

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

WE WILL NOT BE USED

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

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

Living in 19th century Europe, Marx thought mostly in terms of class. Living in 20th century America, in the land where racism found a home, I am thinking about race. Is there a racial equivalent of the economic bourgeoisie? I fear there may be, and I fear it may be us.

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

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

In thinking this, I remember my mother's stories of growing up on a sugar plantation on Kauai. She tells of the Portuguese luna or overseer. The luna rode on a big horse and ordered the Japanese and Filipino workers around. The luna in my mother's stories is a tragic-comic figure. He thinks he is better than the other workers, but he doesn't realize that the plantation owner considers the luna sub-human, just like the other workers. The stereo-

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type of the dumb portagee persists in Hawaii today, a holdover from the days of the luna parading around the big house, cloaked in self-delusion and false pride.

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

The portagee luna now has the last laugh with this new unfunny portagee joke: when the portagee was the luna, he didn't have to pay college tuition to ride that horse.

I'd like to say to my sister behind the small desk, "remember where you came from and take this pledge: we will not be used."

There are one hundred ways to use the racial bourgeoisie. Here are some examples:

When Asian-Americans manage to do well, their success is used against others. Internally, it is used to erase the continuing poverty and social dislocation within Asian-American communities. The media is full of stories of Asian-American whiz kids. Their successes are used to erase our problems and to disavow any responsibility for them. The dominant culture doesn't know about drug abuse in our communities, about our high school dropouts, our AIDS victims. Suggestions that some segments of the Asian-American community need special help are greeted with suspicion and disbelief. External to our communities, our successes are used to deny racism and to put down other groups. African-Americans and Latinos and poor whites are told, "look at those Asians—anyone can make it in this country if they really try." The cruelty of telling this to crack babies, to workers displaced by runaway shops, and to families waiting in line at homeless shelters, is not something I want associated with my genealogy. Yes, my ancestors made it in this country, but they made it against the odds. In my genealogy and probably in yours, are people who went to bed hungry, who lost land to the tax collector, who worked to exhaustion and ill-health, who faced pain and relocation with the bitter stoicism we call, in Nihongo,² "gaman." Many who came the hard road of our ancestors didn't make it. Their bones are still in the mountains by the tunnels they blasted for the railroad, still in the fields where they stooped over the short-handled hoe, still in the graveyards of Europe, where they fought for a democracy that didn't include them. Asian success was success with a dark, painful price. To use that success to discount the hardship facing poor and working people in this country today is a sacrilege to the memory of our ancestors. It is an insult to today's Asian-American immigrants, who work the double-triple shift, who know no leisure, who crowd two and three families to a home, who put children and old-folks alike to work at struggling family businesses or at home doing piece-work until midnight. Yes, we take

1. Dr. Haunani Kay Trask alerted me to the new luna phenomena.

2. Nihongo is the Japanese word for "Japanese language." ed.

pride in our success, but we should also remember the cost. The success that is our pride is not to be given over as a weapon to use against other struggling communities. I hope we will not be used to blame the poor for their poverty.

Nor should we be used to deny employment or educational opportunities to others.

A recent exchange of editorials and letters in the Asian-American press reveals confusion over affirmative action.³ Racist anti-Asian quotas at the universities can give quotas a bad name in our community. At the same time, quotas have been the only way we've been able to walk through the door of persistently discriminatory institutions like the San Francisco fire department.⁴ We need affirmative action because there are still employers who see an Asian face and see a person unfit for a leadership position. In every field where we have attained a measure of success, we are underrepresented in the real power positions. And yet, we are in danger of being manipulated into opposing affirmative action by those who say affirmative action hurts Asian-Americans. What's really going on here? When university administrators have secret quotas to keep down Asian admissions, this is because Asians are seen as destroying the predominantly white character of the university. Under this mentality, we can't let in all those Asian over-achievers AND maintain affirmative action for other minority groups. We can't do both because that will mean either that our universities lose their predominantly white character, or that we have to fund more and better universities. To either of those prospects, I say, "why not?" And I condemn the voices from our own community that are translating legitimate anger at ceilings on Asian admissions into unthinking opposition to affirmative action floors needed to fight racism.

In a period when rates of educational attainment for minorities and working class Americans are going down,⁵ in a period when America is lagging behind other developed nations in literacy and learning,⁶ I hope we will not be used to deny educational opportunities to the disadvantaged and to preserve success only for the privileged.

Another classic way to use the racial bourgeoisie is as America's punching bag. There is a lot of rage in this country, and for good reason. Our economy is in shambles. Persistent unemployment is creating new ghost towns, new soup kitchens, from coast to coast. The symptoms of decay—the drugs, the homelessness, the violence—are everywhere. From out of this decay comes a rage looking for a scapegoat, and a traditional American scapegoat is the oriental menace. From the Workingman's Party that organized

3. See, e.g., Arthur Hu, *Hu's on First*, ASIAN WEEK, May 10, 1991, at 26; May 24, 1991, at 12 (opposing affirmative action admissions programs at colleges, specifically criticizing race-based admission criteria at the University of California).

4. See *U.S. v. City and County of San Francisco*, 696 F. Supp. 1287 (N.D. Cal. 1988) (approving consent decree to implement race-conscious hiring and promotion to remedy past discrimination; discussing the history of race and sex discrimination in the San Francisco Fire Department).

5. See, e.g., Anthony Flint, *Minority Schooling Still Found Wanting*, BOSTON GLOBE, Jan. 20, 1992, at 48 (reporting that the percentage of minority high school graduates going into college remains well below that of white students and that economic troubles may reverse gains made in minority college enrollment).

6. See, e.g., Jean Merl, *U.S. Still Lags in Math, Science, Tests Find*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 6, 1992, at A16 (reporting that the Educational Testing Service completed a 20-nation comparison study showing that American students lag behind students from other countries in math and science skills).

white laborers around an anti-Chinese campaign in California in 1877,⁷ to the World War II internment fueled by resentment of the success of issei farmers,⁸ to the murder of Vincent Chin,⁹ to the terrorizing of Korean merchants in ghetto communities today,¹⁰ there is an unbroken line of poor and working Americans turning their anger and frustration into hatred of Asian-Americans. Every time this happens, the real villains—the corporations and politicians who put profits before human needs—are allowed to go about their business free from public scrutiny. And the anger that could go to organizing for positive social change goes instead to Asian-bashing.

Will we be used as America's punching bag? We can prevent this by organizing to publicize and to fight racist speech and racist violence wherever we find it. More importantly, however, Asian-Americans must take a prominent role in advocating economic justice. We must show that Asian-Americans are allies of the working poor, of the unemployed, of the ghetto teenager. If we can show our commitment to ending the economic upheaval that feeds anti-Asian sentiment, the displaced rage that terrorizes Asian-Americans will turn upon more deserving targets.

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

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

I love my Asian brothers, but I've lost my patience with malingering homophobia and sexism, and especially with using white racism as an excuse to resist change. You know, the "I have to be Bruce Lee because the white man wants me to be Tonto" line. Yes, the J-town boys with their black leather jackets are adorable, but the pathetic need to put down straight women, gays, and lesbians is not. To anyone in our communities who wants to

7. See *The Workingmen's Party of California*, 55 CAL. HIST. Q. 58 (Spring 1976) (describing propaganda that the Party used to stir anti-Chinese sentiments).

8. COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, PERSONAL JUSTICE DENIED 42-44 (1982); See also, Dean Takahashi, *Half a Century Later, Relocation Pain Persists*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 16, 1992, at A1 (recounting the experience of one issei family's internment).

9. *500 Protest Probation For 2 Killers in Detroit*, N.Y. TIMES, May 10, 1983, at A16 (describing 500 people protesting the release of and probationary sentences given to two men for beating Vincent Chin to death with baseball bats; the assailants, unemployed auto workers, killed Mr. Chin because they thought Mr. Chin was a Japanese responsible for their loss of jobs).

10. See, e.g., Courtland Milloy, *The Revolution at the Corner Store*, WASH. POST, Mar. 14, 1985, at DC1 (describing the resentment that a Korean-American grocer faces from African-Americans).

bring their anger home, let's say, "cut it out." We will not be used against each other.

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

In anti-eviction struggles in Chinatowns from coast to coast and in Hawaii we heard the song, "We Shall Not Be Moved."¹¹ For the 90's, I want to sing, "We Shall Not Be Used." I want to remember the times when Asian-Americans stood side-by-side with African-Americans, Latinos, and progressive whites to demand social justice. I want to remember the multi-racial ILWU (International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Workers' Union) that ended the plantation system in Hawaii.¹² I want to remember the multi-racial sugar beet strikes in California that brought together Japanese, Filipino and Chicano workers to fulfill their dreams of a better life.¹³ I want to remember the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born that brought together progressive Okinawan, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and European immigrants to fight McCarthyism and deportation of political activists.¹⁴ I want to remember the San Francisco State College strike,¹⁵ and the Asian-American students who stood their ground in a multi-racial coalition to bring about ethnic studies and lasting changes in American academic life, changes that make it possible for me, as a scholar, to tell the truth as I see it.

In remembering the San Francisco State strike, I also want to remember Dr. Hayakawa and ask what he represented.¹⁶ For a variety of historical and cultural reasons, Asian-Americans are particularly susceptible to being used by the dominant society. Nonetheless, we have resisted being used; we have joined time and again in the struggle for democracy in America. The Asian Law Caucus represents that tradition. The Caucus is a concrete manifestation of the pledge to seek a better life for the least advantaged and to work in coalition with other groups. All of you who support the Caucus help keep alive a utopian vision of a world free from racism and poverty. You honor the proudest moments in our collective histories.

When I told a friend about this speech, he sent me a newsclipping from the Chronicle about Asian-Americans as the retailer's dream.¹⁷ It starts out, "[t]hey're young, [t]hey're single, [t]hey're college educated and on the white-

11. TOM GLAZER, SONGS OF PEACE, FREEDOM, AND PROTEST, 332-333 (1970) (a popular union song based on an old hymn, "I Shall Not Be Moved"; it was first sung in 1931 by miners; later versions added newer verses and were sung for different purposes); See generally, Chester Hartman, *San Francisco International Hotel: Case Study of a Turf Struggle*, 12 RADICAL AM. 47-58 (June 1978) (describing activists struggling against the eviction of Chinese-American tenants in San Francisco Chinatown).

12. EDWARD BEECHERT, WORKING IN HAWAII: A LABOR HISTORY (1985); SANFORD ZALBURG, A SPARK IS STRUCK: JACK HALL AND THE ILWU IN HAWAII (1979) (biography of ILWU labor leader, Jack Hall).

13. Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Domination and Class Conflict in Capitalist Agriculture: The Oxnard Sugar Beet Workers' Strike of 1903*, 25 LAB. HIST. 325-350 (1984).

14. Cf., ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE AMERICAN LEFT 19-20 (Mari Jo Buhle, et al. eds., 1990) (chronicles the general history of the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born).

15. See generally, Karen Umemoto, "On Strike!" *San Francisco State College Strike, 1968-69: The Role of Asian American Students*, 15 AMERASIA 3-41 (1989) (recounting the event at the San Francisco State Strike and Senator Hayakawa's attempt to end it).

16. See *id.*, at 19.

17. John Berry, *Survey Says Asians Are Dream Customers*, S.F. Chron., Mar. 5, 1990, at C1.

collar track. And they like to shop for fun." Does that describe you? Well, it may describe me, too. But I hope there is more to Asian-American identity than that. I hope we will be known to history as a people who remembered the hard road of their ancestors, and who shared, therefore, a special commitment to social justice.

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