

MARI J. MATSUDA

Where Is Your
Body?

AND
OTHER
ESSAYS ON
RACE
GENDER
AND THE
LAW

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WE WILL NOT BE USED**Are Asian-Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?**

The Asian Law Caucus is the original public interest law firm serving the Asian-American community. It was built up from scratch by young, radical lawyers who carried files in their car trunks and stayed up all night to type their own briefs. The Asian Law Caucus has changed the lives of many—poor and working people, immigrants, and troubled youth—the least advantaged in the Asian-American community. The Caucus has also made history, successfully bringing landmark cases that have changed the law and the legal system. The supporters of the Caucus include many who participated in the civil rights and antiwar movements and who have worked all their lives in coalition with other people of color. This history is what inspired the words below, delivered at a fund-raising banquet in April 1990.

It is a special honor to address supporters of the Asian Law Caucus. Here, before this audience, I am willing to speak in the tradition of our women warriors, to go beyond the platitudes of fund-raiser formalism and to talk of something that has been bothering me and that I need your help on. I want to speak of my fear that Asian Americans are in danger of becoming the racial bourgeoisie and of my resolve to resist that path.

Marx wrote of the economic bourgeoisie—of the small merchants, the middle class, and the baby capitalists who were deeply confused about their self-interest. The bourgeoisie, he said, often emulate the manners and ideology of the big-time capitalists. They are the “wannabes” of capitalism. Struggling for riches, often failing, confused about the reasons why, the economic wannabes go to their graves thinking that the big hit is right around the corner.

Living in nineteenth-century Europe, Marx thought mostly in terms of class. Living in twentieth-century America, in the land where racism found a home, I am thinking about race. Is there a racial equivalent of the economic bourgeoisie? I fear there may be, and I fear it may be us.

If white, as it has been historically, is the top of the racial hierarchy in America, and black, historically, is the bottom, will yellow assume the place of the racial middle? The role of the racial middle is a critical one. It can reinforce white supremacy if the middle deludes itself into thinking it can be just like white if it tries hard enough. Conversely, the middle can dismantle white supremacy if it refuses to be the middle, if it refuses to buy into racial hierarchy, and if it refuses to abandon communities of black and brown people, choosing instead to forge alliances with them.

The theme of the unconventional fund-raiser talk you are listening to is “we will not be used.” It is a plea to Asian Americans to think about the ways in which our communities are particularly susceptible to playing the worst version of the racial bourgeoisie role.

I remember my mother’s stories of growing up on a sugar plantation on Kauai. She tells of the Portuguese *luna*, or over-

seer. The *luna* rode on a big horse and issued orders to the Japanese and Filipino workers. The *luna* in my mother's stories is a tragic/comic figure. He thinks he is better than the other workers, and he does not realize that the plantation owner considers the *luna* subhuman, just like all the other workers. The invidious stereotype of the dumb "portagee" persists in Hawaii today, a holdover from the days of the *luna* parading around on the big horse, cloaked in self-delusion and false pride.

The double tragedy for the plantation nisei who hated the *luna* is that the sansei in Hawaii are becoming the new *luna*. Nice Japanese girls from Manoa Valley are going through four years of college to get degrees in travel industry management in order to sit behind a small desk in a big hotel, to dole out marching orders to brown-skinned workers, and to take orders from a white man with a bigger desk and a bigger paycheck who never has to complicate his life by dealing with the brown people who make the beds and serve the food.¹ He need only deal with the Nice-Japanese-Girl-ex-Cherry Blossom-Queen, eager to please, who does not know she will never make it to the bigger desk.

The Portuguese *luna* now has the last laugh with this new, unfunny portagee joke: When the portagee was the *luna*, he did not have to pay college tuition to ride that horse. I would like to say to my sister behind the small desk, "Remember where you came from, and take this pledge: We will not be used."

There are a hundred ways to use the racial bourgeoisie. First is the creation of success myths and blame-the-victim ideology. When Asian Americans manage to do well, their success is used against others. Internally, it is used to erase the continuing poverty and social dislocation within Asian-American communities. The

media are full of stories of Asian-American whiz kids.² Their successes are used to erase our problems and to disavow any responsibility for them. The dominant culture does not know about drug abuse in our communities, our high school dropouts, or our AIDS victims.³ Suggestions that some segments of the Asian-American community need special help are greeted with suspicion and disbelief.

Externally, our successes are used to deny racism and to put down other groups. African Americans and Latinos and poor whites are told, "Look at those Asians—anyone can make it in this country if they really try." The cruelty of telling this to crack babies, to workers displaced by runaway shops, and to families waiting in line at homeless shelters is not something I want associated with my genealogy. Yes, my ancestors made it in this country, but they made it against the odds. In my genealogy, and probably in yours, are people who went to bed hungry, who lost land to the tax collector, who worked to exhaustion and ill-health, who faced pain and relocation with the bitter stoicism that we call, in Nihongo, *gaman*.⁴ Many who came the hard road of our ancestors did not make it. Their bones are still in the mountains by the tunnels they blasted for the railroad, still in the fields where they stooped over the short-handled hoe, and still in the graveyards of Europe, where they fought for a democracy that did not include them.

Asian success was success with a dark, painful price. To use that success to discount the hardship facing poor and working people in this country today is a sacrilege to the memory of our ancestors. It is an insult to today's Asian-American immigrants who work the double-triple shift, who know no leisure, who crowd two and three families to a home, and who put children

and old folks alike to work at struggling family businesses or doing piecework until midnight. Yes, we take pride in our success, but we should also remember the cost. The success that is our pride is not to be given over as a weapon to use against other struggling communities. I hope we will not be used to blame the poor for their poverty.

Nor should we be used to deny employment or educational opportunity to others. A recent exchange of editorials and letters in the Asian-American press reveals confusion over affirmative action.⁵ Racist anti-Asian quotas at the universities can give quotas a bad name in our community. At the same time, quotas have been the only way we have been able to walk through the door of persistently discriminatory institutions like the San Francisco Fire Department.⁶ We need affirmative action because there are still employers who see an Asian face and see a person who is unfit for a leadership position. In every field where we have attained a measure of success, we are underrepresented in the real power positions.⁷ And yet, we are in danger of being manipulated into opposing affirmative action by those who say affirmative action hurts Asian Americans. What is really going on here? When university administrators have hidden quotas to keep down Asian admissions, this is because Asians are seen as destroying the predominantly white character of the university. Under this mentality, we cannot let in all those Asian over-achievers and maintain affirmative action for other minority groups. We cannot do both because that will mean either that our universities lose their predominantly white character or that we have to fund more and better universities. To either of those prospects, I say, why not? and I condemn the voices from my own community that are translating legitimate anger at ceilings

on Asian admissions into unthinking opposition to affirmative-action floors needed to fight racism.

In a period when rates of educational attainment for minorities and working-class Americans are going down,⁸ in a period when America is lagging behind other developed nations in literacy and learning,⁹ I hope we will not be used to deny educational opportunities to the disadvantaged and to preserve success for only the privileged.

Another classic way to use the racial bourgeoisie is as America's punching bag. There is a lot of rage in this country, and for good reason. Our economy is in shambles. Persistent unemployment is creating new ghost towns and new soup kitchens from coast to coast. The symptoms of decay—the drugs, the homelessness, and the violence—are everywhere.

From out of this decay comes a rage looking for a scapegoat, and a traditional American scapegoat is the Oriental Menace. From the Workingman's Party that organized white laborers around an anti-Chinese campaign in California in 1877,¹⁰ to the World War II internment fueled by resentment of the success of issei farmers,¹¹ to the murder of Vincent Chin,¹² and to the terrorizing of Korean merchants in ghetto communities today, there is an unbroken line of poor and working Americans turning their anger and frustration into hatred of Asian Americans. Every time this happens, the real villains—the corporations and politicians who put profits before human needs—are allowed to go about their business free from public scrutiny, and the anger that could go to organizing for positive social change goes instead to Asian bashing.

Will we be used as America's punching bag? We can prevent this by organizing to publicize and to fight racist speech and racist

violence wherever we find it. More important, however, Asian Americans must take a prominent role in advocating economic justice. We must show that Asian Americans are allies of the working poor, the unemployed, and the ghetto teenager. If we can show our commitment to ending the economic upheaval that feeds anti-Asian sentiment, the displaced rage that terrorizes Asian Americans will turn on more deserving targets.

If we can show sensitivity to the culture and needs of other people of color when we do business in their communities, we will maintain our welcome there, as we have in the past. I hope we can do this so we can put an end to being used as America's punching bag.

The problem of displaced anger is also an internal problem for Asian Americans. You know the story: the Japanese pick on the Okinawans, the Chinese pick on the Filipinos, and the Samoans pick on the Laotians. On the plantation we scabbed on each other's strikes. In Chinatown, we have competed over space. There are Asian men who batter Asian women and Asian parents who batter their children. There is homophobia in our communities, tied to a deep fear that we are already so marginalized by white society that any additional difference is intolerable. I have heard straight Asian men say they feel so emasculated by white society that they cannot tolerate assertive women or sexually ambiguous men. This is a victim's mentality, the tragic symptom of a community so devoid of self-respect that it brings its anger home.

I love my Asian brothers, but I have lost my patience with malingering homophobia and sexism and especially with using white racism as an excuse to resist change. You know, the "I have to be Bruce Lee because the white man wants me to be Tonto"

line. Yes, the J-town boys with their black leather jackets are adorable, but the pathetic need to put down straight women, gays, and lesbians is not. To anyone in our communities who wants to bring anger home, let us say, "Cut it out." We will not be used against each other.

If you know Hawaiian music, you know of the *ha'ina* line that tells of a song about to end. This speech is about to end. It will end by recalling echoes of Asian-American resistance.

In anti-eviction struggles in Chinatowns from coast to coast and in Hawaii, we heard the song *We Shall Not Be Moved*.¹³ For the 1990s, I want to say, "We shall not be used." I want to remember the times when Asian Americans stood side by side with African Americans, Latinos, and progressive whites to demand social justice. I want to remember the multiracial ILWU,¹⁴ which ended the plantation system in Hawaii,¹⁵ and the multiracial sugar beet strikes in California that brought together Japanese, Filipino, and Chicano workers to fulfill their dream of a better life.¹⁶ I want to remember the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, which brought together progressive Okinawans, Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, and European immigrants to fight McCarthyism and the deportation of political activists.¹⁷ I want to remember the San Francisco State College strike¹⁸ and the Asian-American students who stood their ground in multiracial coalition to bring about ethnic studies and lasting changes in American academic life, changes that make it possible for me, as a scholar, to tell the truth as I see it.

In remembering the San Francisco State strike, I also want to remember Dr. Hayakawa and ask what he represented.¹⁹ For a variety of historical and cultural reasons, Asian Americans are particularly susceptible to being used by the dominant society.

Nonetheless, we have resisted being used. We have joined time and again in the struggle for democracy in America. The Asian Law Caucus represents that tradition. The caucus is a concrete manifestation of the pledge to seek a better life for the least advantaged and to work in coalition with other groups. All of you who support the caucus help keep alive a utopian vision of a world free of racism and poverty. You honor the proudest moments in our collective histories.

When I told a friend about this speech, he sent me a news clipping from the *San Francisco Chronicle* about Asian Americans as the retailer's dream.²⁰ It starts out, "[t]hey're young, [t]hey're single, [t]hey're college-educated, and on the white-collar track. And they like to shop for fun." Does that describe you? Well, it may describe me, too. But I hope there is more to Asian-American identity than that. I hope we will be known to history as a people who remembered the hard road of their ancestors and who shared, therefore, a special commitment to social justice.

This song is now at an end, a song of my hope that we will not be used.

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- 1 Dr. Haunani Kay Trask alerted me to the new *luna* phenomena.
 - 2 See, e.g., David Brand, "The New Whiz Kids: Why Asian-Americans Are Doing so Well, and What It Costs Them," *Time*, 31 August 1987, 42. See generally Al Kamen, "Myth of 'Model Minority' Haunts Asian Americans; Stereotypes Eclipse Diverse Group's Problems," *Washington Post*, 22 June 1992, A1.
 - 3 Cf. Harry H. L. Kitano, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1995) (discussing social problems facing Asian Americans).
 - 4 "Nihongo" is the Japanese word for the Japanese language.
 - 5 For example, individuals such as columnist Arthur Hu have opposed affirmative action admissions programs at colleges, specifically criticizing

- race-based admission criteria at the University of California. See Arthur Hu, "Hu's on First," *Asian Week*, 10 May 1991, 26; 24 May 1991, 12.
- 6 In 1985, only 35 (2.5 percent) of the 1,380 firefighters in the San Francisco Fire Department were Asian, while Asian men comprised 19.3% of the male civilian labor force (women were not hired by the SFFD until 1987). *U.S. v. City and County of San Francisco*, 656 F. Supp. 276, 286 n. 10 (1987). A consent decree required hiring Asian Americans. As of August 5, 1990, Asian firefighters still comprised only about 4 percent of the SFFD. *U.S. v. City and County of San Francisco*, 748 F. Supp. 1416, 1428 n. 10 (1990).
 - 7 According to a 1990 census data and a report by Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Asian Americans are widely dispersed along the economic spectrum and face discrimination at all levels of employment. Further, Asian Americans earn less income, per capita, than whites even though they are often better educated. See generally Elizabeth Llorente, "Asian Americans Finding Many Doors Closed to Them," *Record (New Jersey)*, 23 October 1994, A1. The federal "glass ceiling report" (*Good for Business: Making Full Use of Human Capital*, [Washington, D.C.: Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995] stated, "Despite higher levels of formal education than other groups, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans receive a lower yield in terms of income or promotions."
 - 8 See, e.g., Brenna B. Mahoney, "Children at Risk: The Inequality of Urban Education," *New York Law School Journal of Human Rights*, 9 (1991):161 (reporting the "declining numbers of urban minority high school graduates . . . pursuing postsecondary educational opportunities" and the increasing percentage of poor and minority students performing below grade level in mathematics and reading).
 - 9 See e.g., Augustus F. Hawkins, "Becoming Preeminent in Education: America's Greatest Challenge," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 15, (1991):367 (noting that the United States is falling behind other countries in virtually all educational areas, particularly mathematics and the sciences).
 - 10 In the 1870s, white workers, resentful of Chinese laborers (who worked for lower wages and in worse conditions), pressured politicians into enacting a series of anti-Chinese laws that culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.
 - 11 U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians: Report for the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs*

(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 42-44. See also Mari J. Matsuda, "Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 22, (1987):363-68 (describing the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and their subsequent claims for redress).

- 12 Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was murdered in Detroit in 1982 by assailants (unemployed auto workers) who thought he was a Japanese person responsible for their loss of jobs. See U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Recent Activities against Citizens and Residents of Asian Descent* (1986) pp. 43-44 (giving a brief history of this case).
- 13 This popular union song based on an old hymn, *I Shall Not Be Moved*, was first sung in 1931 by miners; later versions added newer verses appropriate to the civil rights and anti-war movements. See Tom Glazer, *Songs of Peace, Freedom, and Protest* (New York: D. McKay, 1970), 332-33. For an example of anti-eviction struggle, see e.g. Chester Hartman, "San Francisco International Hotel: Case Study of a Turf Struggle," *Radical America* 12 (June 1978):47-58 (describing activists struggling against the eviction of Chinese-American tenants in San Francisco's Chinatown).
- 14 The International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union is a progressive, multiracial union active on the West Coast and in Hawaii.
- 15 See Edward Beechert, *Working in Hawaii: A Labor History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985); and Sanford Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck: Jack Hall and the ILWU in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979).
- 16 Thomas Almaguer, "Racial Domination and Class Conflict in Capitalist Agriculture: The Oxnard Sugar Beet Workers' Strike of 1903," *Labor History* 25 (1984):325-50.
- 17 See Mari Jo Buhle et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 19-20 (chronicles the general history of the American Committee for Protection of the Foreign Born).
- 18 See generally Karen Umemoto, "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968-69: The Role of Asian American Students," *Amerasia* 15 (1989):3-41. (recounting the events at the San Francisco State College strike and Senator Hayakawa's attempt to end it).
- 19 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 20 John Berry, "Survey Says Asians Are Dream Customers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 March 1990, C1.