

Poll Finds Latinos Are Objects of Negative Perceptions

Michael A. Fletcher

ELGIN, IL. Eight months pregnant, Sabrina Roman was watching television with her 2-year-old son when she heard an urgent knock out front. She pushed herself up from the couch, opened the front door and found herself face-to-face with a city inspector and a police officer.

Everyone in the house had to leave immediately or face arrest, she recalls the inspector saying. Roman said they were being thrown out, in part, because there were mattresses on the basement floor, which city officials took as a sure sign that people were living there illegally.

Roman, 21, says she pleaded that no one lived in the basement, that the mattresses were there because her family laid on them to watch television. But the inspector was not hearing it. He slapped a red notice on the door declaring the house uninhabitable and told Roman to gather some belongings and leave.

"I couldn't believe they would just put us out like that," she said. "I was mad. I was really angry."

Many Latinos see bias in law enforcement. But many non-Latino whites see only a struggle to maintain safety standards and beat back creeping blight caused by an influx of hard-working but low-income residents. Those differing perceptions have heightened racial tensions in Elgin and elsewhere.

A national poll by the Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University found that racial groups differ sharply over the amount of discrimination they believe is faced by Latinos. More than half of the nation's Latinos—55 percent—say that discrimination against Latinos is a big problem. By contrast, only 27 percent of non-Latino whites and 44 percent of blacks view discrimination against Latinos as a major concern.

The poll also found that two in five Latinos say they, a family member or close friend have experienced discrimination in the past five years because of their race or ethnicity.

The poll and interviews with whites and Latinos suggest there exists a gap in perceptions about just how much discrimination Latinos face. And some of that

discrimination, the poll suggests, is fueled by stereotypes that whites—and blacks—have of Latinos.

The battles now roiling Elgin are hardly new. Generations ago municipalities used similar occupancy codes to limit the number of black, Jewish, Irish or Italian residents.

"All of a sudden people were going in the back yards and hearing Spanish spoken or seeing people congregating on stoops or in their yards," said Joan Laser, an assistant U.S. attorney in Chicago. "In some ways people were living a different lifestyle, but they were not doing anything the least bit offensive."

Some of the fear might be rooted in the mistaken perceptions many Americans have of their Latino neighbors. The Post/Kaiser/Harvard survey found, for example, that many whites and blacks overestimate the share of Latinos who live in poverty, are illegal immigrants or receive welfare.

Half of both blacks and whites said that they believe at least half of the nation's Latinos live in poverty. The Latino poverty rate, meanwhile, is nearly 26 percent.

About six in 10 of those polled think that most of the Latinos who came to the United States in the past decade were illegal immigrants. In reality, about one in four Latinos who have immigrated to the United States since 1992 came illegally, according to INS estimates.

Also, more than a third of the poll's respondents said that at least half of the nation's legal Latino residents collect welfare. In fact, about 6.9 percent of the nation's Latinos over age 15 receive either public assistance or federal disability payments. Or just over a quarter receive welfare, if that definition is broadened to include housing assistance or Medicaid.

In Elgin, 35 miles northwest of Chicago, as long as a century ago the city's population was nearly a quarter foreign-born and business boomed. Then, the immigrants were mostly from Germany and Sweden, and they worked in the local foundry or the sprawling watch factory that at its peak employed 4,000 people and made Elgin watches a household name.

After the old economy faded and the city and surrounding towns spent decades in the doldrums, business is once against humming.

Now Elgin's immigrants are largely Latino, mostly from Mexico, and their growing presence is lubricating the economy even as it reveals a fundamental dilemma.

On one hand, Elgin needs low-cost workers to clean the malls, run the hospital laundry and staff the small factories that are creating a bounty of new jobs and giving the area new economic life.

But few of those jobs pay well, and the area has little low-income housing, leaving the heavily Latino work force to share homes and apartments.

From 1995 to 1998, Elgin issued 268 citations for occupancy code violations, and two-thirds of them went to families with Hispanic surnames. Hundreds of other Latinos, many of whom speak little English, say they have been confronted with threats of eviction or arrest after their landlords were cited with code violations.

"These kinds of code issues, even if they were on the books, would not be enforced if this community were all-white," said Bernie J. Kleina, executive director

of the HOPE Fair Housing Center, an advocacy group preparing to file a complaint with federal officials alleging that Elgin's housing code enforcement discriminates against Latinos.

"You should not see that kind of extreme enforcement actions unless there is some sort of pressing health or safety concern."

Many homeowners here say this issue has nothing to do with discrimination, but instead reflects their desire to protect their property values and way of life.

"If you are paying one property tax and have two or three families living in a house, that is not fair to the rest of us," said Betsy Couture, an Elgin community leader. "You are demanding more in service than you pay in taxes."

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Injured Laborers File \$66M Suit: *Suing Men Charged in Bias Attacks, 7 Groups*

Robert E. Kessler

Two Mexican day laborers have filed a federal civil rights lawsuit seeking \$66 million in damages from two men charged with brutally beating them in Shirley last year, as well as seven groups they say created an environment supporting violence against Latino immigrants.

The suit by Israel Perez and Magdaleno Estrada Escamilla, who have since returned to Mexico, is part of a class action on behalf of Latino day laborers across the United States. Besides the monetary damages, the suit seeks a court order barring both men, Ryan Wagner, 20, of Maspeth, and Christopher Slavin, 29, of Hicksville, as well the seven groups that oppose illegal immigration, from harassing or assaulting any Latino day laborers. The suit charges that the defendants deprived the laborers of their right to the same security enjoyed by white people, conspired to create a climate of fear within the Latino communities, and deprived the workers of their rights to free speech, free assembly and free association under the First and 14th Amendments.

Slavin was convicted in August of attempted murder and assault in connection with the attack and faces up to 50 years in prison when he is sentenced. Wagner's trial is scheduled for November.

Frederick Brewington of Hempstead, who filed the suit on behalf of the men in U.S. District Court in Central Islip on Sept. 17, declined to comment yesterday.

Slavin's attorney, Robert Del Col of Huntington, who maintains his client is innocent and is a victim of perjured testimony, said of the suit: "It doesn't surprise me that money was the bottom line. . . . That's a motive to lie . . . fabricate."

Wagner's attorney, Thomas Liotti of Garden City, said his client isn't associated with racist organizations, nor is he a racist.

The organizations named in the suit are the Long Island-based Sachem Quality of Life, American Patrol, headquartered in Sherman Oaks, Calif., the Posse Comitatus and the Sheriff's Posse Comitatus, headquartered in Ulysses, Pa., the National Alliance in Hillsboro, Va., and the Creativity Movement and the World Church of the Creator, in East Peoria, Ill.

Ray Wysolmierski of Farmingville, a spokesman for the Sachem Quality of Life Organization, scoffed at news of the lawsuit.

Wysolmierski said the lawsuit would not stop the group from expressing its views. "They can't stop us from saying what we have to say," he said. "This guy [Brewington] wants to take away somebody else's civil rights."

Wysolmierski also suggested that Brewington is suing the wrong people, and said he should target the U.S. government, whose policies he said have allowed undocumented immigrants to enter the country.

He added that if the two Mexican men "weren't here they wouldn't have had anything happen to them."

Glenn Spencer of American Patrol said his organization opposes illegal immigration and was just exercising its right to free speech at meetings on Long Island. Spencer, in a telephone interview from his California office said, "I deny any connection between [the attack on the day laborers and] our attempt to warn the American people about the threat represented by illegal immigrants as evidenced clearly by the tragic loss of life on Sept. 11 [at the World Trade Center and Pentagon]—7,000 people are dead in Manhattan because our government refuses to enforce our immigration laws."

Spokesmen for other groups could not be reached for comment.

Staff writer Bart Jones contributed to this story.

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Yellow

Frank Wu

Writing Race

I'd like to be as honest as possible in explaining why and how race matters, because it shapes every aspect of my life—and everyone else's. I'd like to do so in a manner that allows my white relatives and my white friends to understand and empathize.

I have learned how naïve I was to have supposed that children grew out of their race and to have expected that adults could not possibly be racist. The lives of people of color are materially different than the lives of whites, but in the abiding American spirit we all prefer to believe that our individualism is most important.

As a member of a minority group everywhere in my country except among family or through the self-conscious effort to find other Asian Americans, I alternate between being conspicuous and vanishing, being stared at or looked through. Although the conditions may seem contradictory, they have in common the loss of control. In most instances, I am who others perceive me to be rather than how I perceive myself to be. Considered by the strong sense of individualism inherent to American society, the inability to define one's self is the greatest loss of liberty possible. We Americans believe in an heroic myth from the nineteenth century, whereby moving to the frontier gives a person a new identity. Even if they do not find gold, silver, or oil, men who migrate to the West can remake their reputations. But moving to California works only for white men. Others cannot invent themselves by sheer will, because no matter how idiosyncratic one's individual identity, one cannot overcome the stereotype of group identity.

Sometimes I have an encounter that demonstrates how easily people can be transfixed by a racial stereotype. In a casual aside, a business colleague, who I thought knew me well enough to know better, may make an earnest remark revealing that his attempt to connect with me can come only through race. Although they rarely mention their personal lives, people always will make it a point to tell me about the hit movie they saw last night or the museum exhibit they toured over the weekend if it had a vaguely Asian theme, whether Chinese, Japanese, Korean,

Vietnamese, or whatever, because, "It reminded me of you." They tell me I resemble the cellist Yo-Yo Ma or their five-year-old son's friend in school. Or in a passing instant, a white boy or a black boy, whom I would credit with childhood innocence, can rekindle my memory of the ordinary intolerance of days past. At an airport or riding on a subway, boys will see me and suddenly strike a karate pose, chop at the air, throw a kick, and utter some sing-song gibberish, before turning around and running away. Martin Luther King Jr. asked to be judged by the content of his character rather than the color of his skin, but in these surreal episodes I am not judged by the content of my character because the dealings have no content except for the racial image. Worse, it is as trivial for others as it is traumatic to me. I may as well be a stage prop. University of California at Berkeley literature professor Elaine Kim has recounted being told by a white friend who'd read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, one of the earliest works of Asian American novels to become a staple of literature courses, that only through the book did she come to understand Kim.¹ The fictional character becomes more believable than a real person, as though it is easier to know Asian Americans through the representation than through the reality.

At other times, I will have another type of encounter in the anonymous rush of contemporary life, one that confirms that people can be oblivious to folks who don't resemble them.² To present an analogy, most motorcyclists and bicyclists who ride regularly on city streets are accustomed to the situation in which they will make prolonged eye contact with a driver, who then blithely proceeds to cut off the bike or turn directly in front of it. The person behind the wheel may have seen the rider but responds only to vehicles like her own; anything else doesn't register. Likewise, waiting in line, I am amazed when a white person, sometimes well-dressed and distinguished looking and sometimes not, cuts in front of me or expects to be given VIP treatment. I am galled by not only the action but also the sense of entitlement that this person radiates. I want to say, "Hello? Did you not see the rest of us back here, or did you take it for granted that you were more important?" Of course, sometimes people are momentarily distracted or generally impolite. It happens often enough, however, in cases where it is fair to surmise that race and gender are involved. When whites are disrespected by other whites—for example, when they are ushered to a deserted area of the restaurant near the kitchen—they generally are not plagued by the suspicion that it is for racial reasons. It is easier for them to write off an incident as the consequence of incivility rather than another indication of something worse. Even if people of color are spurned for reasons other than race, the maltreatment harkens back to race because of the uncertainty of the matter. People of color are held to a double standard. Asian Americans are impudent if we presume to behave as others have done without doubting their right; what is assertive and commanding when it comes from a white male is bossy and presumptuous from an Asian American female. . . .

My premise is straightforward. Race is more than black and white, literally and figuratively. Yellow belongs. Gray predominates. I advance these arguments together, and they are mutually reinforcing. Being neither black nor white, Asian

Americans do not automatically side with either blacks or whites. Columbia University professor Gary Okiihiro once asked, "is yellow black or white?"³ Chang-Lin Tien, who was the first Asian American to head a major research university, recalled arriving in the United States in 1956. He says that when he was a graduate student, "I never rode the city buses" in Louisville, Kentucky. He was humiliated when he boarded one and saw that "whites rode in the front and 'coloreds' rode in the rear." He asked, "Just where exactly did an Asian fit in?" He did not wish to be consigned to the back of the bus, but neither did he believe that even if he dared to sit down in the front of the bus, he could stay there in good conscience.⁴ Theirs are the best type of question, because they have no answers. . . .

In race matters, words matter, too. Asian Americans have been excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of "American" as if it means "white" and "minority" as if it means "black." In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority. I am offended, both as an academic and as an Asian American. Asian Americans should be included for the sake of truthfulness, not merely to gratify our ego. Without us—and needless to say, without many others—everything about race is incomplete.

It isn't easy to call people on their unconscious errors. If I point out that they said "American" when they meant "white," they will brush it off with, "Well, you know what I mean," or "Why are you bringing up race?" Yet it is worth pondering exactly what they do mean. What they have done through negligence, with barely any awareness, is equate race and citizenship. They may even become embarrassed once the effect is noticed. Asian Americans were upset when the MS-NBC website printed a headline announcing that "American beats out Kwan" after Tara Lipinsky defeated Michelle Kwan in figure skating at the 1998 Winter Olympics.⁵ Like gold medalist Lipinsky, Kwan is an American. By implying that Kwan was a foreigner who had been defeated by an "American," the headline in effect announced that an Asian American had been defeated by a white American in a racialized contest. If two white Americans compete against each other in a sporting event—say, rivals Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding—it would be preposterous for the result to be described as one of them defeated by an "American." If Kwan had won, it also would be unlikely for the victory to be described as "American beats out Lipinsky" or "Asian beats out white." Movie producer Christopher Lee recalls that when studio executives were considering making a film version of *Joy Luck Club*, they shied away from it because "there are no Americans in it." He told his colleagues, "There are Americans in it. They just don't look like you."⁶

NOTES

1. Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), xix.

2. "Miss Manners," the advice columnist, has addressed this issue, but she prefers to assume that these incidents are not racial. See Judith Martin, "Anger, Fear and Loathing at Airport and at Dinner," *Washington Post*, July 22, 1998, D16.

3. Gary Y. Okiihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 31–63.

4. Chang-Lin Tien, "Affirming Affirmative Action," *Perspectives on Affirmative Action . . . and Its Impact on Asian-Pacific Americans* (Los Angeles: Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, 1996), 19.

5. Joann Lee, "Mistaken Headline Underscores Racial Presumptions," *Editor & Publisher*, April 25, 1998, 64.

6. Howard Chua-Eoan, "Profiles in Outrage: America Is Home, But Asian Americans Feel Treated as Outlanders with Unproven Loyalties," *Time*, September 25, 2000, 40.

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Asian American?

Sonia Shah

I was recently asked to write about Asian American History Month, which, since 1979, has been observed during the month of May.

Despite the fact that I write about Asian American issues on a fairly regular basis, and in many ways consider myself an Asian American, it wasn't easy to figure. The very term, "Asian American History," makes our presence here sound so official, so natural.

Yet the term "Asian America" itself is problematic. Most of the people whom others would characterize as "Asian American" most emphatically don't think of themselves that way. (And many, including most of those in my family, would be almost offended: they are Gujuratis, thank you very much!) Our particular histories, ethnicities, and nationalities are one million times more visceral and meaningful in our lives than pan-Asianness (and what would that be, one wonders: "fusion" cooking?).

The push to unify the disparate peoples and histories of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Hmong, Pakistanis, Thais, and Indians, among others, comes from both right and left. Of course it would be easier for the U.S. census, but also for the radicals who started the "Yellow Power" movement in the 1960s, among others. But unlike other diverse ethnic/racial groups, such as African Americans and

Native Americans, Asian Pacific Americans share no common historical trauma like slavery or colonization. We share no “Asian” language or ethnicity or nation or color. What we have in common, most of us would rather forget.

There is an undeniable strategic value in our unity. Americans know so little about Asian cultures, in general, that the stereotypes and fantasies projected upon any one group bleed over onto the next. We have those in common, and it wouldn’t do any good to resist some and not the others. As a group, Asians have sometimes been held up as “model minorities” and at other times pilloried as spies and interlopers, but always, it seems, we are held at a distance, no matter how “American” we may become. This is at least partly because our role in American society is largely defined not by our unique contributions per se, but by our assigned roles in the unfolding drama between American labor and capital, and between blacks and whites.

Each wave of Asian immigration to American shores has been triggered by U.S. immigration policy or military interventions in Asia. When American labor has gotten too expensive, due to union organizing victories and the like, immigration laws have strategically shifted to import workers from Asia, whether poor Chinese laborers in the 1800s to build the railroads or professional Asians in the 1960s to service the then-growing welfare state. U.S. military interventions in the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere likewise resulted in floods of Asian refugees at American gates. Today, the workers, farmers, and small landowners in Asia whose livelihoods have been crushed by the demands of U.S. multinational companies—now freer than ever to do business abroad—are being smuggled illegally into the country.

Predictably, backlashes against these workers have followed in each case. Laws excluding Chinese from becoming citizens, owning property, marrying, or attending public schools with whites were enacted in the mid- to late-1800s. In 1942, the U.S. government stripped 110,000 Japanese Americans of their homes, possessions, and savings and forced them into concentration camps; upon their release—jobless, penniless—the government served as an employment agency, fielding the many requests for servants.

The 1980s economy sparked another wave of anti-Asian violence: in 1982, Chinese American Vincent Chin was beaten to death with a baseball bat by unemployed auto workers who thought he was Japanese (and who served not a single day in jail). In 1987, Navraz Mody was beaten to death by a gang of youths in New Jersey, home of the infamous “dotbusters” (a vicious reference to the Indian bindhi).

Today, many Asian workers serve as a sort of middle-tier wedge between blacks and whites, and between corporate elites and workers—most tragically in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots. Even the much-lauded professional Asians are harassed and excluded on the basis of their accents, their degrees often devalued and held to higher-than-usual standards. For all the fanfare regarding their success, most of them still make less money than whites with comparable educations. Undocumented Asian workers take the jobs nobody else will tolerate, toiling in sweatshops and factories. In one particularly egregious case, dozens of Thai work-

ers were recently found to have been held against their will in a barbed-wire-enclosed southern California sweatshop between 1990 and 1997.

The model minority myth—consciously encouraged by embattled elites in Asian communities—likewise inserts Asians into the larger drama about blacks and whites. While an education can be had and a living made based on model minority myths (at least for some), it is at the cost of indulging the racist delusion that there can be some “good minorities” in implicit contrast to those other “bad minorities,” who have only themselves to blame.

Part of the double-bind of Asian Americans is that retaining our Asian heritages can be almost as difficult as becoming American. The American media continues to be fascinated with Asian misery and senseless oppression. When Americans gain a peek into life in Asia, it is invariably a horror scene: Indonesians eating bark; Chinese women drinking pesticides; Thai prostitutes chained to their beds; dead bodies in rivers, contaminated blood supplies, mudslides, train wrecks, massacres. Non-Asians may be strangely comforted by these tales of distant woe. But what could anyone with ties to those countries feel, beside sorrow, shame, rage, alienation, or: Thank God we’re here and not there!

The story of Asian American history, in these ways, is a story of not belonging, of alienation from America and Asia. Yet, despite all this ambivalence and contradiction about our place in U.S. society, Asian Americans have played upon the broader American stage and have made lives and history change as a result.

People such as the human rights advocate Yuri Kochiyama; the feminist activist Anannya Bhattacharjee; the queer activist Urvasi Vaid; the radical poet Janice Mirikitani; the public intellectuals Glenn Omatsu, Peter Kwong; and Mari Matsuda; the filmmakers Richard Fung and Renee Tajima to name just a few, among many others, are building an inspired, radical Asian left to improve all of our lives.

Their legacy—the future of history—are today’s vibrant Asian American immigrant worker movements, the growing institution of Asian American Studies in universities, a flourishing Asian American arts community, and more. These people and the institutions they have built, against the odds, are the Asian makers of American history. They have and will continue to force America to reckon with the realities of a diverse, multilingual, yellow and brown, ever-more-vocal Asianized America.

Yes, I Follow Islam, but I'm Not a Terrorist

Nada El Sawy

The tragedy of Sept. 11 gives Americans the chance to learn about a religion they have never understood.

As an Egyptian-American and a Muslim, I've always been dismayed by the way Islam has been generally misrepresented in the media and misunderstood by most Americans. Since the tragic events of Sept. 11, Islam has been in the spotlight, and though leaders such as President George W. Bush and New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani have made a concerted effort to distinguish it from terrorism, some people still aren't getting the message.

I am a graduate student in journalism, often assigned to write articles about current events. The day after the terrorist attacks I headed out to Brooklyn to cover a story about an Islamic school that had been pelted with rocks and bloody pork chops in the hours after the World Trade Center towers collapsed. Whoever committed this act knew enough about Islam to know that pork is forbidden, but apparently little else about Islamic beliefs. "I wish people would stop calling us terrorists," one sixth grader told me.

When I read about Osama bin Laden or groups like the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, I want to tell them, "You're giving Islam a bad name!" I want to show people that the religion I know is one that calls for patience, harmony and understanding.

Islam may be the world's second largest religion, but in the United States, home to about 6 million of its followers, it remains a mystery. Americans seem to believe that backpacking through Europe or keeping up with the news gives them an understanding of everything about the cultures, religions and traditions that differ from their own. While I'm heartened by the sincere curiosity of some, like the stylist who asked me about my beliefs as he trimmed my hair, most people still have a long way to go.

I have yet to meet anyone—who isn't either especially well read, a religion major or a Muslim—who can accurately describe Islamic beliefs. Many people find it fascinating that I worship Allah without understanding that "Allah" is simply

the Arabic word for God. Muslims use the word only because the universal teachings of Islam have been preserved in the Arabic language.

I can recall a Thanksgiving dinner with family friends several years ago when the host offered a small prayer. As we all held hands, he started with the customary thanks for the food, family and friends. Then he proceeded to say, "And thank you to God—or whoever else you choose to worship, may it be Allah . . ." He meant well, but I remember flinching. He and his family had traveled to the Middle East, taken pictures of Muslims praying, read about the cultures they were visiting, but none of it had led to a clear understanding of Islam.

I'm not surprised when classmates confront me with the charge that Muslims around the world are killing in the name of religion. I'm careful not to mention the many Muslims who have been killed in places like Kosovo, Indonesia and Palestine. I don't want to respond with that kind of foolish rebuttal because I abhor the senseless murder of all human beings.

The truth is, fanaticism can spring from misguided excess in any religion, and Muslims who kill in the name of their beliefs are not true Muslims. Aggression is not a tenet of our religion, but rather something that is condemned except in self-defense. The Quran states: "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but commit no aggression; for Allah loves not transgressors" (al-Baqarah 2:190).

If few people understand that Islam is a peaceful religion, even fewer know how beautiful it can be. When I studied in Cairo during my junior year of college, my grandmother had a religion teacher come to her house every week to teach us the Quran. Hearing him chant the verses was like listening to breathtaking music. There is also an element of poetry in a Muslim's everyday life. One says "Allah" or "ma sha'aAllah" ("as God wills") upon seeing something beautiful, like a sunset or a newborn baby. Whenever family members or friends part, one says, "La illah illaAllah" ("there is only one God") and the other responds, "Muhammad rasoul Allah" ("Muhammad is God's prophet").

To me, informing people about these wonderful aspects of Islam is a pleasure, not a burden. There are signs that Americans may be ready to learn. I was moved recently when I saw a woman on the subway reading a book about Islam to her young daughter. She explained that she was teaching herself, as well as her daughter. If more people take that approach, there will come a day when fanaticism is no longer equated with faith, and Muslims aren't seen as terrorists but as human beings.

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Indian Tribes: *A Continuing Quest for Survival*

U.S. Commission on Human Rights

Traditional civil rights, as the phrase is used here, include those rights that are secured to individuals and are basic to the United States system of government. They include the right to vote and the right to equal treatment without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or national origin, among others, in such areas as education, housing, employment, public accommodations, and the administration of justice.

In order to understand where American Indians stand today with respect to these rights, it is important to look at historical developments of the concept of Indian rights along with the civil rights movement in this country. The consideration given to these factors here will not be exhaustive, but rather a brief look at some of the events that are most necessary to a background understanding of this area.

A basic and essential factor concerning American Indians is that the development of civil rights issues for them is in reverse order from other minorities in this country. Politically, other minorities started with nothing and attempted to obtain a voice in the existing economic and political structure. Indians started with everything and have gradually lost much of what they had to an advancing alien civilization. Other minorities have had no separate governmental institutions. Their goal primarily has been and continues to be to make the existing system involve them and work for them. Indian tribes have always been separate political entities interested in maintaining their own institutions and beliefs. Their goal has been to prevent the dismantling of their own systems. So while other minorities have sought integration into the larger society, much of Indian society is motivated to retain its political and cultural separateness.

Although at the beginning of the colonization process Indian nations were more numerous and better adapted to survival on this continent than the European settlers, these advantages were quickly lost. The colonization period saw the rapid expansion of non-Indian communities in numbers and territory covered

and a shift in the balance of strength from Indian to non-Indian communities and governments. The extent to which Indians intermingled with non-Indian society varied by time period, geographical location, and the ability of natives and newcomers to get along with one another. As a general matter, however, Indians were viewed and treated as members of political entities that were not part of the United States. The Constitution acknowledges this by its separate provision regarding trade with the Indian tribes.¹ Indian tribes today that have not been forcibly assimilated, extinguished, or legally terminated still consider themselves to be, and are viewed in American law, as separate political units.

The Racial Factor

An important element in the development of civil rights for American Indians today goes beyond their legal and political status to include the way they have been viewed racially. Since colonial times Indians have been viewed as an “inferior race”; sometimes this view is condescendingly positive—the romanticized noble savage—at other times this view is hostile—the vicious savage—at all times the view is racist. All things Indian are viewed as inherently inferior to their counterparts in the white European tradition. Strong racist statements have appeared in congressional debates, Presidential policy announcements, court decisions, and other authoritative public utterances. This racism has served to justify a view now repudiated, but which still lingers in the public mind, that Indians are not entitled to the same legal rights as others in this country. In some cases, racism has been coupled with apparently benevolent motives, to “civilize” the “savages,” to teach them Christian principles. In other cases, the racism has been coupled with greed; Indians were “removed” to distant locations to prevent them from standing in the way of the development of the new Western civilization. At one extreme the concept of inferior status of Indians was used to justify genocide; at the other, apparently benevolent side, the attempt was to assimilate them into the dominant society. Whatever the rationale or motive, whether rooted in voluntary efforts or coercion, the common denominator has been the belief that Indian society is an inferior lifestyle.

It sprang from a conviction that native people were a lower grade of humanity for whom the accepted canons [*sic*] of respect need not apply; one did not debase oneself by ruining a native person. At times, this conviction was stated explicitly by men in public office, but whether expressed or not, it generated decision and action.²

Early assimilationists like Thomas Jefferson proceeded from this assumption with benevolent designs.

Thus, even as they acknowledged a degree of political autonomy in the tribes, their conviction of the natives' cultural inferiority led them to interfere in their social, religious, and economic practices. Federal agents to the tribes not only negotiated

Indian Tribes: A Continuing Quest for Survival, a report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, June 1981, p. 34. Reprinted by permission.

treaties and tendered payments; they pressured husbands to take up the plow and wives to learn to spin. The more conscientious agents offered gratuitous lectures on the virtues of monogamy, industry, and temperance.

The same underlying assumption provided the basis for Andrew Jackson's attitude. "I have long viewed treaties with the Indians an absurdity not to be reconciled to the principles of our government," he said. As President he refused to enforce the decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court upholding Cherokee tribal autonomy, and he had a prominent role in the forced removal of the Cherokees from Georgia and the appropriation of their land by white settlers. Other eastern tribes met a similar fate under the Indian Removal Act of 1830.³

Another Federal Indian land policy, enacted at the end of the 19th century and followed until 1934, that shows the virulent effect of racist assumptions was the allotment of land parcels to individual Indians as a replacement for tribal ownership. Many proponents of the policy were considered "friends of the Indians," and they argued that the attributes of individual land ownership would have a great civilizing and assimilating effect on American Indians. This action, undertaken for the benefit of the Indians, was accomplished without consulting them. Had Congress heeded the views of the purported beneficiaries of this policy, allotment might not have been adopted. Representatives of 19 tribes met in Oklahoma and unanimously opposed the legislation, recognizing the destructive effect it would have upon Indian culture and the land base itself, which was reduced by 90 million acres in 45 years.

An important principle established by the allotment policy was that the Indian form of land ownership was not "civilized," and so it was the right of the Government to invalidate that form. It is curious that the principle of the right to own property in conglomerate form for the benefit of those with a shareholder's undivided interest in the whole was a basis of the American corporate system, then developing in strength. Yet a similar form of ownership when practiced by Indians was viewed as a hallmark of savagery. Whatever the explanation for this double standard, the allotment policy reinforced the notion that Indians were somehow inferior, that non-Indians in power knew what was best for them, and that these suppositions justified the assertion that non-Indians had the power and authority to interfere with the basic right to own property.

Religion is another area in which non-Indians have felt justified in interfering with Indian beliefs. The intent to civilize the natives of this continent included a determined effort to Christianize them. Despite the constitutional prohibition, Congress, beginning in 1819, regularly appropriated funds for Christian missionary efforts. Christian goals were visibly aligned with Federal Indian policy in 1869 when a Board of Indian Commissioners was established by Congress under President Grant's administration. Representative of the spectrum of Christian denominations, the independently wealthy members of the Board were charged by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to work for the "humanization, civilization and Christianization of the Indians." Officials of the Federal Indian Service were supposed to cooperate with this Board.

The benevolent support of Christian missionary efforts stood in stark contrast to the Federal policy of suppressing tribal religions. Indian ceremonial behavior was misunderstood and suppressed by Indian agents. In 1892 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs established a regulation making it a criminal offense to engage in such ceremonies as the sun dance. The spread of the Ghost Dance religion, which promised salvation from the white man, was so frightening to the Federal Government that troops were called in to prevent it, even though the practice posed no threat to white settlers.

The judiciary of the United States, though it has in many instances forthrightly interpreted the law to support Indian legal claims in the face of strong, sometimes violent opposition, has also lent support to the myth of Indian inferiority. For example, the United States Supreme Court in 1883, in recognizing the right of tribes to govern themselves, held that they had the exclusive authority to try Indians for criminal offenses committed against Indians. In describing its reasons for refusing to find jurisdiction in a non-Indian court in such cases, the Supreme Court said:

It [the non-Indian court] tries them, not by their peers, nor by the customs of their people, nor the law of their land, but by *superiors* of a different race, and which is opposed to the traditions of their history, to the habits of their lives, to the strongest prejudices of their *savage nature*; one which measures the red man's revenge by the maxims of the white man's morality.⁴ (emphasis added)

In recognizing the power of the United States Government to determine the right of Indians to occupy their lands, the Supreme Court expressed the good faith of the country in such matters with these words: "the United States will be governed by such considerations of justice as will control a Christian people in their treatment of an ignorant and dependent race."⁵

Another example of racist stereotyping to be found in the courts is this example from the Supreme Court of Washington State:

The Indian was a child, and a dangerous child, of nature, to be both protected and restrained. . . . True, arrangements took the form of treaty and of terms like "cede," "relinquish," "reserve." But never were these agreements between equals . . . [but rather] that "between a superior and an inferior."⁶

This reasoning, based on racism, has supported the view that Indians are wards of the Government who need the protection and assistance of Federal agencies and it is the Government's obligation to recreate their governments, conforming them to a non-Indian model, to establish their priorities, and to make or approve their decisions for them.

Indian education policies have often been examples of the Federal Government having determined what is "best" for Indians. Having judged that assimilation could be promoted through the indoctrination process of white schools, the Federal Government began investing in Indian education. Following the model

established by army officer Richard Pratt in 1879, boarding schools were established where Indian children were separated from the influences of tribal and home life. The boarding schools tried to teach Indians skills and trades that would be useful in white society, utilizing stern disciplinary measures to force assimilation. The tactics used are within memory of today's generation of tribal leaders who recall the policy of deterring communication in native languages. "I remember being punished many times for . . . singing one Navajo song, or a Navajo word slipping out of my tongue just in an unplanned way, but I was punished for it."

Federal education was made compulsory, and the policy was applied to tribes that had sophisticated school systems of their own as well as to tribes that really needed assistance to establish educational systems. The ability of the tribal school to educate was not relevant, given that the overriding goal was assimilation rather than education.

Racism in Indian affairs has not been sanctioned recently by political or religious leaders or other leaders in American society. In fact, public pronouncements over the last several decades have lamented past evils and poor treatment of Indians.⁷ The virulent public expressions of other eras characterizing Indians as "children" or "savages" are not now acceptable modes of public expression. Public policy today is a commitment to Indian self-determination. Numerous actions of Congress and the executive branch give evidence of a more positive era for Indian policy.⁸ Beneath the surface, however, the effects of centuries of racism still persist. The attitudes of the public, of State and local officials, and of Federal policymakers do not always live up to the positive pronouncements of official policy. Some decisions today are perceived as being made on the basis of precedents mired in the racism and greed of another era. Perhaps more important, the legacy of racism permeates behavior and that behavior creates classic civil rights violations. . . .

NOTES

1. U.S. Const. Art. 1, §8.

2. D'Arcy McNickel, *Native American Tribalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 56.

3. Act of May 28, 1830, ch. 148, 4 Stat. 411.

4. *Ex Parte Crow Dog*, 109 U.S. 556, 571 (1883).

5. *Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railway Co. v. Roberts*, 152 U.S. 114, 117 (1894).

6. *State v. Towessnute*, 154 P. 805, 807 (Wash. Sup. Ct. 1916), quoting *Choctaw Nation v. United States*, 119 U.S. 1, 27 (1886).

7. See, e.g., President Nixon's July 8, 1970, Message to the Congress, Recommendations for Indian Policy, H. Doc. No. 91-363, 91st Cong., 2d sess.

8. *Ibid*; Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, Pub. L. No. 93-638, 88 Stat. 2203 (1975); Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, Pub. L. No. 95-608, 92 Stat. 3096; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report on the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act* (1979).

Americans identified themselves as belonging to two or more races, not counting the Latinos who picked “some other race.”

And the culture is offering up role models, like Halle Berry and Tiger Woods, who celebrate their multiracial background.

In Los Angeles, where Hispanics are the largest ethnic group, Ms. Arza-Goderich said she and her husband, who is also Cuban, have never discussed with their three sons “whether they are white, or *moreno* or what.”

“Race takes a back seat to what they listen to on their CD players, what movies they see,” she said. “One is into Japanese anime. Another is immersed in rap. Basically it’s the ghetto culture, but ghetto doesn’t mean poor or deprived, but hip.”

Her 16-year-old, Ray, has adopted a hip-hop persona and hangs out with Vietnamese, Indian, Chicano, white and black friends. Ms. Arza-Goderich said most of them had Asian girlfriends.

“They say they’re hot,” she explained.



SHADES OF BELONGING: LATINOS AND RACIAL IDENTITY



Sonya Tafoya

When census takers, pollsters or bureaucrats with application forms ask people to identify their race, most have no problem checking a box that corresponds to one of the five, standard, government-defined racial categories. In the 2000 Census, for example, 90 percent of the U.S. population was counted as either white, black, Asian, American Indian or Pacific Islander. Hispanics are the exception. While a little more than half picked one of the standard categories, some 15 million, 42 percent, of the Hispanic population marked “some other race.” This and much other evidence suggests that Hispanics take distinctive views of race, and because their numbers are large and growing fast, these views are likely to change the way the nation manages the fundamental social divide that has characterized American society for 400 years.

According to federal policy and accepted social science, Hispanics do not constitute a separate race and can in fact be of any race. The 2000 [Census] asked respondents first to mark off whether they were “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” and then

in a separate question to specify their race. Among those who identified themselves as Hispanics, nearly half (48 percent) were counted as white. Blacks made up 2 percent. The American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander categories each accounted for small fractions. Surprisingly, given the large number of Latinos whose parentage includes combinations of white, African and indigenous ancestries, only 6 percent described themselves as being of two or more races. The only racial identifier, other than white, that captured a major share of the Latino population (42 percent) was the non-identifier, “some other race” (SOR). That is a sizeable category of people, outnumbering the total U.S. population of Asians and American Indians combined.

“Some other race” is not exactly a political slogan or rallying cry. Nor is it a term anyone ordinarily would use in conversation or to describe themselves. So, who are the some-other-race Hispanics? And, what are they trying to tell us with their choice of this label?

In order to explore these questions the Pew Hispanic Center examined micro-data from the 2000 Census as well as information from surveys and focus groups conducted by the Center. The numbers show that Latinos who call themselves white and those who say they are some other race have distinctly different characteristics, and survey data show they have different attitudes and opinions on a variety of subjects. Consistently across a broad range of variables, Hispanics who identified themselves as white have higher levels of education and income and greater degrees of civic enfranchisement than those who pick the some other race category. The findings of this report suggest that Hispanics see race as a measure of belonging, and whiteness as a measure of inclusion, or of perceived inclusion.

Given immigration’s important role in shaping the Hispanic population, nativity—whether a person was born in the United States or abroad—is a key characteristic. More foreign-born Latinos say they are of some other race (46 percent) than native born (40 percent). Cuban-born immigrants are the exception. More importantly, whiteness is clearly associated with distance from the immigrant experience. Thus, the U.S.-born children of immigrants are more likely to declare themselves white than their foreign-born parents, and the share of whiteness is higher still among the grandchildren of immigrants. In addition, U.S. citizenship is associated with racial identification. Among immigrants from the same country, those who have become U.S. citizens identify themselves as white more often than those who are not U.S. citizens. It seems unlikely that the ability and willingness to become a U.S. citizen are somehow linked to skin color. Thus, it may be that developing deeper civic bonds here can help an immigrant feel white.

The full extent to which race is a measure of belonging for Latinos becomes apparent in examining the native born alone. Immigration status and language do not play a direct role in determining economic or social outcomes for Hispanics born in this country, and their conceptions of race are primarily home grown. Among U.S.-born Latinos whiteness is clearly and consistently associated with higher social status, higher levels of civic participation and a stronger sense of acceptance.

- The share of native-born Latinos without a high school diploma is higher for those who say they are some other race (35 percent) than for those who call themselves white (30 percent).
- Unemployment runs two points higher among native-born Hispanic males who declare themselves some other race compared to those who say they are white and poverty rates are four points higher among adults.
- The share of native-born Latino men earning more than \$35,000 a year is a third higher for those who say they are white compared to the some other race group (24.7 percent vs. 18.5 percent).
- Among all Hispanics, those who say they are some other race tend to be younger (median age 24) than those who say they are white (median age 27).
- More of those native-born Hispanics who say they are white (85 percent) are registered voters than those who say they are of some other race (67 percent).
- When asked whether they consider themselves Republicans, Democrats, independents or something else, more native-born Latinos who say they are white (22 percent) pick Republican compared to those who say they are some other race (13 percent). The same pattern prevailed among the foreign-born.
- When asked to choose between the terms “American” versus “Hispanic or Latino” versus a national origin identifier such as “Mexican,” far more native-born Latinos who say they are white (55 percent) pick “American” compared to those who say they are some other race (36 percent).
- About a quarter of native-born Latinos who say they are white complain that discrimination is a major problem for Latinos in the United States compared to a third of those who say they are some other race.

These findings suggest that Latinos’ choice to identify as white or not does not exclusively reflect permanent markers such as skin color or hair texture but that race is also related to characteristics that can change such as economic status and perceptions of civic enfranchisement. Also, social context and the nature of race relations in a given place also appear to play a role. Hispanics of Mexican origin, who comprise about two-thirds of the total Hispanic population, are almost evenly divided between those who identify as white and those who pick some other race. However, in Texas many more native-born Latinos of Mexican descent say they are white (63 percent) compared to those who live outside of Texas (45 percent). Again, it seems unlikely that skin color is the determining factor. Instead, one can suppose that the unique and complex history of race relations in Texas is a major influence. This is the only state where a large Latino population was caught up both in Southern-style racial segregation and then the civil rights struggle to undo it.

Understanding Latinos’ views of their racial identities involves much more than defining a series of demographic sub-categories. Rather it helps illuminate the ways that race is being lived in the United States today. In the commonplace view, Latinos are an additional “group” that has been added to the American mix of white, black, Asian etc. And, in particular Latinos are categorized as a minority group that is significantly different from the white majority due to factors including a history

of discrimination and persistently lower educational outcomes and incomes on average. The temptation is to racialize this population, to make it fit in the traditional American social paradigm which assigns people to race or at least race-like categories. But, the growing Hispanic population may compel a reassessment of the common view of a racial or ethnic group as a readily identifiable category of people who share a common fate and a common identity.

Categorizing Hispanics, particularly a minority group, becomes much more difficult once you realize this population is almost evenly divided between those who identify with the white majority and those that have trouble seeing themselves in any of the standard racial categories. It is not that some are more Hispanic or Latino than the others because they all have taken on that mantle. Nor are they saying that race does not matter to them. Rather, the message seems to be that Latinos in the United States experience race differently. For them, it is not something that pertains exclusively to skin color, let alone to history and heritage.

For Latinos the concept of race appears to extend beyond biology, ancestral origins or a history of grievance in this country. The differences in characteristics and attitudes between those Hispanics who call themselves white and those who identify as some other race, suggests they experience racial identity as a measure of belonging: Feeling white seems to be a reflection of success and a sense of inclusion. The fact that changeable characteristics such as income help determine racial identification among Latinos, versus permanent markers such as skin color, does not necessarily mean that the color lines in American society are fading. On the contrary, these findings show that color has a broader meaning. The Latino experience demonstrates that whiteness remains an important measure of belonging, stature and acceptance. And, Hispanic views of race also show that half of this ever larger segment of the U.S. population is feeling left out.

6

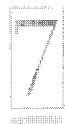
ASIAN AMERICAN?

Sonia Shah

I was recently asked to write about Asian American History Month, which, since 1979, has been observed during the month of May.

Despite the fact that I write about Asian American issues on a fairly regular basis, and in many ways consider myself an Asian American, it wasn’t easy to figure.

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THE MYTH OF THE MODEL MINORITY

Noy Thrupkaew

Mali Keo fled Cambodia with her husband and four children in 1992. Several years later, she was still haunted by searing memories of “the killing fields,” the forced-labor camps where millions of Cambodians died, victims of Communist despot Pol Pot’s quest for a perfect agrarian society. Because of the brutal beatings she suffered at the hands of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge, she was still wracked with physical pain as well. Traumatized and ailing, uneducated, unskilled, and speaking very little English, Mali Keo (a pseudonym assigned by researchers) could barely support her children after her husband abandoned the family.

And now she may not even have public assistance to fall back on, because the 1996 welfare-reform act cut off most federal benefits to immigrants and subsequent amendments have not entirely restored them. In what was supposed to be the land of her salvation, Mali Keo today is severely impoverished. Living in a hard-pressed neighborhood of Philadelphia, she struggles with only mixed success to keep her children out of trouble and in school.

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), an advocacy group in Washington, estimates that more than 2.2 million Southeast Asians now live in the United States. They are the largest group of refugees in the country and the fastest-growing minority. Yet for most policy makers, the plight of the many Mali Keos has been overshadowed by the well-known success of the Asian immigrants who came before and engendered the myth of the “model minority.” Indeed, conservatives have exploited this racial stereotype—arguing that Asians fare well in the United States because of their strong “family values” and work ethic. These values, they say, and not government assistance, are what all minorities need in order to get ahead.

Paradoxically, Southeast Asians—supposedly part of the model minority—may be suffering most from the resulting public policies. They have been left in the hands of underfunded community-assistance programs and government agencies that, in one example of well-intentioned incompetence, churn out forms in Khmer and Lao for often illiterate populations. But fueled by outrage over bad services and a fraying social safety-net, Southeast Asian immigrants have started to embrace that

most American of activities, political protest—by pushing for research on their communities, advocating for their rights, and harnessing their political power.

The model-minority myth has persisted in large part because political conservatives are so attached to it. “Asian Americans have become the darlings of the right,” said Frank Wu, a law professor at Howard University and the author of *Yellow: Race beyond Black and White*. “The model-minority myth and its depiction of Asian-American success tells a reassuring story about our society working.”

The flip side is also appealing to the right. Because Asian Americans’ success stems from their strong families and their dedication to education and hard work, conservatives say, then the poverty of Latinos and African Americans must be explained by their own “values”: They are poor because of their nonmarrying, school-skipping, and generally lazy and irresponsible behavior, which government handouts only encourage.

The model-minority myth’s “racist love,” as author Frank Chin terms it, took hold at a sensitive point in U.S. history: after the 1965 Watts riots and the immigration reforms of that year, which selectively allowed large numbers of educated immigrants into the United States. Highly skilled South and East Asian nurses, doctors, and engineers from countries like India and China began pouring into the United States just as racial tensions were at a fever pitch.

Shortly thereafter, articles like “Success Story of One Minority in the U.S.,” published by *U.S. News & World Report* in 1966, trumpeted: “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own, with no help from anyone else.” *Newsweek* in 1971 had Asian Americans “outwhiting the whites.” And *Fortune* in 1986 dubbed them a “superminority.” As Wu caricatures the model-minority myth in his book:

Asian Americans vindicate the American Dream. . . . They are living proof of the power of the free market and the absence of racial discrimination. Their good fortune flows from individual self-reliance and community self-sufficiency, not civil-rights activism or government welfare benefits.

A closer look at the data paints another picture, however. If Asian-American households earn more than whites, statistics suggest, it’s not because their individual earnings are higher but because Asian Americans live in larger households, with more working adults. In fact, a recent University of Hawaii study found that “most Asian Americans are overeducated compared to whites for the incomes they earn”—evidence that suggests not “family values” but market discrimination.

What most dramatically skews the data, though, is the fact that about half the population of Asian (or, more precisely, Asian-Pacific Islander) Americans is made up of the highly educated immigrants who began arriving with their families in the 1960s. The plight of refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, who make up less than 14 percent of Asian Americans, gets lost in the averaging. Yet these refugees, who started arriving in the United States after 1975, differ markedly from

the professional-class Chinese and Indian immigrants who started coming 10 years earlier. The Southeast Asians were fleeing wartime persecution and had few resources. And those disadvantages have had devastating effects on their lives in the United States. The most recent census data available show that 47 percent of Cambodians, 66 percent of Hmong (an ethnic group that lived in the mountains of Laos), 67 percent of Laotians, and 34 percent of Vietnamese were impoverished in 1990—compared with 10 percent of all Americans and 14 percent of all Asian Americans. Significantly, poverty rates among Southeast Asian Americans were much higher than those of even the “nonmodel” minorities: 21 percent of African Americans and 23 percent of Latinos were poor.

Yet despite the clear inaccuracies created by lumping population together, the federal government still groups Southeast Asian refugees under the overbroad category of “Asian” for research and funding purposes. “We’ve labored under the shadow of this model myth for so long,” said Ka Ying Yang, SEARAC’s executive director. “There’s so little research on us, or we’re lumped in with all other Asians, so people don’t know the specific needs and contributions of our communities.”

To get a sense of those needs, one has to go back to the beginning of the Southeast Asian refugees’ story and the circumstances that forced their migration. In 1975, the fall of Saigon sent shock waves throughout Southeast Asia, as communist insurgents toppled U.S.-supported governments in Vietnam and Cambodia. In Laos, where the CIA had trained and funded the Hmong to fight Laotian and Vietnamese communists as U.S. proxies, the communists who took over vowed to purge the country of ethnic Hmong and punish all others who had worked with the U.S. government.

The first refugees to leave Southeast Asia tended to be the most educated and urban, English-speakers with close connections to the U.S. government. One of them was a man who wishes to be identified by the pseudonym John Askulraskul. He spent two years in a Laotian re-education camp—punishment for his ability to speak English, his having been educated, and, most of all, his status as a former employee of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

“They tried to brainwash you, to subdue you psychologically, to work you to death on two bowls of rice a day,” Askulraskul told me recently.

After being released, he decided to flee the country. He, his sister, and his eldest daughter, five and a half years old, slipped into the Mekong River with a few others. Clinging to an inflated garbage bag, Askulraskul swam alongside their boat out of fear that his weight would sink it.

After they arrived on the shores of Thailand, Askulraskul and his daughter were placed in a refugee camp, where they waited to be reunited with his wife and his two other daughters.

It was not to be.

“My wife tried to escape with two small children. But my daughters couldn’t make it”—he paused, drawing a ragged breath—“because the boat sank.”

Askulraskul’s wife was swept back to Laos, where she was arrested and placed in jail for a month. She succeeded in her next escape attempt, rejoining her suddenly diminished family.

Eventually, with the help of his former boss at USAID, they moved to Connecticut, where Askulraskul found work helping to resettle other refugees. His wife, who had been an elementary-school teacher, took up teaching English as a second language (ESL) to Laotian refugee children. His daughter adjusted quickly and went to school without incident.

Askulraskul now manages a project that provides services for at-risk Southeast Asian children and their families. “The job I am doing now is not only a job,” he said. “It is part of my life and my sacrifice. My daughter is 29 now, and I know raising kids in America is not easy. I cannot save everybody, but there is still something I can do.”

Like others among the first wave of refugees, Askulraskul considers himself one of the lucky ones. His education, U.S. ties, and English-language ability—everything that set off the tragic chain of events that culminated in his daughters’ deaths—proved enormously helpful once he was in the United States.

But the majority of refugees from Southeast Asia had no such advantages. Subsequent waves frequently hailed from rural areas and lacked both financial resources and formal schooling. Their psychological scars were even deeper than the first group’s, from their longer years in squalid refugee camps or the killing fields. The ethnic Chinese who began arriving from Vietnam had faced harsh discrimination as well, and the Amerasians—the children of Vietnamese women and U.S. soldiers—had lived for years as pariahs.

Once here, these refugees often found themselves trapped in poverty, providing low-cost labor, and receiving no health or other benefits, while their lack of schooling made decent jobs almost impossible to come by. In 1990, two-thirds of Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong adults in America had less than a high-school education—compared with 14 percent of whites, 25 percent of African Americans, 45 percent of Latinos, and 15 percent of the general Asian-American population. Before the welfare-reform law cut many of them off, nearly 30 percent of Southeast Asian Americans were on welfare—the highest participation rate of any ethnic group. And having such meager incomes, they usually lived in the worst neighborhoods, with the attendant crime, gang problems, and poor schools.

But shouldn’t the touted Asian dedication to schooling have overcome these disadvantages, lifting the refugees’ children out of poverty and keeping them off the streets? Unfortunately, it didn’t. “There is still a high number of dropouts for Southeast Asians,” Yang said. “And if they do graduate, there is a low number going on to higher education.”

Their parents’ difficulty in navigating American school systems may contribute to the problem. “The parents’ lack of education leads to a lack of role models and guidance. Without those things, youth can turn to delinquent behavior and in some very extreme cases, gangs, instead of devoting themselves to education,” said Narin Sihavong, director of SEARAC’s Successful New Americans Project, which interviewed Mali Keo. “This underscores the need for Southeast Asian school administrators or counselors who can be role models, ease the cultural barrier, and serve as a bridge to their parents.”

“Sometimes families have to choose between education and employment, especially when money is tight,” said Porthira Chimm, a former SEARAC project director. “And unfortunately, immediate money concerns often win out.”

The picture that emerges—of high welfare participation and dropout rates, low levels of education and income—is startlingly similar to the situation of the poorest members of “nonmodel” minority groups. Southeast Asians, Latinos, and African Americans also have in common significant numbers of single-parent families. Largely as a result of the killing fields, nearly a quarter of Cambodian households are headed by single women. Other Southeast Asian families have similar stories. Sihavong’s mother, for example, raised him and his five siblings on her own while his father was imprisoned in a Laotian re-education camp.

No matter how “traditional” Southeast Asians may be, they share the fate of other people of color when they are denied access to good education, safe neighborhoods, and jobs that provide a living wage and benefits. But for the sake of preserving the model-minority myth, conservative policy makers have largely ignored the needs of Southeast Asian communities.

One such need is for psychological care. Wartime trauma and “lack of English proficiency, acculturative stress, prejudice, discrimination, and racial hate crimes” place Southeast Asians “at risk for emotional and behavioral problems,” according to the U.S. surgeon general’s 2001 report on race and mental health. One random sample of Cambodian adults found that 45 percent had post-traumatic stress disorder and 51 percent suffered from depression.

John Askulraskul’s past reflects trauma as well, but his education, English-language ability, and U.S. connections helped level the playing field. Less fortunate refugees need literacy training and language assistance. They also need social supports like welfare and strong community-assistance groups. But misled by the model-minority myth, many government agencies seem to be unaware that Southeast Asians require their services, and officials have done little to find these needy refugees or accommodate them. Considering that nearly two-thirds of Southeast Asians say they do not speak English very well and more than 50 percent live in linguistically isolated ethnic enclaves, the lack of outreach and translators effectively denies them many public services.

The problem extends beyond antipoverty programs, as Mali Keo’s story illustrates. After her husband left her, she formed a relationship with another man and had two more children. But he beat the family for years, until she asked an organization that served Cambodian refugees to help her file a restraining order. If she had known that a shelter was available, she told her interviewer, even one without Khmer-speaking counselors, she would have escaped much earlier.

Where the government hasn’t turned a blind eye, it has often wielded an iron fist. The welfare-reform law of 1996, which cut off welfare, SSI, and food-stamp benefits for most noncitizens—even those who are legal permanent residents—sent Southeast Asian communities into an uproar. Several elderly Hmong in California committed suicide, fearing that they would become burdens to their families. Meanwhile, the lack of literacy programs prevented (and still does prevent) many

refugees from passing the written test that would gain them citizenship and the right to public assistance.

“We achieved welfare reform on the backs of newcomers,” Frank Wu said. “People said that ‘outsiders’ don’t have a claim to the body politic, and even liberals say we should care for ‘our own’ first.” Few seemed to ask the question posed by sociologist Donald Hernandez: “What responsibility do we have to ensure a basic standard of living for immigrants who have fled their countries as a result of the American government’s economic, military, and political involvement there?”

But welfare reform also had a second effect. “It was such a shocking event, it completely galvanized the Southeast Asian community,” said Karen Narasaki, executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium. “In different Asian cultures, you have ‘the crab who crawls out of the bucket gets pulled back’ [and] ‘the nail that sticks out gets pounded down.’ But in the United States, ‘the squeaky wheel gets the grease,’ and people had to learn that.”

The learning process has been a difficult one. At first, because of their past negative experiences with the United States and their homeland governments, many Southeast Asians feared political involvement. Many saw themselves as noncitizens and second-class “outsiders” with a precarious standing in the United States. But as they have grown more familiar with this country, even noncitizens have started to think of themselves less as refugees in a temporary home and more as “new Americans” who are entitled to shape their destinies through political engagement.

The energy for this new activism grew out of the mutual-assistance associations (MAAs) that have taken root in various Southeast Asian communities. Primarily staffed by people like Askulraskul—the more successful members of the ethnic groups they serve—MAAs form the backbone of support for Southeast Asians, providing, among many other things, child care, job training, school liaisons, and assistance with navigating government bureaucracies.

But the MAAs are facing problems of their own. The funding they used to get from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement is dwindling. In 1996 new federal guidelines mandated that these funds go exclusively to organizations serving the most recent refugees. (In response, several Southeast Asian MAAs have tried to stay afloat by offering their services to newer refugees from places like Ethiopia and Iraq.) As for outside funding, only 0.3 percent of all philanthropic aid goes to groups that work specifically with Asian-American populations, according to the 1998 edition of *Foundation Giving*. “A lot of people in philanthropy think [that Asians] are doing so well, they don’t need help,” Narasaki said.

Despite these problems, MAAs and national advocacy organizations like SEARAC have won limited restorations of benefits and food stamps for immigrants. And a significant victory came in 2000, when legislation sponsored by Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone was adopted: It will allow Hmong veterans—or their widows—from America’s “secret war” in Laos to take the U.S. citizenship test in Hmong, with a translator.

One key to the MAAs’ success is their networking with other minority-advocacy groups, says Sandy Dang, executive director of Asian American LEAD, an

organization based in Washington, that provides a range of services for Vietnamese Americans, including ESL classes, youth mentoring, and parent-support groups.

When Dang founded the organization, she didn't know how to write grant proposals, so she asked the director of a nearby youth center for Latin Americans to provide guidance. "The Latino organizations have a lot of empathy for people starting out," she said. "They understand the refugee-immigrant experience.

"Disadvantaged people share a lot in common," Dang continued, "and we have to help each other. People who are empowered in this country like to play us off each other, like with the model-minority myth. They need the poor and disadvantaged to fight each other. Because if we unite, we can make it difficult for them."

Southeast Asians are disproving the model-minority myth not just with their difficult lives but with their growing insistence that it takes more than "traditional values" and "personal responsibility" to survive in this country. It takes social supports and participation in the legacy of civil rights activism as well.

The refugees and their children are forging their identities as new Americans and are starting to emerge as a political force. At first, Yang said, "we had no time to think about anything else but our communities—and no one was thinking about us. But now we know that what we were grappling with [affects both] me and my neighbor, who might be poor black, Latino, or Asian. We are no longer refugees, we are Americans. And we know what being 'successful' is: It's being someone who is truly aware of the meaning of freedom to speak out."



RACIAL RELATIONS BECOMING MORE COMPLEX ACROSS COUNTRY

Jonathan Tilove

HOUSTON As a trouble-shooter with the U.S. Justice Department, Efrain Martinez negotiates racial peace in and around America's fourth-largest city.

There are, of course, the classic black-and-white or brown-and-white conflicts. But often now, it is blacks and browns who are butting heads over jobs and power. And increasingly, Martinez finds himself mediating disputes involving peoples who barely existed here 20 years ago.

From *The Star-Ledger* (December 26, 1996). Reprinted by permission of Newhouse News Services, Washington, DC.

The Houston area, for example, has one of the nation's largest Vietnamese communities, and over the years Martinez, in his sotto voce style, has defused violent confrontations between Vietnamese fishermen and the Ku Klux Klan, between Vietnamese merchants and black customers and between Vietnamese and Latino residents of the same condominium.

In the past year, he even brokered a truce between Vietnamese and Chinese members of the board of a new Tao temple, prompting one member of the board to gush, "You a hero. You stop a war."

Nationally, and especially in those cities like Houston that are magnets for immigrants, race and ethnic relations are becoming more complexly contentious. In part it is simple math: Greater diversity yields more diverse points of conflict. But a wealth of survey research indicates that inter-minority hostilities and negative attitudes often are more pronounced than those that exist between whites and minorities, though the more polite white attitudes may be as much a function of more affluent distance as meaningful commitment.

Still, Asians in Los Angeles are far more likely than whites to view most blacks and Hispanics as unintelligent, while most Hispanics and Asians—but only a minority of whites—think blacks prefer welfare to self-sufficiency. In New York City, Hispanics and Asians are more likely than whites to think blacks provoke hostility.

In return, blacks more than whites in both New York and Los Angeles consider Asians difficult to get along with. In Houston, blacks rate their relationship with Asians as worse than their relationship with whites.

"If we posit the original Rodney King question—'Can we all get along?'—the answer is a resounding no," says James Johnson Jr., a professor of business, sociology and geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the former director of the Center for the Study of Urban Poverty at UCLA.

"I think we're really headed toward more intolerance," says Johnson, who is black.

Diversity's Effect

Not everyone is so sure.

University of Houston sociologist Nestor Rodriguez says it remains to be seen whether Houston's transformation from a city that was more than half Anglo (which is what they call whites here) in 1980, to one that will be 29 percent Anglo, 25 percent black, 39 percent Hispanic and 7 percent Asian by the year 2000, will prove its doing or undoing.

"I have a sense of Houston becoming better," says Rodriguez. He takes hope from the fact that his survey this year of Houston's black and Hispanic communities discovered black ambivalence—rather than one-sided anger—about immigration and people speaking Spanish at work.

Houston, with the largest black population and largest Hispanic immigrant population of any city in the South, has enjoyed relative racial calm. People variously credit its size and sprawl, its deep-seated conservatism and the almost



INSIDE THE JAIL WARS

Earl Ofari Hutchinson

At a recent raucous and contentious meeting of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Marc Klugman, head of Correctional Services for the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, said, "Everything that's going on in our streets is coming into

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our jails.” Klugman’s helpless warning is ominous and terrifying, but he’s right. The jail violence between blacks and Latinos that has torn L.A. County jails has roots that go far beyond the jails.

The painful truth is that relations between blacks and Latinos are rife with cultural, racial, and economic myths and misconceptions. Since the civil rights era, the popular fiction was that blacks and Latinos are an oppressed people of color with a history of racial discrimination and poverty, so their struggle is the same.

During the 1960s, some blacks and Latinos did form organizations and raise issues that appeared to mirror each other. There was the Black Panther Party and the La Raza Unida Party, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Mexican-American Legal and Education Defense Fund, as well as dozens of local black and Latino activist groups. The Poor Peoples March in Washington D.C. in 1968 was the highpoint of ethnic co-operation during that time.

Blacks and Latinos enjoyed the political honeymoon of the era. Neither wanted to admit that the serious political and cultural differences between them could crack the facade of unity. But the last decade has presented a new reality.

Through massive immigration and higher birth rates, the Latino population has soared. Latinos have displaced blacks as the largest non-white minority in America. Latinos demand that political and social issues no longer be framed solely in black and white.

The clash has been especially fierce on three hot button issues: immigration and jobs, political representation, and street turf control.

Immigration and Jobs

Many Latinos work at low-pay jobs that offer no health, union, or retirement benefits. Many employers take advantage of their economic plight and hire them to work the dirtiest and most hazardous jobs in plants, factories, and farms. Unskilled or semi-skilled white and black workers once did these jobs. Employers defend their labor practices by insisting that Latinos “work harder, and don’t cause problems.” Latino leaders deflect criticism with the retort that “Americans won’t take these jobs anyway.”

While there is no conclusive evidence that Latinos take jobs away from American workers (studies have been conflicting), increased immigration came at the worst possible time for impoverished African-American communities. They are reeling from a decade of job, education, and social service cuts. Illegal immigrant labor competition could further marginalize the black poor by raising joblessness, decreasing benefits, and exacerbating the crime and drug crisis.

With federal and state governments grappling with massive budget deficits, and corporations, in the throes of shakeout, outsourcing and downsizing, many African-American leaders see little point in demanding more federal and corporate spending on job and skill training. If some black leaders scream along with groups such as the Minuteman Project for a crackdown on illegal immigrants, it is because they see Latinos—whose customs and language are barely comprehensible to them—as a direct threat to their economic existence.

Political Representation

The tensions have spilled over into politics. Latinos have changed the ethnic make-up of many neighborhoods from black and white to brown. From the local to the national level, Latino leaders now demand their fair share of political officeholders, appointments, and positions in California and Los Angeles.

But this could further erode the new-found political gains and power blacks have won through decades of struggle. Many African-American leaders argue that the numbers that count most are the voting numbers and blacks vote in proportionally greater numbers than Latinos. To many, power sharing is out of the question.

There is the problem of ethnic insensitivity. African-Americans note that Latinos (and other non-whites) did not experience chattel slavery and its legacy. Their family and ethnic cohesion was not ruptured. Nor were they color-stamped with the “badge of inferiority.”

Many blacks perceive that Latinos are less harshly treated by white society, encounter less discrimination, and enjoy more mobility and opportunities. The stunning success of Asian and Latino immigrants in business and the professions does seem to offer proof of this. They are often able to secure business loans, credit, and access to education and the professions with much more ease than blacks.

Many Latinos fail to understand the complexity and severity of the black experience. They frequently bash blacks for their poverty and goad them to “pull themselves up like we did.” Worse, some even repeat the same vicious anti-black epithets as racist whites.

But ethnic insensitivity cuts both ways. Blacks have little understanding of the political repression and economic destitution that drives many Latinos to seek refuge in the United States. Many have fled from the ravages of war and revolution in their countries. They face the massive problems of readjusting to a strange culture, customs, and language. Latino immigrants and the native born also suffer police abuse and face the same racial discrimination in jobs, and housing, and health care, and as many blacks do.

Street Turf Control

Then there’s the action in the streets. For years black gangs have controlled the drug traffic, sale of contraband, and other illicit activities in South L.A. and other urban inner city neighborhoods. The influx of young, poorly educated, crime-prone gang members from El Salvador, Mexico, and other Latin countries has ignited street clashes with blacks over turf. The street turf struggles have spilled over into the prisons, with groups such as the Mexican Mafia more than willing to give orders to attack blacks to assert their dominance.

L.A. County officials cite prison overcrowding, turf wars, renewal of gang rivalries, the ancient prison ritual of making a “rep” as a tough guy, or just boredom for the violence. It’s that and much more, and jail authorities and elected officials must recognize that.

African-Americans and Latinos are undergoing a painful period of political and economic adjustment. They are finding that the struggle for power and recognition will be long and difficult. The wars in the L.A. County jails are a tragic, deplorable symptom of that.