

# Whither the Asian American Coalition?

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*This article offers a brief history of the Asian American coalition and suggests how possible new directions for the coalition in the future may affect the scope and preoccupations of Asian American history as it will be written. "Asian American" was an idea invented in the 1960s to bring together Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans for strategic purposes. Soon other Asian-origin groups, such as Korean, Vietnamese, and South Asian Americans, were added. The article considers four groups who some people have suggested have strategic links with the Asian American coalition—Pacific Islander Americans, multiracial people of part-Asian descent, international adoptees from Asian countries, and Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans. It examines whether and how each group might be considered part of the Asian American coalition, and what impact their inclusion might have on the writing of Asian American history.*

My colleagues in this special issue of the *Pacific Historical Review* offer instructive, indeed compelling, visions for new directions we ought to take in the study of Asian American history. I am happy to endorse their ideas. Yet, even as we propose new directions and paradigms for Asian American historical studies, we ought to pause and consider an older, yet ever-morphing issue: Who is an Asian American? The answer to that question has changed dramatically—in fact, several times—over the years since the Asian American coalition was first formed in the 1960s and 1970s. The definition of who is an Asian American shows signs of changing yet again in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The possibilities and imperatives faced by historians of Asian America depend a great deal on whether and how such definitional changes may take place.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Inevitably, an essay of this sort builds on other work that the author has been doing. Readers may discern here echoes of the ideas, and even some of the phrases, that appear in the some of my earlier writings, particularly: Paul Spickard, "Who Is an Asian? Who Is a Pacific Islander? Monoracialism, Multiracial People, and Asian Ameri-

## History of the Asian American idea

The old joke asks: “How many Asian Americans were there in 1950?” The answer: “Zero. The idea hadn’t been invented yet.”<sup>2</sup> Asian Americans have long known that their existence as a group did not mean they shared a timeless essence or a natural common identity; rather, their Asian American identity was a thing purposefully constructed. “Asian American” as an idea grew out of the work of a coalition of activists and their intellectual allies who created the idea for particular political purposes. Those purposes and their historical contexts have changed over the last forty years, and they may be changing again; hence, the limits and contents of the Asian American coalition have also changed and may change again.

Prior to the 1950s the various peoples who would come to think of themselves and to be thought of as Asian Americans did not see themselves as a single people. There were substantial numbers of Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans (as well as smaller numbers of other groups with Asian origins),

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can Communities,” in Teresa Williams-León and Cynthia L. Nakashima, eds., *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans* (Philadelphia, 2001), 13–24; Spickard, “Pacific Diaspora?” in Paul Spickard, Joanne L. Rondilla, and Debbie Hippolite Wright, eds., *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific* (Honolulu, 2002), 1–30; Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York, 2007); and Debbie Hippolite Wright and Spickard, “Pacific Islander Americans and Asian American Identity,” in Linda Trinh Võ and Rick Bonus, eds., *Contemporary Asian American Communities* (Philadelphia, 2002), 105–119.

2. Sources on Asian American panethnicity and the Asian American movement include: Karin Aguilar-San Juan, ed., *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* (Boston, 1994); Edwin G. Burrows, *Chinese and Japanese in Hawaii during the Sino-Japanese Conflict* (Honolulu, 1939); Doug Chin, *Seattle’s International District: The Making of a Pan-Asian American Community* (Seattle, 2001); Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity* (Philadelphia, 1992); Espiritu, ed., *Asian American Panethnicity*, special issue of *Amerasia Journal*, 22 (Number 2, 1996); Emma Gee, ed., *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (Los Angeles, 1976); Philip Kan Gotanda, *Yankee Dawg You Die* (New York, 1991); Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2005); Edward J. W. Park and John S. W. Park, *Probationary Americans: Contemporary Immigration Policies and the Shaping of Asian American Communities* (New York, 2005); Amy Tachiki, et al., eds., *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Los Angeles, 1971); Karen Umemoto, “‘On Strike!’ San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–1969: The Role of Asian American Students,” *Amerasia Journal*, 15 (Number 1, 1989), 3–41; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Civil Rights Issues Facing Asian Americans in the 1990s* (Washington, D.C., 1992); Linda Trinh Võ, *Mobilizing an Asian American Community* (Philadelphia, 2004); William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia, 1992); Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams* (New York, 2000).

but those constituted separate communities. During World War II most Chinese and Filipino Americans very much disliked Japanese Americans for reasons having to do with the actions of their ancestral homelands' governments and armies.

Two experiences prepared the ground for the formation of a panethnic Asian American identity: European Americans' Orientalism and propinquity among Asian American peoples. Orientalism has been a persistent theme in Western culture, and it had much to do with the way that Asian-descended peoples have been treated throughout their history in the United States. More enduring than the imagery laid on other immigrant groups, the idea of the Oriental has affected Asian-descended Americans from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. The idea that there is a fundamental divide between East and West goes back at least to the account of the war between Greece and Persia by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE.

Edward Said described the degree to which the idea of the Orient was an unexamined assumption in European culture: "‘Oriental’ . . . designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, culturally. One could speak in Europe of an Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental tale, Oriental despotism, or an Oriental mode of production, and be understood."<sup>3</sup> Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx believed in it, as did Benjamin Disraeli and Theodore Roosevelt. In the idea of the Orient, everything from the Bosphorus and Nile to Honolulu and Tokyo became one undifferentiated place. People as utterly unlike one another as Egyptians, Koreans, Bengalis, and Vietnamese somehow were melded together into a single, faceless mass in the White imagination—even while

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3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). Other sources on Orientalism include: Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Baltimore, 1954); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley, 2003); Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, 1999); Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley, 2005); Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002); Sheng-Mei Ma, *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (Minneapolis, 2000); A. L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (London, 2002); Macfie, ed., *Orientalism* (New York, 2000); *Orientalism and the Legacy of Edward Said*, special issue of *Amerasia Journal*, 31 (Number 1, 2005); Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998); Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York, 2002); Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York, 2001).

Vietnamese, Bengalis, Koreans, and Egyptians did not see one another as part of the same group at all.

In the nineteenth century Europeans of various sorts, including European Americans, encountered a multitude of different peoples in Asia on various colonial trajectories. This reinvigorated Orientalism as one particular kind of racist justification for imperial conquest and exploitation—the British in India, the French and Dutch in Southeast Asia, everyone in China. One learned of “Oriental coolies” as a distinctive type of labor—cheap, exploitable, faceless, and disposable, without human individuality or will. In the eyes of Western traders, according to Stuart Miller, Orientals were “ridiculously clad, superstitious ridden, dishonest, crafty, cruel, and marginal members of the human race who lacked the courage, intelligence, skill, and will to do anything about the oppressive despotism under which they lived or the stagnating social conditions that surrounded them.” Missionaries wanted to save Orientals from their natural state: “lechery, dishonesty, xenophobia, cruelty, despotism, filth, and intellectual inferiority.”<sup>4</sup>

Such ideas endure. They have framed the experiences of Asians in the United States from the 1850s to the 2000s. Many White people have difficulty telling Asian Americans apart; few Asian Americans give evidence of a reciprocal inability. More than any other people except Arab Americans, Asian Americans have been regarded as eternal foreigners in the United States. The anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese movements made much of the alleged unassimilability of Asians into American culture and values. To this day, hardly an Asian American lives who has not heard, and more than a few times, some version of the question, “Where are you from?” If the answer given is “Chicago,” inevitably a follow-up is asked: “No, where are you *really* from?” by which the White questioner means, “What foreign country is your real home?”<sup>5</sup>

In the two decades that followed World War II, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans did in fact begin to have common experiences that led them to form another panethnicity: Asian Americans. In the 1950s and 1960s, a generation grew up in American streets and schools, and they were very often the same streets

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4. Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785–1882* (Berkeley, 1969), 36.

5. Tuan, *Forever Foreigners*.

and schools.<sup>6</sup> In Seattle, it was a swath of the Central Area, from Chinatown to Rainier Valley to Beacon Hill, where working-class Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese American families lived near one another. In San Francisco, it was Chinatown, Russian Hill, and the Western Addition. In Los Angeles, it was the span from Chinatown through Little Tokyo and on to Boyle Heights. In Honolulu, the district ran from Makiki to Kalihi. Youth of the American-born generation went to school together, played ball together, ran the streets together, and were treated by their teachers and other Whites as if they were all one set of people. The other racial group with whom they interacted in those same schools and neighborhoods (except in Honolulu) were African Americans; although there were friendships between Blacks and Asians, they remained distinct peoples.

Asian Americans first went to college in large numbers in the 1960s. There—at UCLA, Berkeley, San Francisco State, the University of Washington, and other urban, public West Coast colleges—they became politicized in the second half of the 1960s by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. They saw that the Civil Rights and Black Power movements started to bring changes to the problems of Black communities. The student activists who were forming Black student unions and agitating for Black studies courses were very often people whom the Asians had known in high school. It was a short step for those Asians from witnessing such activism on the part of Black friends to becoming activists themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The Vietnam War was crucial. Asian Americans were not over-represented among those drafted and killed, as was the case for Blacks and Chicanos. Still, the rhetoric of the war was racialized, and the racism was directed against Asians. Americans heard endlessly of “gooks” and “slopes” and that “life is cheap in the Orient.” Asian GIs came home to tell of being the targets of suspicion and racist slurs from their comrades in arms. A sheltered Chinese American girl of nineteen joined an antiwar group in 1970 and passed out leaflets in a West Coast suburb. She was told repeatedly

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6. This is described in detail in Paul R. Spickard, *Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformations of an Ethnic Group* (New York, 1996), 65–68, 135–138. See also Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District, from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle, 1994).

7. I witnessed this at the University of Washington in 1969–1971.

by the White people she encountered, “But how can you be against the war? We’re doing this for *you people*.” Until that moment, she had never thought of herself as being part of the same people as the Vietnamese. Her antiwar work was political work, not ethnic work, but this experience made her rethink her identity. She remained Chinese in her own mind, but she began to see herself as Asian American, too.<sup>8</sup>

The Third World Student Strike at San Francisco State in 1968–1969, which demanded specific programs of study oriented to Blacks, Asians, American Indians, and Chicanos, was quickly copied by students at Berkeley, the University of Washington, and other schools. Out of that flurry of organizing came ethnic studies programs and the first concerted attempt by the academy to address the experiences of people of color in the United States. Those programs gave theoretical coherence and institutional support to the emerging Asian American panethnicity. William Wei has described the process by which Asian American students and activists created a common Asian American identity:

[T]he Black Power movement made Asian Americans realize that they too had been defined by European American attitudes and dominated by an Eurocentric culture. They had to rethink who they were and re-create their own cultural identity, forging distinct Asian ethnic group identities into a pan-Asian one. The foundation for this unique identity was their experience as Asians in America—a common history of oppression and resistance that would serve as the basis for a “bold culture, unashamed and true to itself.”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, young Asians began to turn their attention toward the communities from which they had come. Some of that attention was directed along ethnic-specific lines, as when Chinese Americans went into Oakland’s Chinatown to run athletic programs for youth and medical clinics for the elderly. But some crossed ethnic lines, as when Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos demonstrated together throughout the 1970s and even fought against police to keep developers from razing the International Hotel, a residence

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8. Conversation with the author, San Francisco, 1970.

9. Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 42. “Asian American” was chosen over the White-inflected “Oriental” because, as was often said in the movement, “Orientals are objects like rugs. Asians are people.”

for old, poor, single Filipino men in San Francisco.<sup>10</sup> Increasingly, social service agencies and political efforts took on a pan-Asian cast, such as the Asian American Mental Health Training Center, the Asian American Law Caucus, the Asian American Political Alliance. Partly it was a matter of numbers: Perhaps Filipinos alone could not garner much attention, but Asians *together* had about three times as many constituents. Increasingly it became a matter of a self-consciously chosen additional identity as Asian Americans. Other, less overtly political entities also began to make the change: the National Asian American Telecommunications Association, the Asian American Women's Business Roundtable, the Westminster Asian American Church, and so on.

Common racialized experiences led Asian Americans to react together as one. A marker for Asian American panethnic community formation was the murder of Vincent Chin. On the night of June 19, 1982, Chin met some friends in a Detroit bar to celebrate his upcoming wedding. The American car industry was then in desperate straits. Thousands were out of work, and White Detroit residents blamed the Japanese—not the Japanese government or the Japanese auto industry, but anyone they saw as a Japanese person. Chin was a Chinese American. Two White autoworkers, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, accosted Chin and called him a “Jap.” They chased him out of the bar, caught him, and beat him to death with a baseball bat. None of the facts are in dispute. Still, Ebens and Nitz were convicted of relatively minor offenses, and neither of them served time in jail. The murder of Vincent Chin galvanized Asian Americans across the country as they realized that they too were at risk as Asians in American society. The fact that Chin was Chinese, not Japanese, had not kept him from being killed. The fact that he was a native-born American, not a foreigner, did not protect him either. The thought that a judge and jury found it understandable, perhaps even reasonable, that Nitz and Ebens would kill him cast a chill through the hearts of Asian Americans everywhere.<sup>11</sup>

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10. *The Fall of the I-Hotel*, directed by Curtis Choy (National Asian American Telecommunications Association, 1993).

11. Helen Y. Zia, “The New Violence,” in Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and Him Mark Lai, eds., *Chinese American Voices* (Berkeley, 2006), 345–352; “A Letter from Lily Chin,” in *ibid.* [Lily Chin, Victor Chin’s mother, wrote the letter, in Chinese, to the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council on March 18, 1983], 352–354; Christine Choy and

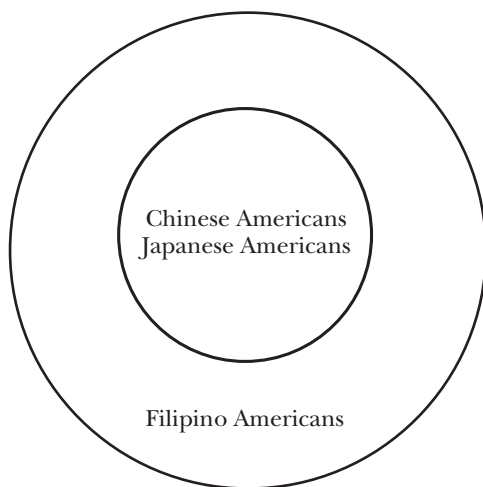


Figure 1. Centrality and marginality of Asian American groups, 1970s.

By the 1980s the idea that Asian Americans were a single pan-ethnic group whose members had a lot in common across lines of ancestral ethnic nationality had become a fairly unremarkable feature of life, not only on the West Coast but in communities all across the nation. Yet it was always the case that some peoples were closer to the heart of the Asian American coalition than others. In the 1970s the core ethnic groups were Chinese and Japanese Americans, with Filipino Americans relegated to a second circle (Figure 1).

The Immigration Act of 1965 removed the racial bar against Asian immigration, and the numbers of Asian immigrants soared. By the 1990s Asian Americans had become the fastest-growing American racial minority (in percentage terms), and the countries from which they or their ancestors came multiplied. Chinese and Filipinos continued to arrive in large numbers, but hundreds of thousands of others came from Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and other countries in Southeast Asia. The forces of globalization brought many more from India, Pakistan, and elsewhere in South and South-west Asia. By the end of the twentieth century the Asian American coalition had grown in size and in the number of its constituent parts, but some groups were still generally regarded to be near the

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Renee Tajima, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (New York, 1989); Patricia Wong Hall and Victor M. Hwang, *Anti-Asian Violence in North America* (Walnut Creek, Calif., 2001).



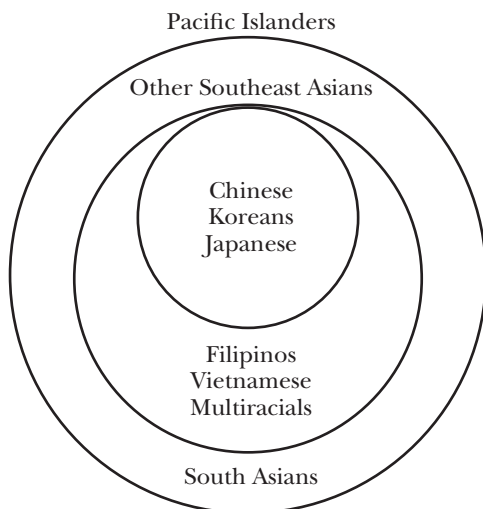


Figure 2. Centrality and marginality of Asian American groups, 1990s.

center of Asian American identity and others to be further away. Korean Americans had joined Chinese and Japanese Americans at the core of the Asian American coalition; Filipinos, Vietnamese, and some multiracial people of part-Asian parentage formed a second circle; and other Southeast Asians and South Asians were still more loosely connected to the coalition (Figure 2).<sup>12</sup>

### Are these Asian Americans?

Let us consider how four groups of people—Pacific Islander Americans, multiracial people of part-Asian descent, international adoptees, and Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans—might or might not be regarded as members of, or connected to, the Asian American coalition, now and in the years to come.

**Pacific Islander Americans.** Pacific Island peoples in the United States have long been lumped together with Asian Ameri-

12. These diagrams and this analysis first appeared in Spickard, "Who Is an Asian?" On the tenuous positioning of South Asians *vis-à-vis* the Asian American coalition, see Nazli Kibria, "Not Asian, Black or White? Reflections on South Asian American Racial Identity," *Amerasia Journal*, 22 (Number 2, 1996), 77–86; Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, eds., *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (Philadelphia, 1998).

cans by non-Pacific Islanders. The U.S. Census long included Hawaiians, Samoans, Tongans, Maori, Chamorros, and other Pacific Island peoples in their aggregate numbers for Asian Americans. Sometimes the lumping has been done by Asian Americans, but very seldom by Pacific Islanders. Some histories, textbooks, and anthologies on Asian American subjects have routinely included treatment of Pacific Islanders.<sup>13</sup> Others have routinely ignored them.<sup>14</sup> There were plenty of Pacific Islanders in the United States when the Asian American coalition was founded, but they were not then part of that coalition.<sup>15</sup>

In the early 1980s some people associated with the Asian American intellectual movement attempted to explore whether and in what ways Pacific Islanders might become part of the Asian American coalition. For the first year or two of its existence, the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) included “/Pacific” in its title, but not significantly in its membership; the organization discontinued that rhetorical inclusion shortly thereafter. Sucheng Chan, Douglas Lee, Alexander Mamak, and Pat Luce explored the question of whether to include Pacific Islanders in an Asian and Pacific American coalition. Chan concluded:

Some years later [after the beginning of the Asian American movement], the adjective “Pacific” got grafted onto the term “Asian Americans” to form the compound “Asian Pacific Americans.” This, too, was a political act. . . . It was thought that lumping the two groups together would

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13. For example, see Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity* (the book, not the issue of *Amerasia Journal*); Harry H. L. Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1988); Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura, eds., *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology* (New York, 2003); Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard, eds., *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America* (New York, 2003); Asian Women United of California, eds., *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (Boston, 1989); Juanita Tamayo Lott, *Asian Americans: From Racial Category to Multiple Identities* (Walnut Creek, Calif., 1998); Lee C. Lee and Nolan W. S. Zane, eds., *Handbook of Asian American Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1998).

14. For example, see Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston, 1991); Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng, eds., *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring* (Philadelphia, 1994); Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions* (New York, 2004); Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston, 1998); Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, ed., *Teaching Asian America* (Lanham, Md., 1998).

15. Jonathan Okamura, “Why There Are No Asian Americans in Hawai‘i: The Continuing Significance of Local,” in Peter Manicas, ed., *Social Process in Hawai‘i: A Reader* (New York, 1995), 243ff.

increase our political strength. . . . [M]ost Asian Americans are quite ignorant about Pacific Islanders. . . . This sad state of ignorance is true not only of the public but of scholars as well. Unfortunately, this includes scholars who teach in Asian American studies programs. . . . The differences between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are much greater than the similarities between them. . . . [T]he people with the greatest vested interest in keeping the two groups aggregated are government officials and bureaucrats in funding agencies, for treating the two umbrella groups as one simplifies the work which such people have to do.<sup>16</sup>

Early in the new century, several Pacific Islander American scholars proposed to re-engage Asian America. Debbie Hippolite Wright called for a frank, open, mutually respectful, and mutually supportive dialogue between Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, with a goal to build a working coalition to support each other's issues, from antiracism to immigration reform to Hawaiian sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> Several scholars, noting that Hawaiians, Maori, Chamorros, Samoans, and other Pacific Islanders had long been active in the AAAS, asked that the name of the scholarly association be changed again, to include Pacific Islanders—but this time, to really include them. Scholars like Vicente Diaz, Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor, Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman, and Joanne Rondilla cited the long, intertwined history of people who have conventionally been regarded as Pacific Islanders and those regarded as Asians. They pointed to the manifest linkages between how American colonialism has been experienced by some Pacific Island peoples such as Hawaiians, Samoans, and Chamorros, and how it has been experienced by some Asians (Filipinos, especially, but also Japanese, Vietnamese, and others). They pointed to the large numbers of Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, and other Asians who have been in the Pacific in the modern era, as well as to ancient trade and cultural links between island and continental peoples.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Douglas Lee, Sucheng Chan, Alexander Mamak, and Pat Luce, *Asian American and Pacific American Relations*, Part One (Seattle, 1982), 3, 41–42, 44.

17. Hippolite Wright and Spickard, "Pacific Islander Americans and Asian American Identity," 115.

18. Vicente M. Diaz, "To 'P' or Not to 'P'? Marking the Territory Between Pacific Islander and Asian American Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 7 (2004), 183–208; Davianna Pomaika'i McGregor, "Engaging Hawaiians in the Expansion of the U.S. Empire," in *ibid.*, 209–222; Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman, "Pacific-ing Asian Pacific American History," in *ibid.*, 223–240; Joanne L. Rondilla, "The Filipino Question in Asia and the Pacific: Rethinking Regional Origins in Diaspora," in Spickard, Rondilla, and Hippolite Wright, eds., *Pacific Diaspora*, 56–66. Diaz, McGregor, and Still-

The panethnic concepts “Asian” and “Pacific Islander” mask profound differences between some of their constituent groups. Punjabis and Koreans share very little history or experience, yet they are in the Asian American coalition. Hawaiians and Solomon Islanders likewise have very little common history or experience, yet they are both Pacific Islanders. On the other hand, Filipinos are considered to be in the Asian American coalition and Chamorros in the Pacific Islander coalition, despite the fact that Filipinos and Chamorros share vast amounts of common history, culture, and social placement. Not all the history between Asian and Pacific Islander Americans is common history; sometimes it has been a history of oppositional interests and actions, as the ongoing discussion of “Asian settler colonialism” in Hawai‘i suggests.<sup>19</sup> But Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have had a great deal of intertwined history, and it will be useful as we go forward to explore the intertwining, even as we recognize that Pacific Islanders are not a subset of Asian America.

What would it mean for historians of Asian America consciously to ask ourselves: How do the issues that I think I am seeing in my study of Asian Americans look different if I consider the situations of Pacific Island peoples as well? I think we might well have a much greater appreciation for the flexible and contingent nature of ethnic coalitions, as well as for the role played by American (and perhaps other nations’) colonialism. We might want to open up our inquiry to talk about the links between the American colonial projects in California, in Hawai‘i, in the Philippines, and in Southwest Asia into the twenty-first century. We might want to think critically about Asian immigrants’ complicity in Japanese colonialism in Micronesia and in American colonialism in Hawai‘i.<sup>20</sup>

**Multiracial Asian Americans.** Multiracial people are also part of Asian America and have been from the beginning, although the monoracially framed histories of Asian America have generally lost

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man were engaged in debate with Kehaulani Kauanui, who opposed linking Pacific Islanders with Asian Americans. I think Kauanui mistook the nature of the move they advocated. For her view on the subject, see Kehaulani Kauanui, “Asian American Studies and the ‘Pacific Question,’” in Kent Ono, ed., *Asian American Studies after Critical Mass* (Malden, Mass., 2005), 123–143.

19. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, eds., *Whose Vision? Asian Settler Colonialism in Hawai‘i*, special issue of *Amerasia Journal*, 26 (Number 2, 2000).

20. Mark R. Peattie, *Nan‘yo: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese in Micronesia, 1885–1945* (Honolulu, 1988); Fujikane and Okamura, *Whose Vision?*

sight of their existence.<sup>21</sup> In the mid-1990s a tall, slim, pale, chestnut-haired, hazel-eyed student stood up and accosted the instructor of an Asian American studies class at a renowned West Coast university. The professor had been speaking about Asian Americans as if they were a racially pure people, as if there had been no mixing and blending between Asians and other Americans. The student declared: "Look at me. I am the face of Asian America."<sup>22</sup>

The student had a point. Outmarriage by several Asian American groups—particularly Filipinos, Japanese, and Vietnamese—has been increasing since the latter 1940s. The rate now hovers around 50 percent for those three groups, and other groups are not far behind. Maria Root talks of an "interracial baby boom" following the *Loving v. Virginia* U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1967, which overturned state antimiscegenation laws. As Yen Espiritu has pointed out, there has been a lot more mixing going on for a lot longer time than is commonly acknowledged:

I often say proudly that I am *all* Vietnamese. But this statement is not quite true. My family has always been much more multiracial and multiethnic than this simple declaration acknowledges. . . . [M]y fifth auntie recently told me that my paternal great-grandmother was of Chinese descent. Since the age of twelve, I have been raised by both my Vietnamese mother and my White American stepfather—a relationship that has not only nurtured my personal growth but has also taught me much about the possibilities and realities of cross-racial families. As an adult, I now revel in my own multiethnic family: my husband is Filipino, and my young children are learning about both their Vietnamese and Filipino heritages as well as the more abstract "Asian American" grouping. . . . [M]any Asian Americans insist on monoraciality and fail to see the multiracial and multicultural realities in our everyday lives. . . . Asian America, by definition, is multiracial and . . . this multiraciality provides us the critical space to

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21. The literature on multiracial Asian Americans is large and growing rapidly, although less among historians than among scholars of other disciplines. The place to begin is Williams-León and Nakashima, eds., *The Sum of Our Parts*. Other notable contributions include: Maria P. P. Root, ed., *Racially Mixed People in America* (Newbury Park, Calif., 1992); Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1996); Kip Fulbeck, *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* (San Francisco, 2006); Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison, Wisc., 1989); Spickard, "What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity," *Amerasia Journal*, 23 (Number 1, 1997), 43–60; Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton), *Miss Spring Fragrance and Other Stories* (Urbana, Ill., 1996); Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain, *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* (Minneapolis, 2006).

22. Conversation with the author, Berkeley, 1995.

explore the strategic importance of cross-group affiliation—not only among Asians but also with other kin groups.<sup>23</sup>

In writing a book about skin-tone preferences among Asian Americans, my fellow researchers and I found that, when we asked almost any Asian American to go back in his or her family history more than a few generations, they were almost uniformly surprised to find out that there was someone two or three generations back who was mixed with another Asian nationality, or with someone White or Black or Latino, whose story had been erased from official family memory.<sup>24</sup> Chinese have been mixing with most of the peoples of Southeast Asia for centuries, to the point where most Filipino, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, and Burmese Americans have at least some Chinese ancestry. Many Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans have elements of the other group's ethnic ancestry within their family lines. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Punjabi men made families with Mexican American women in California's San Joaquin and Imperial valleys.<sup>25</sup> Filipino and Mexican Americans have been living in the same towns and neighborhoods, working at the same jobs, and often being members of the same families since at least the 1930s.<sup>26</sup> Most Pacific Islander Americans have multiple ancestries—mixed Tongan and Samoan, Maori and Pakeha, Hawaiian and Haole, Chamorro and Filipino, and so on and on.<sup>27</sup>

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23. Yen Le Espiritu, "Possibilities of a Multiracial Asian America," in Williams-León and Nakashima, eds., *The Sum of Our Parts*, 25–33.

24. Joanne Rondilla and Paul Spickard, *Is Lighter Better? Skin-Tone Discrimination among Asian Americans* (Lanham, Md., 2007).

25. Karen Isaaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi-Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia, 1994); Allison Varzally, "Romantic Crossings: Making Love, Family, and Non-Whiteness in California, 1930–1950," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 23 (Fall 2003), 3–54.

26. Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., "Burritos and Bagoong: Mexipinos and Multiethnic Identity in San Diego, California," in Marc Coronado, Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., Jeffrey Moniz, and Laura Furlan Szanto, eds., *Crossing Lines: Race and Mixed Race Across the Geohistorical Divide* (Santa Barbara, 2003), 3–96; Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., "Mexipino: A History of Multiethnic Identity and the Formation of the Mexican and Filipino Communities of San Diego, 1900–1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007). Filipinos also mixed with Whites in many places, and with other Asians and Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest.

27. Kathleen Tyau, *A Little Too Much Is Enough* (New York, 1996); Paul R. Spickard and Rowena Fong, "Pacific Islander Americans and Multiethnicity: A Vision of America's Future?" *Social Forces*, 73 (1995), 1365–1383; Jeffrey Moniz and Paul Spickard, "Carving Out a Middle Ground: The Case of Hawai'i," in David L. Brunnsma, ed., *Mixed*

What would it mean for historians of Asian America consciously to ask ourselves: How do the issues that I think I am seeing among Asian Americans look different if I consider the situations of multiracial Asian Americans as well? It may be that the options and ambiguities surrounding an individual's identity will be as important as the single-group commitments. It will surely be that the nature and prospects of any group will immediately look very much more complex. If we explore racial and ethnic multiplicity in Asian American history, we open ourselves up to thinking about connections between groups, and not just between groups that have traditionally been included in the Asian American coalition.

**Adoptees.** One of the places in Asian American history where the multiracial story must be told is with respect to international and transracial adoption. According to the online adoption service Adoption.com, each year more than 20,000 people come to the United States as international adoptees—in 2005, more than 8,000 from China alone.<sup>28</sup> By far the majority of such people become part of multiracial families; many of them join White families in the American heartland. At various times since World War II, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam have sent large numbers of multiracial adoptees—presumably the children of U.S. GIs—to the United States. The rule of thumb in Korean adoptee activist circles is that one in ten Korean Americans is an adoptee (I don't know of any authoritative figure on this). Yet no one has written the history of international adoptees as Asian Americans, nor even as immigrants.<sup>29</sup> The field has been left to social workers, novelists, anthropologists, and adoptees themselves to tell their stories. Those stories, as told by such people, almost never explore whether and how such people might be considered part of Asian America.<sup>30</sup>

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*Messages: Multiracial Identities in a Color-Blind Era* (Boulder, Colo., 2006). The terms "Pakeha" and "Haole" usually, but not always, imply European American.

28. See Adoption.com at <http://international.adoption.com/foreign/trends-in-international-adoption-2003.html> (accessed Feb. 5, 2007).

29. Some outstanding scholars are making a start. Mia Tuan, a sociologist at the University of Oregon, and Catherine Choy, a historian at the University of California, Berkeley, are writing about Korean adoptees. Lily Welty, a University of California, Santa Barbara, historian, is writing about multiracial Japanese adoptees in the 1950s and 1960s.

30. See, e.g., Tonya Bishoff and Jo Rankin, eds., *Seeds from a Silent Tree: An Anthology By Korean Adoptees* (Glendale, Calif., 1997); Susan Soon-Keum Cox, ed., *Voices from Another Place: A Collection of Works from a Generation Born in Korea and Adopted to Other Countries* (St. Paul, Minn., 1999); Sara Dorow, ed., *I Wish for You a Beautiful Life:*

Certainly, none of the mainstream historians of Asian America treats adoptees as part of the Asian American story.

What would it mean for historians of Asian America consciously to ask ourselves: How do the issues that I think I am seeing among Asian Americans look different if I consider the situations of internationally and transracially adopted Asian Americans as well? Talking about Asian American adoptee history forces us to think transnationally, for the history of the birth country and its relationship with the United States is inevitably part of the adoptee story. As with Pacific Islanders and multiracial people, adoptee history invites us to think more deeply and critically about the implications of U.S. colonial involvement in Asia and in Asian America. What is more, considering adoptees as Asian Americans opens up the Asian American story to embrace multiple definitions of group membership. Does one need to have grown up in an Asian American family and community in order to be an Asian American? Or does Asian biological ancestry suffice? Ought adoptees from Korea be treated as part of Korean American history? Or should they be thought of, along with adoptees from Japan, China, and Vietnam, as part of a pan-Asian adoptee experience?

**Arab and Middle Eastern Americans.** I don't know anyone who asserts that Arab, North African, Persian, or other Middle Eastern-derived Americans are a subset of Asian Americans. Yet growing numbers of Arab and Middle Eastern American scholars have regularly been part of the Association for Asian American Studies, have contributed to Asian American publications, and have wanted to talk about whether, and in what ways, Arab or other Middle Eastern Americans might connect with the Asian American coalition.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps it is partly that, as with Pacific Islander Ameri-

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*Letters from the Korean Birth Mothers of Ae Ran Won to Their Children* (St. Paul, Minn., 1999); Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York, 2006); *First Person Plural* [film], dir. Deann Borshay Liem (San Francisco, 2000); Marie Myong-Ok Lee, *Somebody's Daughter* (Boston, 2005); Kien Nguyen, *The Unwanted: A Memoir* (Boston, 2001); Aimee Phan, *We Should Never Meet* (New York, 2004); Rita J. Simon and Howard Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders* (Lanham, Md., 2000); Jane Jeong Trenka, *The Language of Blood: A Memoir* (St. Paul, Minn., 2003); Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, eds., *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (Boston, 2006); Toby Alice Volkman, ed., *Cultures of Transnational Adoption* (Durham, N.C., 2005).

31. For the past several years the AAAS has featured papers, panels, and speeches by Arab Americans and other scholars on the question of Arab American-Asian American linkage. The April 2007 meeting included three such papers: Ibrahim G. Aoudé,



cans, there is nowhere else on the ethnic studies map for such people to find a home, and the Asian American coalition has always shown some flexibility and welcome.

Let me point to issues where the experiences of Asian Americans and Arab and Middle Eastern Americans have considerable resonance, even commonality. The first is Orientalism. Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans experienced the European-generated, eastward-looking Orientalism about which Edward Said wrote and that was defined mainly by images of Turkey, Arabia, and Persia. That is quite a different thing from the westward-looking Orientalism, built on contemplation of China and Japan, that focused American Orientalist thinkers. White Americans may call both Japanese Americans and Arab Americans Orientals, but they do not really think of them as the same sort of people, whereas they do think of Japanese and Chinese as pretty much the same. Yet the two Orientalisms overlap and come together in many places, not least in the study of Asian religions in America (which must be distinguished from the study of the religious experiences of Asian Americans).

A connected Orientalism contributes to the fact that Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans are the two largest immigrant groups who have never quite overcome their immigrant status, no matter how many generations they may have lived in the United States. Other Americans see Asians, Arabs, Persians, and other Middle Eastern peoples as eternal foreigners, much as White Americans treat U.S. citizens of East and South Asian descent as if they were from a foreign land. Vincent Chin was murdered because his attackers took him for a citizen of Japan. In 1996 a Seattle newspaper combed the records of contributors to American-born Gary Locke's gubernatorial campaign for non-citizen Chinese names; they did not look for non-citizen English or Scandinavian names in his opponent's contributor lists. Asian American scientists have lost their jobs, and one was incarcerated without cause,

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"Between Two Worlds: Arab Americans, Homeland (in)Security, and Exile"; Sunaina Maira, "'By Any Means Necessary': War, Resistance, and Repression"; Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, "'From the Bay to the Middle East, We've Got to Stop this US Beast': Filipino and Arab Transnationalisms and Solidarities." A plenary panel, "The Question of Arab America," included Moustafa Bayoumi, Thomas Abowd, Louise Cainkar, Steven Salaita, and Janice Terry; it began with the question, "Are Arab Americans Asian Americans?" The answers varied, but all these Arab Americanists recognized its legitimacy.

in a racist scare campaign in the 1990s that alleged Asian Americans were giving secrets to the People's Republic of China.<sup>32</sup> Just as numerous are the cases of people of Middle Eastern ancestry being cast as foreigners by White Americans. If one asks the average American to describe an Arab, a Muslim, or someone whose ancestors are from the Middle East, out comes a chilling description of a terrorist or sinister oil baron. Almost no one talks about Ralph Nader, John Zogby, and Danny Thomas as Arab Americans.<sup>33</sup>

Arab and Asian Americans have a linked history with regard to a series of court cases from the 1910s and 1920s that decided definitively who was White (and therefore allowed to become a naturalized citizen) and who was not. The answers then were different: George Dow, a Lebanese immigrant, was judged first not White, but then the federal court reversed the decision and ruled that he was White after all. The court never had any question about Japanese-born Takao Ozawa or Bhagat Singh Thind, an immigrant from India: They were not White. Yet in the years after the oil shocks of 1974, and especially after the rise of violence in the 1990s by people whom White Americans chose to call Muslim terrorists, Arab and Middle Eastern Americans grew darker and darker in the White American imaginary.<sup>34</sup>

In recent years, especially since September 11, 2001, several South Asian and Arab American scholars have begun to explore commonalities between their groups' experiences and ways in which they might form intellectual and political coalitions. One aspect of both communities is the large minority of Muslims in each. Another has to do with the ways in which both Asians and Middle Eastern Americans have experienced American colonialism at home and abroad. Then there is the conflation in White American

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32. Tuan, *Forever Foreigners*; Wen Ho Lee, with Helen Zia, *My Country Versus Me* (New York, 2001). Even an American-born member of Congress, David Wu of Oregon, was denied entry to Los Alamos on racial grounds while on a congressional fact-finding mission.

33. Paul Spickard, "Who Is an American? Teaching about Racial and Ethnic Hierarchy," *Immigration and Ethnic History Society Newsletter*, 31 (May 1999).

34. Ian F. Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race in America* (New York, 1996). I deal with these issues at some length in *Almost All Aliens*. It is significant that only Asian and Middle Eastern peoples were found wanting on the Whiteness scale. Armenians were found to be White. No European-derived people ever had their Whiteness legally questioned.

minds of Middle Eastern and South Asian-descended peoples. It is tragic, but not accidental, that several of the people murdered or attacked in hate crimes just after September 11 were not Muslims, nor Arabs, nor Middle Eastern Americans at all, but rather Sikhs. As journalist Tram Nguyen wrote of immigrants in the years since 9/11: "We are all suspects now."<sup>35</sup>

What would it mean for historians of Asian America consciously to ask ourselves: How do the issues that I think I am seeing in my study of Asian Americans look different if I consider the situations of Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans as well? Surely, there is important historical work to do at the intersection of the experiences of Asian Americans and of Arab and other Middle Eastern Americans.

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In the end, I suppose I am calling for a less essentialist, more flexible vision of who is an Asian American. The lives and experiences of Pacific Islander Americans have much in common with those of certain groups such as Filipinos who have long been part of the Asian American coalition. The multiracial aspect of many Asian Americans, and the persons of many multiracial people, have been for the most part unacknowledged in Asian American history. Adoptees from Asian countries have also been left out of Asian American history. Likewise, there is a good bit of common experience and current political positioning between Arab Americans, other Middle Eastern Americans, and South Asian Americans. The commonalities of inquiry may be tied to the politics of particular historical moments, whereas the Asian American coalition has up until now been quite durable and has evolved only slowly.

The one issue that seems to tie all these threads together is U.S. colonialism around the world, and its creation of racial hierarchies

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35. Russell C. Leong, "Internees, in turn," *Amerasia Journal*, 31 (Number 3, 2005), vii–ix; Bill Ong Hing, "Deporting Our Souls and Defending our Immigrants," in *ibid.*, xi–xxxii; Louise Cankar and Sunaina Maira, "Targeting Arab/Muslim/South Asian Americans: Criminalization and Cultural Citizenship," in *ibid.*, 1–28; Maira and Magid Shihade, "Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies: Thinking Race, Empire, and Zionism in the U.S.," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 9 (2006), 117–140; Ibrahim Aoudé, "Arab Americans and Ethnic Studies," in *ibid.*, 141–155; Tram Nguyen, *We Are All Suspects Now: Untold Stories from Immigrant Communities after 9/11* (Boston, 2005).

both abroad and at home. American colonialism, Orientalism, and racism may make it necessary that historical inquiry be made on the basis of larger and shifting coalitions, rather than the simpler Asian American coalition of old. If historians of Asian America take up a more complex and shifting idea of who is an Asian American, we will have to make conscious, explicit choices of who we will regard as an Asian American as we address each project.

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