rebellion decided to keep the cap on my head. She looked down expecting my gesture of respect, and I looked up in innocent defiance. When she left the elevator, she turned and said in an almost incomprehensible German accent, "Why don't you foreigners go back where you came from!" And I remember being worried about whether I really

was foreign (particularly since I had a hard time understanding her accent), and confused about who was supposed to go where.

I live in Hawaii now. I moved here recently and have much to learn. But, I now live in a place where omusubi (riceballs) are as ubiquitous as hamburgers, where McDonalds has rice for breakfast, and where for the first time in my life strangers do not assume I am foreign, but assume that I am local. For the first time I can remember, my shoulders are down because I am in a land of color where I am the norm: a land of Asian and brown faces in which the cultural benchmarks and expectations are comforting and familiar.

But it is still a place of intense beauty and majesty that has been ripped from its indigenous people, where there are still haves and have-nots, where haoles have disproportionate power, where we Japanese must be sensitive to how our powerful cultural norms can create resentment in other more marginalized populations. I have realized that the many faces of color that surround me may be necessary for my own sense of paradise, but it is still not sufficient.

