

# Eleven Reflections on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the US—We're Here, Too.

## 1. Names: Asian Americans

This moniker is an invention, something meant to encompass communities and individuals with a great variety of origins, languages, cultures, faiths, and economic, legal, and social status, tracing back to anywhere between Japan and the Caucasus region, anywhere between Siberia and southern India. People from islands in the Pacific vary among themselves, yet their situations are interwoven, and they have sometimes intermarried, often enough to justify the term "Asian and Pacific Islander." And yet the experiences of Native Hawaiians have been different enough from those from many other islands, that sometimes NHPI (Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander) is used—but then again, the Hawaiian Islands are in the Pacific. Still, I think I prefer "NHPI" because it feels like a way for me to recognize and respect the different lives and experiences of people from the Pacific Islands other than where my family came from.

These constructs are clumsy tools yet the best we have for obtaining some place at the table, some minimal part in the conversation on race. When people talk as though race in America were all on a black-white binary, they push us toward a mis-identification as either white people or black people unless we push back firmly. This happens in the public media, and it also happens when our friends are speaking and we are present.

God, our creator, holds precious all our identities. May God sustain us in the work of claiming who we are and honoring who each other are.

## 2. Exclusion and Detention

Laws designed for exclusion were first invented for Chinese immigrants, eventually extended to other Asian immigrant groups. While some immigrants from Asia, and their descendants, have become highly successful business people, academics, software or traditional engineers, others face great barriers in educational progress, financial progress, and acceptance and assimilation.

Chinese Americans strove on in spite of this oppression until the 1940's, when, in the context of World War II, they were suddenly compared favorably against Japanese Americans, who were, in spite of citizenship and loyalty, forced away from their homes and land and detained in camps.

Our children may learn nothing or little about these things in our schools, but Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans do remember. Overall, our position is improved, but disrespect still lingers, and a pendulum can swing both ways. Asian American subgroups, by ethnicity, have not always supported each other in their difficulty.

We also see other immigrants from other places in Asia, the Pacific, or other parts of the world treated with hostility now. Are we doing all we can to offer support to them? Or have we, in our assimilation, now adopted an exclusionary position toward the *new* New Americans or racist attitudes toward African, Latinx, and Indigenous Americans?

It is a terrible loss to our humanity, when our own inclusion leads us to exclude others or accept their exclusion. Let us never do so.

### **3. Māhele and Annexation**

American business interests required the commodification of the land and the wresting of governance from the people. In this, Hawai'ians lost not an asset but a family member, a nurturing elder brother. Having gained the highest literacy rate in the world, they then lost it when the use of their language was banned in the schools. In similar ways, their right to dance and chant were denied for a time. When traditions - the things handed down - are lost, as well as sustenance from the earth, the ability to be who you are suffers a devastating loss that cannot be compensated by all the tourist dollars in the world.

If you need help understanding cultural appropriation, look at Hawai'ians—never seen in their full complex humanity, but as travel poster tropes —while the nation downs "Hawai'ian style" pizzas and "Big Kahuna" drinks and celebrates the end of school with plastic leis and a picnic recast as a luau.

The losses of other Pacific Islanders in other colonial experiences—I know they lost self-governance, and surely much of their way of life. May we learn more, and may their lives be recognized and honored also. Let us delve into our own cultural traditions with relish. Let us also learn from others' with humility and some respectful distance.

### **4. Looking at the Full Range**

From other islands of the Pacific, from the Philippines and India and South Asia, Southeast Asia and Korea—in response to pressures at home, persecutions and wars, or a hope to build a new life in a new place - they have come, some in earlier waves and some later. Some are doctors and nurses and engineers, some laborers in farms or factories or hotels, hospitals, and caregiving homes. Some are builders, some librarians, some academics, journalists, I cannot say where they all are and how they are all working. Only some have good incomes and economic security. Some struggle terribly.

Let us not forget that all are here, that all who have something to share—whether API/NHPI Americans or any Americans - need to offer support to those who need it, as moral human beings.

### **5. Our History and US National Identity.**

Ellis Island is in the text books, but Angel Island is usually not. The different ways arriving immigrants were treated is not studied. Many Chinese American laborers at the railroad may be mentioned, but what about the Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and other early immigrants in many trades and occupations, building the infrastructure, the economy, and the culture of the United States alongside European-descended immigrants? The historical narrative of a European civilization, with some add-ons from other cultures, is incomplete.

When we have an incomplete history, we not only fail to honor all contributors, we fail to understand fully who our nation is, who we are.

### **6. Gender and Family**

Gender and family stereotypes abound. Can we please be done with the stereotypes and misconceptions about the sexual lives of Asian women, the parenting styles and the lives of the children, the suppositions about patriarchal roles in cultures not well understood?

## 7. One-Way Accommodations

Do you, as a white person, have a friend or coworker or neighbor who is a person of color (maybe API/NHPI), and you have a very smooth-running, comfortable relationship where race seems to have no impact? Is this relationship as easy as all your relationships with others of your own race? This may not be a post-racial triumph. It may well be a working or social relationship which you both value, and while the white person may participate with little attention to race, the other consistently—even habitually—accommodates, allowing misunderstandings, cultural appropriations, and other things to pass because it would be too complicated, too uncomfortable, to discuss “just now.”

Maybe there are no problems with the words spoken, but someone of color understands that a white person lives in a world that continually reinforces a white perspective, so it is necessary to communicate with them referring only to the things they already understand from within their dominant culture so that the conversation will run smoothly—this is another one-way accommodation.

And if you weren't aware—when accommodations always flow always in the same direction because the naming and confronting difference would make one party too uncomfortable or would be too costly in the relationship - then that's a power differential.

## 8. Identity Not Expressed

When the cultural or racial identity cannot be freely expressed, when some are implicitly asked to keep it within bounds so that dominant groups can continue the prerogative of feeling normal without interruption while others feel counter to the norm, then what happens to their identity? Identity may survive, depending on the private resilience and how well the racial group can preserve it in its "own time." But the energy given to continually restoring identity has its own personal cost.

This is certain: Where identity cannot be expressed, people of different identities cannot grow in understanding of each other. Friendships begin with introductions, do they not? One cost of accommodations that can only flow one way is that the old relationship based on maintaining the comfort of the already-comfortable reinforces a status quo, rather than allowing for growth of understanding and change. Of course, preserving stasis is considered a *benefit* for systemic racism.

## 9. "Community"

Let's please be careful how we use this word. Many Asian Pacific Islander groups exist, and they may have their own relationships among each other, but those might not even be very well developed. If a network of churches, civic organizations, or business identities, a *range of them within the API/NHPI designation*, respond together to a particular current event—in the context of a local political election, for example— then it makes sense to say that the "API/NHPI community" responded. But if the local *Japanese* community responded, let's just say that.

Some Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders in the US live very dispersed lives, in small, largely non-Asian towns, with very little contact with others of their race. They may just barely participate in an API/NHPI community, through ties to out-of-town relatives or online connections. But if we're not talking about their community involvement, wouldn't "Indian American *person*" make more sense than "member of the Indian American community?"

Maybe this is a small matter. It isn't a shared preference among API/NHPI folks. But my own personal hope is that paying close attention to how our words describe our realities can help us better understand those realities and each other

## **10. A mixed relationship with privilege**

Some—not all—API/NHPI Americans are excluded from privilege in the ways I've described, yet they have also, through hard work and some plain good luck, reached an enviable level of education and socio-economic status.

Money and education do not always translate into power. Still, whatever educated, financially successful API/NHPI Americans are able to do within their sphere, to participate in dismantling racism, that is their responsibility. Their inclusion in favored spaces may be late in coming and always contingent in a society where white privilege predominates. Yet if they currently participate in the material gains of an economy that has become great largely through enslaved labor (and also the labor of other oppressed people of color) – then financially successful API/NHPI Americans have the responsibility of confronting questions of reparations and economic amends for slavery just like everyone else.

We have to acknowledge the pot itself is tainted until it is equitably distributed. We have to assert that access to funds does not nullify the importance of full inclusion in our nation, of cultural transmission and survival, and of our history and identity in the American story.

## **11. Implications of the "model minority" myth**

The phrase *myth of the model minority* may not convey how many impacts there are. The implication that other groups, such as African Americans or Latinx, should match Asian and NHPI American experience is offensive and divisive. Many Asian American groups' struggles needs are masked by this myth: Khmer, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese students are reported to be doing about as well in school as African American and Latinx students. The income levels of Khmer, Laotian, Cambodian, and Bangladeshi Americans were under \$16,785 per capita per year in 2007-2009, with Vietnamese Americans doing only a little better. Even among East Asian Americans (whose higher averages contribute to this "positive stereotype") attainment is not all equal because individuals vary. In the case of the Chinese Americans, also, earlier migrations tended to bring far more impoverished, uneducated laborers, while in the mid 20th century, there was an influx of highly trained middle class Chinese or Taiwanese immigrant professionals, possibly creating an "optical illusion" of more advancement than had actually happened.

Even for individuals and families that have had very rapid assimilation, high educational and financial achievement, how much difficulty is not recognized in those lives? Some individuals have traversed much ground, from one set of circumstances, responsibilities, cultural worlds, kinds of social networks and professional communities and sometimes world view - so very fast - this seems likely to create a strain on some individuals and families.

The factual inaccuracy of this "myth" is not its only flaw. What about its ethics? What is the value placed on assimilation and competitive achievement, rather than wholeness in God and the well-being of all people, in their beautiful diversity, together?