

*Major Problems in
Asian American History*



DOCUMENTS AND ESSAYS

EDITED BY

LON KURASHIGE

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

ALICE YANG MURRAY

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

Boston New York

Editor in Chief: Jean L. Woy
Senior Associate Editor: Frances Gay
Associate Project Editor: Reba Libby
Editorial Assistant: Kendra Johnson
Associate Production/Design Coordinator: Christine Gervais
Manufacturing Manager: Florence Cadran
Senior Marketing Manager: Sandra McGuire

Cover image: "Chinatown, San Francisco" by artist Jade Fon Woo (1911–1983) from the Michael D. Brown Collection.

Copyright © 2003 by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the copyright owner unless such copying is expressly permitted by federal copyright law. With the exception of nonprofit transcription in Braille, Houghton Mifflin is not authorized to grant permission for further uses of copyrighted selections reprinted in this text without the permission of their owners. Permission must be obtained from the individual copyright owners as identified herein. Address requests for permission to make copies of Houghton Mifflin material to College Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company, 222 Berkeley Street, Boston, MA 02116-3764.

Printed in the U.S.A.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2001131519

ISBN: 0-618-07734-0

3456789-MP-08 07 06 05 04

The Centrality of Racism in Asian American History

RONALD TAKAKI

In Palolo Valley on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, where I lived as a child, my neighbors had names like Hamamoto, Kauhane, Wong, and Camara. Nearby, across the stream where we caught crayfish and roasted them over an open fire, there were Filipino and Puerto Rican families. Behind my house, Mrs. Alice Liu and her friends played mah-jongg late into the night, the clicking of the tiles lulling me to sleep. Next door to us the Miuras flew billowing and colorful carp kites on Japanese boys' day. I heard voices with different accents, different languages, and saw children of different colors. Together we went barefoot to school and played games like baseball and *jan ken po*. We spoke pidgin English. "Hey, da kind tako ono, you know," we would say, combining English, Japanese, and Hawaiian: "This octopus is delicious." As I grew up, I did not know why families representing such an array of nationalities from different shores were living together and sharing their cultures and a common language. My teachers and textbooks did not explain the diversity of our community or the sources of our unity. After graduation from high school, I attended a college in a midwestern town where I found myself invited to "dinners for foreign students" sponsored by local churches and clubs like the Rotary. I politely tried to explain to my kind hosts that I was not a "foreign student." My fellow students and even my professors would ask me how long I had been in America and where I had learned to speak English. "In this country," I would reply. And sometimes I would add: "I was born in America, and my family has been here for three generations."

Indeed, Asian Americans have been here for over 150 years. Resting on benches in Portsmouth Square in San Francisco's Chinatown, old men know their presence in America reaches far into the past. Wearing fedora hats, they wait for the chilly morning fog to lift; asked how long they have been in this country, they say: "Me longtime Californ'." Nearby, elderly Filipinos—*manongs*—point to the vacant lot where the aging International Hotel had once offered these retired farm workers a place to live out the rest of their lives. They remember the night the police came to evict them and the morning the bulldozers obliterated a part of their history. In the California desert town of El Centro, bearded and gray-haired men wearing turbans sit among the fallen leaves on the grounds of the Sikh temple. One of them describes what life was like in California decades ago: "In the early days it was hard. We had a hell of a time. We had a hell of a time. We had to face a lot of narrow mindedness."

Asian Americans are diverse, their roots reaching back to China, Japan Korea, the Philippines, India, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Many of them live in Chinatowns, the colorful streets filled with sidewalk vegetable stands and crowds of people carrying shopping bags; their communities are also called Little Tokyo, Koreatown, and Little Saigon. Asian Americans work in hot kitchens and bus tables in restaurants with elegant names like Jade Pagoda and Bombay Spice. In garment factories, Chinese and Korean women hunch over whirling sewing machines, their babies sleeping nearby on blankets. In the silicon Valley of California, rows and rows of Vietnamese and Laotian women serve as the eyes and hands of production assembly lines for computer chips. Tough Chinese gang members strut on Grant Avenue in San Francisco and Canal Street in New York's Chinatown. In La Crosse, Wisconsin, welfare-dependent Hmong sit and stare at the snowdrifts outside their windows. Holders of Ph.D.'s, Asian-American engineers do complex research in the laboratories of the high-technology industries along Route 128 in Massachusetts. Asian Americans seem to be ubiquitous on university campuses: they represent 11 percent of the students at Harvard, 10 percent at Princeton, 16 percent at Stanford, 21 percent at MIT, and 25 percent at the University of California at Berkeley. From Scarsdale to the Pacific Palisades, "Yuppies"—"young Asian professionals"—drive BMWs, wear designer clothes, and congregate at continental restaurants; they read slick magazines like *AsiAm* and *Rice*. "I am Chinese," remarks Chester in David Hwang's play *Family Devotions*. "I live in Bel Air. I drive a Mercedes. I go to a private prep school. I must be Chinese." . . .

Yet very little is known about Asian Americans and their history. In fact, stereotypes and myths of Asians as aliens and foreigners are pervasive, in American society. During Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North's testimony before the joint House-Senate committee investigating the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987, co-chair Senator Daniel Inouye became the target of racial slurs: some of the telegrams and phone calls received by the committee told the senator he should "go home to Japan where he belonged." But Senator Inouye was born in the United States and had been awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for his valor as an American soldier during World War II. The belief that Americans do not include people with Asian ancestries is usually expressed more innocently, more casually. A white woman from New Jersey, for example, once raved to William Wong of the *Oakland Tribune* about a wonderful new Vietnamese restaurant in her town: "We were there the other night and we were the only Americans there." Wong noted with regret: "She probably meant the only white people."

But her remark reveals a widely shared assumption in American culture—one that reflects and is reinforced by a narrow view of American history. Many existing history books give Asian Americans only passing notice or overlook them altogether. "When one hears Americans tell of the immigrants who built this nation," Congressman Norman Mineta of California recently observed, "one is often led to believe that all our forebearers came from Europe. When one hears stories about the pioneers going West to shape the land, the Asian immigrant is rarely mentioned." . . .

We need to "re-vision" history to include Asians in the history of America. . . . Their stories belong to our country's history and need to be recorded in our history books, for they reflect the making of America as a nation of immigrants, as a place where men and women came to find a new beginning. . . . But, coming here from

Asia, many of America's immigrants found they were not allowed to feel at home in the United States, and even their grandchildren and great-grandchildren still find they are not viewed and accepted as Americans. "We feel that we're a guest in someone else's house," said third-generation Ron Wakabayashi, National Director of the Japanese American Citizens League, "that we can never really relax and put our feet on the table."

Behind Wakabayashi's complaint is the question, Why have Asian Americans been viewed and treated as outsiders? In his essay "The Stranger," sociologist Georg Simmel develops a theory, based on the experiences of Jews, to explain the discrimination and estrangement experienced by a group entering another society. Not belonging in the new place initially, the intruders bring qualities that are not indigenous. Not bound by roots to the new place, they are in a state of detachment, viewed as clannish, rigidly attached to their old country and their old culture. Their "strangeness" stands out more sharply as they settle down in the new land and become traders and merchants, for they still lack organic and established ties of kinship and locality. What is stressed in the host society is not the individuality of the newcomers but their alien origin, the qualities they share with one another as "strangers."

While Simmel's theory is heuristic and insightful for the study of Asian Americans, it needs to be grounded in history—the particularities of time and place. What transformed Asians into "strangers" in America was not simply their migration to a foreign land and their lack of indigenous and organic ties to American society, but also their point of origin and their specific reception. Their experiences here, as they turned out in historical reality, were profoundly different from the experiences of European immigrants. To be sure, the immigrants who crossed the Atlantic Ocean suffered hardships and anguish. As historian John Higham has described so powerfully in *Strangers in the Land*, the Italians, Jews, Irish, and other European-immigrant groups were victims of labor exploitation, social ostracism, and the sharp barbs of intolerant American nativism. Nevertheless, immigrants of European ancestry had certain advantages in America. The promise of this new world for them, as F. Scott Fitzgerald portrayed it, was mythic: here an individual could remake himself—Gatz could become Gatsby. They could give themselves new identities by changing their names as did Doris Kapplehoff to Doris Day, Bernie Schwartz to Tony Curtis, Issur Danielovitch to Kirk Douglas, and Edmund Marcizewski to Ed Muskie. "America represented a new life, new hope, new perspective," observed J. N. Hook in his book *Family Names*. "Why not enter it with a new name, an 'American' name that would have no association with the life forever left behind." A new "American" name also opened the way for economic opportunities. "Some immigrants believed, rightly in some instances, that their chances for material success would be improved if their name did not betray their origins." Others became "Americans" mainly by shedding their past, their ethnicity—the language, customs, dress, and culture of the old country. Physically indistinguishable from old-stock whites in America, they were able to blend into the society of their adopted country.

Asian immigrants could not transform themselves as felicitously, for they had come "from a different shore." In the present study, the term "shore" has multiple meanings. These men and women came from Asia across the Pacific rather than from Europe across the Atlantic. They brought Asian cultures rather than the traditions and ideas originating in the Greco-Roman world. Moreover, they had qualities they could

not change or hide—the shape of their eyes, the color of their hair, the complexion of their skin. They were subjected not only to cultural prejudice, or ethnocentrism, but also racism. They wore what University of Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park termed a “racial uniform.” Unlike the Irish and other groups from Europe, Asian immigrants could not become “mere individuals, indistinguishable in the cosmopolitan mass of the population.” Regardless of their personal merits, they sadly discovered, they could not gain acceptance in the larger society. They were judged not by the content of their character but by their complexion. “The trouble is not with the Japanese mind but with the Japanese skin,” wrote Park as he observed American-white attitudes in 1913. “The Jap is not the right color.”

“Color” in America operated within an economic context: Asian immigrants came here to meet demands for labor—plantation workers, railroad crews, miners, factory operatives, cannery workers, and farm laborers. Employers developed a dual-wage system to pay Asian laborers less than white workers and pitted the groups against each other in order to depress wages for both. “Ethnic antagonism”—to use Edna Bonacich’s phrase—led white laborers to demand the restriction of Asian workers already here in a segregated labor market of low-wage jobs and the exclusion of future Asian immigrants. Thus the class interests of white capital as well as white labor needed Asians as “strangers.”

Pushed out of competition for employment by racial discrimination and white working-class hostility, many Asian immigrants became shopkeepers, merchants, and small businessmen. “There wasn’t any other opportunity open to the Chinese,” explained the son of a Chinese storekeeper. “Probably opening a store was one of the few things that they could do other than opening a laundry.” Self-employment was not an Asian “cultural trait” or an occupation peculiar to “strangers” but a means of survival, a response to racial discrimination and exclusion in the labor market. The early Chinese and Japanese immigrants had been peasants in their home countries. Excluded from employment in the general economy, they *became* shopkeepers and ethnic enterprisers. They also developed their own separate commercial enclaves, which served as an economic basis for ethnic solidarity, and their business and cultural separateness in turn reinforced both their image and condition as “strangers.”

Unlike European immigrants, Asians were also victimized by the institutionalized racial discrimination of public policies. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 singled out the Chinese on a racial basis, and the National Origins Act of 1924 totally prohibited Japanese immigration while permitting the annual entry of 17,853 from Ireland, 5,802 from Italy, and 6,524 from Poland. Furthermore, the 1924 law supported the formation of families in European-immigrant communities, allowing European-immigrant men to return to their homelands and bring wives back to the United States. Their wives were accorded nonquota status, that is, there were no limits to the number of European women who could come here as wives. The law had the very opposite effect on Asian-immigrant communities. Seeking to prevent the development of Asian families here, it barred the entry of women from China, Japan, Korea, and India. Even U.S. citizens could not bring Asian wives into the country, for the latter were classified as “aliens ineligible to citizenship” and hence inadmissible. While the 1924 law did not apply to Filipino immigration (because the Philippines was a territory of the United States), the Tydings-McDuffie Act of

1934 provided for the independence of the Philippines and limited Filipino immigration to fifty persons a year.

The laws not only determined who could come to the United States but also who could become citizens. Decades before Asian immigration had even begun, this country had already defined by law the complexion of its citizens. The Naturalization Law of 1790 had specified that naturalized citizenship was to be reserved for "whites." This law remained in effect until 1952. Though immigrants from countries like Ireland and Italy experienced discrimination and nativist reactions, they nonetheless could become citizens of the United States. Citizenship is a prerequisite for suffrage—political power essential for groups to defend and advance their rights and interests. Unlike their European counterparts, Asian immigrants were not permitted to exercise power through the ballot and their own Tammany Halls. As "aliens ineligible to citizenship," they were also prohibited by the laws of many states from land ownership—the condition Frederick Jackson Turner celebrated as the foundation of democracy in America. One of the laws went even further. The 1922 Cable Act provided that any American woman who married "an alien ineligible to citizenship shall cease to be a citizen of the United States." . . .

But the most terrible and tragic insurance of this difference occurred during World War II. Setting aside the Constitution of the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which targeted Japanese Americans for special persecution and deprived them of their rights of due process and equal protection of the law. Unlike German Americans and Italian Americans, Japanese Americans were incarcerated in internment camps by the federal government. Even possession of U.S. citizenship did not protect rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution: two thirds of the 120,000 internees were American citizens by birth.

Behind state policy lay a powerful traditional vision of America as a "homogeneous" nation. In a sermon given aboard the *Arbella*, John Winthrop told his fellow Puritans as they sailed to America in 1630 that they would be establishing a "city upon a hill," with the "eyes of the world" upon them. Their colony was to be a "new" England. This conception of the character and purpose of the English "errand" to the New World embraced a racial identity. "In the settlement of this country," historian Winthrop Jordan noted, "the red and black peoples served white men as aids to navigation by which they would find their safe positions as they ventured into America." The question of the relationship between race and nationality became immensely important as the colonies struggled for independence and transformed themselves into a new nation. In 1751 Benjamin Franklin offered his thoughts on the future complexion of American society in his essay *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*. All Africa was black or "tawney," he noted, and Asia was chiefly "tawney." The English were the "principle Body of white People," and Franklin wished there were more of them in America. Why should we, he asked, "darken" the people of America: "Why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White?" After independence, one of the *Federalist Papers* announced: "Providence [had] been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs." In a letter to James Monroe,

President Thomas Jefferson wrote that he looked forward to distant times when the American continent would be covered with such a people. Earlier, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson had identified the particular people who should occupy the new continent, saying he recoiled with horror from the possibility of "either blot or mixture on that surface" and advocating the removal of blacks from the United States. America, for Jefferson, was to be a "sanctuary" where immigrants from Europe would establish a new society for themselves and their progeny. Jefferson's hope for America was articulated over a hundred years later by the United States Supreme Court in the 1923 decision of *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. Denying naturalized citizenship to Asian Indians because they were not "white," the Court noted the assimilability of European immigrants: "The children of English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, and other European parentage, quickly merge into the mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin."

But America also had a counter tradition and vision, springing from the reality of racial and cultural diversity. It had been, as Walt Whitman celebrated so lyrically, "a teeming Nation of nations" composed of a "vast, surging, hopeful army of workers," a new society where all should be welcomed, "Chinese, Irish, German—all, all, without exceptions."

Passage O soul to India! . . .
 Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
 The road between Europe and Asia. . . .
 Lands found and nations born, thou born America,
 For purpose vast, man's long probation fill'd,
 Thou rondure of the world at last accomplish'd. . . .
 Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and they to the New World.

The new society's diversity was portrayed by Herman Melville in his novel about the chase for the great white whale. The crew of the *Pequod* is composed of whites, blacks, Indians, Pacific Islanders, and Asians. As they work together, they are integrated in the labor process and united in a relationship of dependency, mutual survival, and cooperation. Nowhere is this connectedness more graphically illustrated than in the "monkey-rope," which is fastened to both Ishmael and Queequeg. Lowered down to the water to secure the blubber hook onto the dead whale, with vicious sharks swirling around it, Queequeg is held by a rope tied to Ishmael. The process is perilous for both men. "We two, for the time," Ishmael tells us, "were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake." There is a noble class unit among the crew, and the working class aboard the *Pequod* is saluted. An "ethereal light" shines on the "workman's arm," and the laborers are ascribed "high qualities" and "democratic dignity." In the early twentieth century, a Japanese immigrant described in poetry a lesson that had been learned by farm laborers of different nationalities—Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, and Asian Indian:

People harvesting
 Work together unaware
 Of racial problems.

A Filipino-immigrant laborer in California expressed a similar hope and understanding. America was, Macario Bulosan told his brother Carlos, "not a land of one race or

one class of men” but “a new world” of respect and unconditional opportunities for all who toiled and suffered from oppression, from “the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea pickers.”