

The Usual Suspects:  
Asian Americans as Conditional Citizens

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### Introduction

Perpetual foreigners who lean toward treason—this has been the most consequential construction of Asian Americans for the past century and a half. Asian Americans are sometimes model minorities, geishas, martial artists, hardworking merchants and more, but they are always aliens with suspect loyalties. One could argue that Asian Americans are tolerated during ordinary times and, during certain crises, forcefully expelled from the body politic, whether literally or symbolically. The imputation of perpetual foreignness plays a key role in triangulating Asian Americans relative to whites and blacks, or positioning Asian Americans as not only between whites and blacks in terms of intelligence but also apart from both of them in terms of civic belonging (Kim 1999). The rendering of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants as irredeemable aliens is a story whose major historical signposts are all too familiar: the anti-Chinese movement, the racial bar on naturalization, discriminatory legislation such as the Alien Land Law of 1913, exclusionary legislation such as the Immigration Act of 1924, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the campaign finance scandal of 1996, and the prosecution of Wen Ho Lee. This dramatic and continuing story is a pointed rejoinder to recent scholarship suggesting that Asian Americans are now being accepted as white by the majority.

What does all of this mean for Asian American “civic engagement”? One can define “civic engagement” very broadly to refer to any participation in the public sphere, but I want to focus in this ar-

ticle on the collective advancement of group interests through conventional political channels such as voting, running for office, advocacy, lobbying, and seeking to influence policy through donations. Here a number of questions arise. How much can Asian Americans achieve through these channels given the prevailing construction of them as irredeemable aliens? Does their putative foreignness mean that they cannot be taken seriously as political subjects? Is Leti Volpp (2001) right that the “Asian American citizen” may be an oxymoron? Race-neutral laws and widely-held rights suggest that political membership is universal and constant yet the quality of a group’s membership seems to depend crucially upon that group’s standing in the national imagination, and the standing of Asian Americans is at best unresolved.

This article approaches these questions through an analysis of how Asian American scholars, activists, and officials have responded to a recent milestone in the narrative of Asian American exclusion—namely, the campaign finance scandal that emerged out of the U.S. presidential election of 1996. Most concur that this was an extremely significant event. Ling-chi Wang of UC Berkeley testified in front of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that he could not think of “one issue in the 150-year annals of Asian American history that has been more of a setback to civil rights for this community.” Thomas Kim, author of *The Racial Logic of Politics*, characterized the campaign finance scandal as “without question the single most important national event influencing the political fortunes of Asian Americans in the post-World War II era” (2007, 52). Now that a decade has passed since the scandal broke, it seems fitting to ask what meaning(s) Asian American scholars, activists, and officials have attached to it. Almost all agree that the event drew upon and powerfully invigorated the enduring notion of Asian Americans as foreigners inclined toward treason, but they differ on whether we should view the scandal as a temporary setback in the teleological narrative of Asian American political incorporation or as a sober reminder of the ideological processes that will always relegate Asian Americans to the margins of the nation’s political life.

This chapter has three sections. In the first, I show that Asian Americans’ analyses of the 1996 campaign finance scandal tend to di-

verge, with some observers treating the event as a superable barrier to Asian American empowerment and others as suggestive of the permanent exclusion of Asian Americans from political membership. In the second, I suggest that these divergent readings of the scandal spring from a deeper division as to whether the story of Asian American politics generally is an “American Dream” narrative or an “Impossible Dream” narrative. In the third, I propose the concept of “conditional citizenship” as a way of thinking about Asian Americans’ political status and consider what all of this means for Asian American “civic engagement.”

### **Readings of the Campaign Finance Scandal of 1996**

Asian American political efforts bore significant fruit during the 1996 election. Gary Locke of Washington state was elected the first Asian American governor outside of Hawaii; Asian American candidates did well in various state and local elections; and a historic national voter registration drive led by a coalition of Asian American advocacy organizations resulted in 75,000 new Asian American registered voters. Excitement that Asian Americans were coming into their own politically was tempered, however, by the breaking campaign finance scandal. What came to light was that several Asian American fundraisers for Clinton’s re-election effort—including John Huang, Charlie Yah-lin Trie, and Maria Hsia—had violated federal campaign finance laws by soliciting and accepting donations from foreign nationals who were transnational Asian capitalists based in Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. Bob Woodward’s “exclusive” in the *Washington Post* in early 1996 broke the story, which was then energetically taken up by conservative journalists, think tanks, and the presidential campaigns of Bob Dole and Ross Perot. Over the next year, partisan political fervor transformed the fundraising improprieties of a handful of Asian Americans into a phantasmagorical vision of collusion among a Clinton campaign hungry for money, Asian American fundraisers inclined toward treason, and a Chinese government bent on subverting American democracy. Headlines trumpeted an “Asian Connection,” the role of “*guan xi*” in American politics, and the emergence of “Chinagate,” while promi-

ment Republican officials made anti-Asian jokes and mocked Asian accents in public fora.

Leading journalists and politicians racialized the scandal by generalizing from the wrongdoers to all people of Asian descent, and by consistently eliding distinctions between Asians and Asian Americans, and between Asian Americans of different national origin ancestries. Bound by a putatively homogeneous culture, the entire Asian “race” was depicted as implacably alien, prone to doing things in an undemocratic way, and thus presumptively suspect in its political actions. All guns turned on the Asian American community, especially its noncitizen members. The Clinton administration chose to deflect charges of selling state secrets by “getting tough” with its own donors—the Asian American ones, to be specific. After the election, the DNC launched an internal investigation of donors selected according to several criteria, including those who were solicited by Huang and other Asian American fundraisers and those whose contributions were above \$5,000 and were “made in connection with any DNC fund-raising event targeting the Asian Pacific American community.” The investigation ended up broadly targeting donors with Asian surnames. Donors were not only grilled as to their credit history, social security numbers, citizenship status, and sources of income, but were also told that they would be identified to the press as uncooperative if they refused to divulge this information.

The DNC went further, temporarily banning all legal permanent residents from making campaign donations, attending White House events, or having their pictures taken with the Clintons or Gores—even though it was foreign nationals, not legal permanent residents, who had been implicated in the campaign finance scandal. Democratic and Republican House and Senate members introduced a total of nine different bills aimed at limiting campaign contributions from legal permanent residents. Asian American elected officials like Governor Gary Locke and California Treasurer Matt Fong found their fundraising practices scrutinized by the media. The Federal Elections Commission launched an investigation, the Department of Justice started a task force, and two Congressional committees chaired by Senator Fred Thompson (R-TN) and Representative Dan Burton (R-IN), respectively, held formal, well-publicized hearings on the cam-

campaign finance scandal. Both sets of hearings opened with a roar (asserting grand allegations about a Chinese plot to influence U.S. policy or steal nuclear weapons technology and the role of Asian American spies) and closed with a whimper (having failed to produce any hard evidence to support these allegations). Only the emergence of the Monica Lewinsky story in 1997 quieted the frenzy.

Most Asian Americanists analyzed the 1996 campaign finance scandal as an egregious episode of stereotyping and discrimination that hampered Asian American political development. These authors share a sense of moral outrage and a central unspoken assumption: that racial discrimination, however severe its impact and widespread its occurrence, is not necessarily endemic to the American political and legal system. In fact, the system can be mobilized to combat and perhaps even eradicate discrimination.<sup>1</sup> Hence the tone of these works is often hortatory—urging officials to use the tools at their disposal to respond vigorously to the discriminatory aspects of the scandal, urging Asian Americans to persevere in their pursuit of political power, or urging Asian Americans to adopt new political strategies toward this goal. Many of the authors discussed here were actively involved in organizing Asian American community responses to the scandal as it was unfolding.

In September 1997, Asian American advocacy groups and individuals generated a *Petition to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights* in response to the campaign finance scandal. In his introduction to this document, attorney Edward Chen argues that the scandal revealed a “pervasive, institutional and disturbing pattern of discrimination”(377) which violated the First Amendment and equal protection rights of Asian Americans and undermined federal civil rights and voting rights laws. The petition itself criticizes Congress, both parties, the media, and individual elected officials for racial stereotyping, criminalizing the entire Asian “race” as disloyal aliens, applying a double standard by ignoring the campaign finance violations committed by non-Asian Americans, catering to the xenophobic impulses of the public, and unjustifiably stigmatizing legal permanent residents as a suspect class. In this passage, petitioners urge the nation to live up its highest ideals of equality and democratic inclusiveness:

The issues raised in this Petition are significant not only to Asian

Pacific Americans but to ALL Americans...The degradation of any discrete and insular minority group—here the ‘foreignization’ of Asian Pacific Americans in particular—reflects an intolerance of diversity and besmirches the ideals of our Constitution...[W]e must all become engaged in a struggle to define America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—a struggle about whether diversity will be accepted as a core value of this multicolored country or will be rejected as hollow, meaningless rhetoric (359-60).

While supporting a full investigation into the alleged misconduct of various individuals, the petitioners demand that the handling of the affair be “fair, informed, accurate and free of racial and anti-immigrant bias” and that “the standards applied to Asian Pacific Americans—in Congressional hearings, in the media and by all political parties—be fair and equal as befitting their status as loyal citizens and legal permanent residents of this country” (358). The petition captures the civil rights approach to racial injustice: calling the nation to its higher self by marshalling the nation’s laws, constitutional ideals, and antidiscrimination norms against discriminatory actions.

In his two contributions to the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac of 1998-1999*, Don Nakanishi also reads the campaign finance scandal of 1996 as an episode of racism that threatens the political gains achieved by Asian Americans. Noting that the event “revives the long-standing issue of whether America will ever truly accept Asian Pacific Americans as Americans rather than foreigners”(Nakanishi 1998-1999a, 35), Nakanishi implies that Asian Americans will eventually be accepted and achieve empowerment if they keep their eyes on the prize. The historic aspects of Asian American participation in the 1996 election were “signs of political growth and maturation” (Nakanishi 1998-1999b, 9), Nakanishi avers, and Asian Americans should “continue the political momentum begun before the current controversy erupted”(Nakanishi 1998-1999a, 35) by building a strong political infrastructure and becoming more informed voters. Rather than being deterred by racism, Asian Americans should be spurred to greater political engagement because of it. Senator Daniel Akaka’s (D-Hawaii) piece in the same volume reflects a simi-

lar sense that Asian Americans are poised on the brink of historic political achievement. Worried that the campaign finance scandal “will kill this initial flowering of a historically quiescent and apolitical community”(28) by confirming Asian Americans’ fears that the system is rigged against them, Akaka exhorts Asian Americans to emulate the Asian immigrants and Asian Americans who in the past “overcame steep social, economic, and institutional barriers”(28) to gain membership in American society.

Like Nakanishi and Akaka, Frank Wu and May Nicholson (1997) call upon Asian Americans to persist in their quest for political power despite the shadow cast by the campaign finance scandal. They point out that the media and politicians consistently implied that figures like John Huang represented all Asian Americans, elided distinctions among Asians and Asian Americans, and evoked cultural essentialist arguments to discuss the Asian “race”—yet they remain optimistic that the event can serve as “a rite of passage” for Asian Americans who can “contribute positively to our democratic experiment”(25). This reading of the scandal as a discriminatory episode, a barrier that Asian Americans can overcome on their path toward empowerment, can also be seen in a piece by Frank Wu and Francey Lim Youngberg (2001). Here the authors concede that the campaign finance scandal “raise[s] troubling implications about the acceptance of Asian immigrants as U.S. citizens and their ability to participate as equal stakeholders in shaping public policy”(312), yet also suggest that the event highlights a certain “lack of political maturity among Asian Americans”(337). Asian Americans should view it as “a challenge and an opportunity”(337), they argue, redoubling their efforts to gain political power.

Some authors exhort Asian Americans to continue their quest for political empowerment, but in a manner that is significantly modified by the lessons of the campaign finance scandal. No more politics as usual, they insist, Asian Americans need to change course. According to Ling-chi Wang (1998), Asian Americans must recognize that they are being used by various groups, including fundraisers like John Huang, transnational capitalists, and politicians of all parties. Although Huang described himself as promoting Asian American collective interests, he was, according to Wang, representing a small

elite group of wealthy business entrepreneurs and professionals with ties to transnational Asian capital. Transnational capitalists, for their part, attempt to continue the historical pattern of home countries' "extraterritorial domination"(13) of Asian American communities, using these sites as points of entry for economic and political penetration. Noting the deforming impact of these processes upon the class structure and political development of Asian American communities, Wang concludes that transnational capital's interests are pointedly incompatible with those of most Asian Americans. Indeed politicians of all parties, he suggests, racialized the scandal in order to divert public attention from the real national crisis: the corrupting influence of money on American elections and democracy.

In another piece (2002), Wang also criticizes inside-the-Beltway Asian American advocates and politicians for "trying to hitch a free ride from a foreign gravy train" (112) and for reflexively crying racism in defense of Huang and others. What Asian Americans need to do, he insists, is to break free from those trying to hijack their cause. This involves joining others in calling out the corruption of the campaign finance system and pursuing meaningful campaign finance reform, as well as returning to community organizing at the grassroots level. The "silver lining" of the 1996 campaign finance scandal, Wang suggests, is that it shows the "resilience of Asian Americans and their collective determination to conquer the last frontier in their long quest for racial equality and social justice: full and equal participation in a democracy...regardless of one's race, gender, color, or class" (116).

Paul Watanabe (2001), too, sees the campaign finance scandal as an object lesson in what Asian Americans should and should not be doing politically. Against those who suggest that Asian Americans simply need to persevere, Watanabe insists that the scandal "clarified many of the limitations of mainstream involvement"(371), thus pointing out the need for new strategies. If donating money to national campaigns in the hope of appointments and political influence is a failing strategy, in part because the economic and political interests of big donors are not those of the majority of Asian Americans, he asks: "[W]hat must be done if Asian Americans ever wish to participate as they should in ruling America?"(380). Like Ling-chi Wang, Watanabe

favors a return to the grassroots. Citing groups involved in voter registration and naturalization drives, such as Asian American Legal Defense Fund in New York City, he argues that community activism builds an “enhanced indigenous base [which] contains resources—individual, organizational, financial, experiential—that are crucial in support of expeditions into the larger political milieu...[and which] offers sustenance through the battles that may be waged”(376). Though Wang and Watanabe recognize the need for a political adjustment, they, like the authors discussed above, suggest that Asian Americans can, through struggle and perseverance, call the nation to its higher self and achieve true membership in this society.

A second, smaller set of writings on the 1996 campaign finance scandal is more critical and less hortatory in orientation. These authors read the event not as a discriminatory barrier to be overcome but as evidence that the civic exclusion of Asian Americans reflects a profound and perhaps implacable problem in American society. According to these authors, the 1996 campaign finance scandal was the product of entrenched ideological and political structures, not just the prejudiced behavior of certain journalists and politicians. The emphasis in these works is more on advancing a fundamental critique of the culture and the political system and heightening our understanding of how these function systematically to vitiate Asian American citizenship than it is on advising Asian Americans to redouble or retool their efforts within current configurations.

Neil Gotanda’s (2001) piece is a prominent example. In Gotanda’s view, the campaign finance scandal of 1996 and the Wen Ho Lee espionage case of 1999 (more on this below) are paradigmatic examples of a pattern that he calls “Asiatic racialization.” Asiatic racialization involves “a group of related yet distinct ideas—Asiatic inassimilability, the conflation of Asian Americans with Asian citizens, and the perception of Asians as a threat to the American nation”(80). These ideas can be traced all the way back to Justice Harlan’s dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the California Supreme Court case *People v. George Hall* (1854), and the Chinese exclusion cases. Gotanda sharply criticizes those who characterize the 1996 scandal and the Wen Ho Lee case as episodes of “stereotyping.” “Instead of individual prejudice or error,” he writes, “the images of for-

eignness are deeply embedded, historically established racial understandings...[that have been] remarkably stable, remaining largely unchanged for over a hundred years"(92). In other words, the problem is not discrimination, seen as a set of discrete individual acts, but racialized constructions deeply woven over time into the cultural infrastructure of the nation. The result is "citizenship nullification" or "the act of stopping the exercise of a person's citizenship rights through the use of the implicit link between an Asiatic racial category and foreignness"(80).

Leti Volpp (2001), too, reads the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee case as markers of a cultural and ideological dynamic by which Asian Americans are denied full citizenship. Looking back to the 1870 Congressional debate over naturalization law and the 1877 Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration, Volpp argues that Chinese immigrants were seen as aliens "whose deep-seated, ineradicable cultural, political, and religious differences"(79) made incorporation into the polity unthinkable. What is striking is the extent to which this same racialized construction continues to be applied to Asian Americans today. Indeed, Volpp argues, Asian Americans are not just seen as foreigners but as anti-citizens, those against whom Americanness is defined. These racialized perceptions function to vitiate Asian Americans' formal rights of citizenship. Volpp writes: "The perception that the political activity of Asian Americans is somehow at odds with 'American' political interests serves to deny Asian Americans the effective political subjecthood essential to full citizenship"(81-82).

Michael Chang, author of a book-length work on the campaign finance scandal, *Racial Politics in an Era of Transnational Citizenship: The 1996 'Asian Donorgate' Controversy in Perspective* (2004), argues that the campaign finance imbroglio of 1996 was actually the beginning of a discursive-political phenomenon that culminated several years later with the Wen Ho Lee espionage scandal. After the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran front page stories in early 1998 alleging that Clinton had allowed the leaking of w-88 nuclear warhead technology to China, Representative Christopher Cox (R-CA) set up and chaired a House committee investigation on the issue. It was the Cox committee final report's claim that a spy had facilitated the alleged

transfer of nuclear warhead technology to Communist China that led directly to the arrest and prosecution of Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee. The evidence suggests that the government's focus on Lee was a result of racial profiling, and that the major factor weighing against him was his Chinese (ironically, Taiwanese) ancestry.<sup>ii</sup>

The government failed to find evidence to substantiate the allegations against Lee and the case became a public embarrassment. Lee, who had been promptly fired from his job, charged with fifty-six criminal counts, and placed in solitary confinement for nine months, was released in September 2000. To secure his release, he pled guilty to one charge of mishandling classified documents. It turns out that these documents were only categorized as "classified" after Lee had downloaded them; that it was common practice for scientists to download sensitive information onto their computers so that they could work at home (former CIA head John Deutch admitted to doing this and was never prosecuted); and that the information Lee downloaded was never connected to the leak of w-88 nuclear warhead technology. Judge James Parker of the Federal District Court in Albuquerque formally apologized to Lee and publicly excoriated the government for its handling of the case.

What bound the campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee case together, according to Chang, were what he calls "Asian donorgate" discourses, including the "preexisting racialized nationalist discourse best described as perpetual 'foreignness'" (5). These discourses were forged in the crucible of "American Orientalism," or "the dominant mainstream construction of East-West relations in terms of cultural, economic, and military conflict and difference" (78). By generating culturally essentialist views of the Chinese—e.g., the belief that there is a homogeneous and static Chinese "culture" that is antithetical to Western culture and that determines the actions of people of Chinese descent all over the globe—American Orientalism, Chang argues, directly produces events which ostracize Asian Americans, both symbolically and physically. It nurtures the common perception of China as a threat to the well-being of the West, democracy, the environment, and human rights, as well as the common perception of Asian Americans as the enemies within. Unforgettably, the

Cox report stated that every person of Chinese descent residing in the U.S.—whether visiting scholar, student, legal permanent resident, or citizen—was a potential spy or “sleeper agent” waiting to be activated by the Chinese government. In an era of transnational globalization, Chang argues, Asian Americans will continue to be politically marginalized via Orientalist discourses as long as the state’s power to define alienage, or who is culturally a “citizen” and who is an “alien,” goes unchallenged.

In the other book-length treatment of the 1996 campaign finance scandal published to date, *The Racial Logic of Politics: Asian Americans and Party Competition* (2007), Thomas Kim argues that institutional as well as cultural factors overdetermine the ongoing political exclusion of Asian Americans. The conventional wisdom holds that the two-party political system will promote the incorporation of minority groups insofar as each party needs to court the support of these groups to build a winning coalition. According to Kim, reality belies this expectation. In fact, the institutional dynamics of two-party politics have worked to powerfully marginalize Asian Americans, with the 1996 campaign finance scandal being a case in point. Why, Kim asks, did the Democrats in 1996 turn on Asian Americans rather than challenging Republican attacks as racially discriminatory and untrue? The answer lies in the fact that “Asian bodies [are] racialized as immutably beholden to foreign entities” (28). Kim explains: “[P]arty elites, recognizing the political danger posed to their party brand name by the discursive presence of ‘racialized outsiders’ within the party coalition, must explicitly and aggressively expel Asian Americans if their party hopes to build and maintain a majority party coalition”(4). Rather than promoting Asian American incorporation, the dynamics of coalition-building in a two-party system, working in conjunction with cultural constructions of Asian Americans, actually hamper it, as each party distances itself from despised Asian bodies in order to please other supporters. Kim writes: “[T]he problem rests not in the political strategies Asian Americans might choose within the two-party system but in the structure of the system itself”(5). Kim suggests that Asian Americans should continue to seek political empowerment but his own analysis of the events of 1996 implies that there is little reason for optimism on this front. Compared with the

first set of authors, this second set is considerably more skeptical about the possibility of Asian American membership in the polity.

## Two Narratives of Asian American Politics

These divergent readings of the 1996 campaign finance scandal spring from a broad division in how Asian American scholars, activists, and politicians narrativize Asian American politics as a whole. The first reading of the scandal (as an episode of discrimination to be overcome) emerges from what I call an “American Dream” narrative, which is constructed and reproduced by mainstream elected officials, professional civil rights advocates, and many scholars. The second reading of the scandal (as evidence that Asian Americans may be permanently ostracized from the polity) is driven by what I call an “Impossible Dream” narrative, which is constructed and reproduced by certain scholars in critical race theory and ethnic studies. Like all dichotomies, this one obscures various nuances in position and maps imperfectly onto reality. Still, delineating this central fault line in political opinion is helpful in the assessment of the present and future possibilities of Asian American “civic engagement.”

According to the “American Dream” narrative of Asian American politics, Asian Americans have struggled for more than a century against discrimination and are moving inexorably if unevenly toward the promised land of full political incorporation. The journey has been long and painful, marked by oppression and suffering, but the outcome is all but certain. As Martin Luther King, Jr. memorably put it in Selma, “The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” This narrative depends upon the metaphor of movement over time, of a physical journey from a point of origin (exclusion) to a destination point (inclusion), suggesting that Asian Americans are coming out of the wilderness into the heart of the polis. It is teleological, developmental, hortatory, and optimistic. Informed by the notion that America is a land of opportunity and freedom where everyone—“regardless of one’s race, gender, color, or class” (Wang 2002, 116)—can succeed, this “American Dream” narrative of Asian American politics embraces the civil rights movement’s philosophy and the antidiscrimination framework it produced.<sup>iii</sup> It expresses

American triumphalism.

Unsurprisingly, scholars and advocates who focus on voting are among the most active craftspeople of the “American Dream” narrative of Asian American politics. In keeping with the teleological thrust of this story, these observers discuss statistical data about Asian American population numbers, immigration rates, naturalization rates, registration rates, and voting as a matter of collective destiny. As its title suggests, the 2006 press release by the Asian American Studies Center, “The New ‘Sleeping Giant’ in California Politics,” exemplifies this narrative (Ong et al. 2006). This document begins by noting that census data from 2005-2006 indicate that Asian Americans have increased their “potential power” at the polls by raising their overall numbers as well as their rate of citizenship. From 2000 to 2005, Asian Americans in California went from 3.8 million to 4.7 million, representing 38% of the state’s net gain of 2.2 million; in addition, 71% of Asian American adults are now citizens by birth or naturalization, a significant increase over 2000. The report continues: “However, there are still barriers to fully translating the population numbers into voting power”—in particular, that Asian Americans are less likely to register and vote than non-Hispanic whites and African Americans. The sense here is that changing demographics among Asian Americans have created an immanent political potential waiting to be realized. When they overcome the barriers in their way, the narrative goes, the sleeping giant will awaken and Asian Americans will fulfill their political destiny. They will elect more Asian American officials and become an effective voting bloc able to both influence public policy and formulate policy agendas.

Similarly, the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, published every few years or so, presents an optimistic, hortatory view of Asian American politics. The *Almanac* typically includes articles, statistics, scholarly reports, and a political directory of elected and appointed Asian American officials. Although it includes many articles that criticize electoral politics from the left, the *Almanac* conveys a clear “American Dream” orientation by analyzing the growing Asian American population’s voting potential and jubilantly counting the increasing number of Asian American officials. The 2001-2002 volume is dedicated to Elaine Chao and Norman Mineta, who were

appointed Secretaries of Labor and Transportation, respectively, by George W. Bush. James Lai, one of the volume's co-editors, asserts that these two appointments "make a strong statement to our nation that Asian Pacific Americans are not perpetual foreigners" and "make it clear that Asian Pacific Americans are here to stay, achieving new levels of political incorporation"(12).

The "American Dream" narrative of Asian American politics underlies the rhetoric of many Asian American elected officials as well. In "The Need for Asian American Leadership: A Call to Action" (2000), Governor Gary Locke of Washington weaves a classic teleological story about Asian Americans overcoming barriers, facing remaining challenges, and moving toward the promised land of inclusion and the fulfillment of their political destiny. First Locke discusses historical instances of discrimination such as the Chinese exclusion movement, the bar on naturalization, and Japanese American internment. Then he credits the civil rights movement with creating "tremendous progress," adding, "I am honored to be an emblem of that progress"(2). He then identifies the "great challenges"(3) still facing Asian Americans, naming poverty, inequality, racially motivated violence, and episodes of ostracism such as the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the prosecution of Wen Ho Lee. Exhorting Asian Americans to register, vote, and run for office, Locke writes:

We bring into the new century a legacy of the blood, sweat, and tears of our parents and our grandparents who helped make this country all that it is today. We owe it to our ancestors to take action that will guarantee that the children of the twenty-first century do not have to live through the cycles of discrimination that have marred our own coming of age (4).

Through committed political action, Locke suggests, Asian Americans can move forward in their journey toward a post-discrimination age.

In a 1996 speech entitled, "A One Hundred Year Journey: From Houseboy to the Governor's Mansion," delivered during his run for Governor of Washington, Locke casts his personal and political autobiographies in terms of the "American Dream."<sup>iv</sup> Locke explains

that his grandfather emigrated from China in the late 1800s, worked as a houseboy, cannery worker, and logger, and then fought in the Normandy Bay invasion in World War II as a soldier in the U.S. Army. He continues: “[M]y background, and my family’s experiences have emphasized the meaning of values like hard work, education, the family, the meaning of personal responsibility, and that government can only provide an opportunity, but cannot guarantee us success” (3). Urging Asian Americans to get involved politically in order to protect their hard-won gains and assume their “rightful place at the table”(6), Locke describes his run for Governor as the culmination of a 100-year journey of sacrifice, hard work, and determination on the part of his own family and Asian Americans throughout history.

In a special issue of the *UCLA Asian Pacific American Law Journal* (2002) devoted to Asian American politics, articles by other Asian American elected and appointed officials echo Locke’s themes. The titles of Tony Lam’s “Breaking Down the Walls: My Journey From a Refugee Camp to the Westminster City Council” and Satveer Chaudhary’s “How a Chaudhary Beat a Carlson” are vivid and self-explanatory. Chaudhary writes: “[A]ct on your dreams. If an Asian Indian senator can make his mark in Minnesota, every Asian American can achieve his or her dream. If one barrier falls, ten fall with it. This is not just my story, it is the story of America” (168). Ming Chin, who was appointed to the California Supreme Court in 1996, writes in the same volume: “I am living the American dream. Only in America could the son of a Chinese immigrant farmer rise to sit on the state’s highest court” (150).

The “Impossible Dream” narrative of Asian American politics starts with the observation that the “American Dream” narrative is fundamentally mistaken. The “American Dream” narrative, as we have seen, sees racial discrimination as aberrational rather than integral to the American experience. Discrimination may be frequent and widespread, but it can ultimately be overcome. For the scholars who craft the “Impossible Dream” narrative, this view of racism, embodied in antidiscrimination norms and statutes, is wishful thinking and harmfully misleading. In their view, racism is a permanent and inplacable feature of American life, and people of color will be better able to struggle against it if they face this difficult truth. Asian Amer-

icans will never gain full incorporation through politics as usual—electoral politics and traditional civil rights advocacy—because these activities do not challenge racism at its roots. While critical race scholars think racism is ineradicable in an ultimate sense, they do not suggest throwing in the towel but rather generating new and creative strategies for resisting and challenging racism, ranging from deconstructing racialized identities to rethinking the boundaries of the nation-state and definitions of citizenship. Where the “American Dream” narrative is teleological, emphasizing a physical journey through time and space and over barriers toward the promised land, the “Impossible Dream” narrative emphasizes endless cycles of racial “progress” and retrenchment that add up to stasis. Its powerful anti-triumphalist message challenges American national mythology at its core. It is this “Impossible Dream” narrative that underlies the analyses, discussed above, which read the 1996 campaign finance scandal as suggestive of the permanent exclusion of Asian Americans from meaningful U.S. citizenship.

Derrick Bell (1992), one of the founders of critical race theory, articulated many of the core arguments that comprise the “Impossible Dream” narrative. According to Bell’s theory of “racial realism,” racism will never be eradicated in America and the antidiscrimination framework that purports to address racism is a collective fantasy that prevents us from recognizing this truth. Racial realism posits that white people always act out of what they perceive to be their collective racial interest, unconstrained by promises, norms or laws. Whites abstain from racial discrimination if abstinence is cost free or profitable (the “interest convergence thesis”), but they sacrifice black people whenever there is something to be gained from doing so. For example, powerful whites have for centuries instigated “racial bonding” against blacks as a way of distracting poor whites from class inequality. Recognizing the dual truths that racism is permanent and that civil rights will not eliminate it enables one to be realistic, according to Bell, not fatalistic. We must still struggle against racism in a committed way as an assertion of our humanity, but we must do it with our eyes open.

Neil Gotanda is one of a handful of Asian American legal scholars who have brought critical race theory to bear upon the Asian

American experience.<sup>5</sup> Gotanda's (2001, 1985) central argument has been that Asian Americans have a distinctive experience of being racialized as "foreign" as well as non-white, with the implication that critical race theory must differentiate among varied group experiences rather than presuming that the black experience reflects those of other groups of color. Let us return to Gotanda's 2001 article discussed above, entitled, "Citizenship Nullification: The Impossibility of Asian American Politics." As mentioned, Gotanda sees the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee espionage case as evidence that enduring "images of foreignness" continue to "nullify" Asian American citizenship. Like Bell, Gotanda believes that racism is a permanent, implacable feature of American life and that civil rights laws can never uproot it, with the result that groups of color can never achieve true membership in the polity. Gotanda's conclusion at the end of the article is stark: "[G]enuine Asian American citizenship is an impossibility" (80), even for those who possess the legal status of citizens, as long as race continues to play a significant role in American life. In other words, the political exclusion of Asian Americans is a permanent condition.

It is useful to return as well to Leti Volpp's article discussed above, entitled, "'Obnoxious To Their Very Nature': Asian Americans and Constitutional Citizenship" (2001). As mentioned, Volpp, too, reads the 1996 campaign finance scandal and the Wen Ho Lee espionage case as markers of cultural constructions which function to vitiating Asian Americans' formal citizenship rights. Drawing upon Linda Bosniak's work, Volpp identifies four discourses about citizenship: citizenship as legal status, citizenship as rights, citizenship as political activity, and citizenship as national identity. In the first two, citizens are objects, "passive recipient(s) of rights" (72). In the latter two, citizens are active subjects with their own subjectivity. Volpp's argument is that while whites are comfortable with granting Asian Americans citizenship in the first two senses, they are not comfortable with Asian Americans being active political subjects or being seen as representing or constituting national identity. Indeed, Asian Americans are racialized so unremittingly as alien and different that "'citizen' and 'Asian' could be said to function as antonyms in the United States context" (82). According to Volpp, this story about un-

fulfilled citizenship should not surprise us. She writes:

Race has always fundamentally contradicted the promise of liberal democracy. The racially exclusive origins of liberalism and civic republicanism were starkly at odds with their purported goals. While membership in the citizenry has been widened, simply adding rights with an accompanying logic of color-blindness will not translate into substantive enjoyment of citizenship. Ideas about race will continue to disrupt the ability of Asian Americans to function and be identified as citizens...One's Asianness seems to be the difference one must suppress in order to be a full citizen (83).

It is not just that Asian Americans are disadvantaged by the rules of the game; they are actually prevented from succeeding. Since politics as usual is obviously insufficient for dealing with the implacability of racism, Volpp speaks of "new forms of struggle" that recognize the futility of seeking national membership within current configurations and that seek the transformative "creation of political solidarities across racial and national boundaries"(85). In other words, Asian Americans' aspirations of belonging can only be fulfilled if the game is restructured in a significant way.

It is worth noting that this division between the "American Dream" and "Impossible Dream" narratives emerges as well in debates over one of the central events in post-civil rights Asian American politics—namely, Japanese American reparations. As Natsu Saito (2001) argues, the established internment narrative suggests that Japanese American internment was a terrible tragedy, but that the nation recognized and corrected its error. Saito identifies two flaws with this narrative: it sees racism as an aberration, and it suggests that the wrong of the internment has been righted. Casting the internment instead as "really a logical extension of all that had come before"(8) in Asian American history, she demonstrates that history is in fact repeating itself at the start of the twenty first century as the U.S. government traces Arab and Muslim Americans as "terrorists" who are "foreign, disloyal, and imminently threatening" (12). Saito reviews recent cultural productions, individual stories, FBI programs, court

cases and anti-terrorism policies and concludes: “The government is still subverting our civil rights and undermining the safeguards of judicial review by tapping into race-based fears and playing the ‘national security’ trump card”(26). Echoing Chris Iijima, she points out that Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 to reward the “superpatriotism” and acquiescence of Japanese Americans and to promote the idea that minorities can make it in the U.S. if they try hard enough. Saito urges Japanese Americans to speak out against the established internment narrative and fight the treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans, suggesting that it is still in their power to re-interpret the meaning of the internment. How long can the “American Dream” narrative of the internment persist in the face of post-9/11 realities?

### **Asian Americans and Politics in a New Century**

What are the implications of the campaign finance scandal and of putative foreignness more broadly for Asian American “civic engagement”? It depends upon whom you ask. Judging by their public rhetoric, most prominent players in Asian American politics—including elected and appointed officials, professional advocates, and many scholars—espouse the “American Dream” narrative of Asian American politics and believe that the campaign finance scandal and related events are simply setbacks that should spur the community to even greater efforts at political empowerment. The entire premise of their system-oriented work (policymaking, lobbying, mobilizing the vote) is that conventional political action can mitigate discrimination and produce group benefits. Their own reaction to the campaign finance scandal—filing a petition alleging discriminatory treatment, sponsoring public fora on the issue, writing opinion pieces, etc.—exemplifies intensified “civic engagement” as a response to adversity. On the other hand, those scholars and activists who espouse the “Impossible Dream” narrative of Asian American politics believe that “civic engagement” defined as the collective pursuit of group interests through conventional political channels is a dead end.<sup>vi</sup> Convinced that electoral politics and civil rights advocacy are rigged games that inevitably reproduce white privilege, they see

these activities as distracting Asian Americans from exploring alternative political possibilities. What is needed, in their view, is not civic engagement but civic transformation.<sup>vii</sup>

Which is more accurate, the “American Dream” narrative or “Impossible Dream” narrative of Asian American politics? In my view, there is some truth to each. To capture this complexity, I propose that that we think of Asian Americans from 1952 onwards as experiencing “conditional citizenship.”<sup>8</sup> Conditional citizenship is formal citizenship whose meaning is contingent upon variable forces in a given place and time. It is citizenship that is qualified by negative cultural valuations of groups such that demographic changes, geopolitical dynamics, and other kinds of processes can trigger its abrogation, symbolically and perhaps literally. Unlike the unconditional citizenship typically enjoyed by whites, conditional citizenship is always on the verge of being compromised. This notion is not as sanguine as the “American Dream” narrative: there is no teleological, triumphal journey from the outside to the center of the polis; Asian Americans may never fully arrive, politically speaking. But it is not as pessimistic as the “Impossible Dream” narrative either: conditional citizenship is still legal citizenship and provides greater protection and opportunity for Asian Americans than did the earlier state of being “aliens ineligible to citizenship.” This concept recognizes that Asian American citizenship is meaningful and yet that it is vulnerable. Conditional citizenship is a fluid concept that invites historicization, unlike Gotanda’s more fixed concept of “citizenship nullification,” for instance. Thus in any historically specific situation, it is useful to identify which forces might align to qualify and/or shore up the political and national membership of Asian Americans. Will the continued dominance of the foreign-born among Asian Americans for the next several decades weaken the political standing of Asian Americans? Perhaps. But history suggests that even if immigration were to cease completely, third and fourth generation Asian Americans would continue to be seen as immutably foreign and politically suspect.

Looking into the future, what are the implications of conditional citizenship for Asian Americans and politics in the twenty-first century? How will variable demographic, social, and cultural forces

shape the meaning of Asian American citizenship and how might Asian Americans respond? Both domestic and international forces will figure prominently; I will discuss only a few. Consider emergent racial dynamics within the U.S. The growing numbers of Latinos will alter racial configurations, particularly in areas like California that also have large Asian American populations. On the one hand, as Latinos emphasize issues of concern to immigrants, such as bilingual education and immigration policy, there will be new opportunities to extend the alliances that Asian Americans and Latinos have already constructed over redistricting and other issues. On the other hand, as non-Latinos perceive emergent Latino political power as a looming threat, a rise in nativistic expressions is almost certain to occur. Even if these expressions focus explicitly on Latinos and not Asian Americans, they will influence immigration and other policies that profoundly impact both groups. Although the rhetoric surrounding the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 focused on Latino immigrants, the law had an adverse effect on many Asian Americans as well.

One factor that may strengthen Asian American citizenship is the Western “War on Terror” and its impact on the status of Arab and Muslim Americans. As Saito (2001) makes clear, the U.S. government and the media have, through the “War on Terror,” racialized these groups as intrinsically threatening and disloyal. One consistent theme in American history has been that spotlighting a particular group as a threat to the nation tends to cast other marginalized groups in a more favorable light, if only temporarily. During World War II, previously vilified Chinese Americans suddenly found themselves held up as a positive alternative to “Japs.” In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, many Black Americans reported that whites treated them more generously. Foreignness is a relative concept: there’s nothing like a supposed “Islamofascist” to make a Black person look truly American. If the racializing of Arab and Muslim Americans continues or intensifies, if Americans really come to believe they are engaged in a “clash of civilizations” with Islam, this could have the effect of making Asian Americans appear more American and as less of a threat. Even if Asian Americans led the charge against the vilifi-

cation of Arab and Muslim Americans, as Saito encourages them to do, they would still likely benefit from the comparative valuation, whether they wished to or not.

On the other hand, there are international developments that portend serious trouble for Asian Americans who, as conditional citizens, are struggling to assert their membership. The rise of China as a global economic and military powerhouse and competitor with the U.S. has implications for all Asian Americans. Japan's surge as an economic power in the 1980s led to significant tension between the U.S. and Japan. These tensions, combined with a domestic economic downturn, generated a surge of white racially motivated violence against Asian Americans. Vincent Chin was one casualty of this situation. The attitude that leading politicians and literati manifest toward China today is hauntingly familiar and mildly alarming. We hear that China is immune to moral reasoning (because it supports the Sudanese government committing genocide in Darfur and continues its domination of Tibet); it is ruining the planet (because its rapid industrialization has created serious environmental problems); it is spreading plagues (the SARS epidemic appears to have originated in China); it is undercutting American industry (by taking advantage of the "most favored nation" status and flooding the U.S. market with cheap goods); and it is trying to hurt Americans (by sending poisoned toothpaste, pet food, and toys to the U.S.). Jokes about poisonous goods from China have become a staple in late night comedy routines. In the American imagination, China has become the Dr. No of the globe, a mastermind plotting to destroy its enemies and conquer the world via myriad nefarious means.

It may be that the most powerful moves Asian Americans can make in response to conditional citizenship relate to political subject formation, or the definition of the 'we' in question. Consider the fact that conditional citizenship may well apply to other racialized groups (and arguably to other kinds of groups as well), not just to Asian Americans. For example, although the racialization of Asian Americans has differed in important ways from that of Black Americans, unconditional citizenship has eluded both groups. Black people were enslaved, denied citizenship under *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1854), and then granted political membership by the Reconstruction Amend-

ments, only to see these rights abrogated by the establishment of Jim Crow in the South. Black Americans are not cast as aliens beholden to foreign powers, but they are cast as aliens within their own land. In his story "The Space Traders," Derrick Bell (1992) suggests that whites will one day betray Black people spectacularly, in a manner evocative of slavery. Offered wealth, environmental rejuvenation, and bountiful energy sources by space aliens in exchange for the nation's Black population, white and other Americans would, according to Bell, mull it over briefly and then say yes. Constitutional and civil rights protections would be tossed aside and Black Americans would be rounded up, stripped, and chained before being forced onto the space ship. That the same story could be told about Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Arab and Muslim Americans, and others suggest that despite the specificity of their respective experiences, these groups may share the common plight of conditional citizenship. There may be untapped political potential here. If Americans of Asian, African, and Mexican descent were to approach the recent treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans as an assault upon 'us' rather than as a matter of little concern or an occasion for 'us' to stand up for 'them,' interesting new political configurations might emerge.

As Espiritu (1992) has shown, Asian American panethnicity or racial consciousness was constructed in the 1960s by people of various Asian origins as a response to being racialized as a single group (see also Espiritu in this volume). Forged in the crucible of white racism and nativism, Asian American panethnicity has come to be seen as a normative good, an achievement that literally birthed a community, the key to effective political action. The conventional narrative of panethnicity is exciting and heroic: Asian Americans constructed something from nothing and now struggle to keep panethnicity alive despite the centrifugal pressures of ethnic and diasporic identities, all in the name of group empowerment. However, panethnicity may reinforce foreignizing tendencies by suggesting that Asian Americans constitute a unitary group with distinct political interests from other Americans. Proponents of panethnicity are very clear that Asian Americanness is constructed, but the nuances of reactive identity formation are lost on the general public, who simply

perceive a culturally or racially distinct group asserting its unitary identity and interests. Along these lines, Asian Americans might want to avoid describing themselves in the very culturally and racially essentialist terms used by those seeking to restrict their citizenship. For instance, many Asian American elected officials and community leaders such as Michael Woo, Matthew Fong, and Changlin Tien have claimed that Asian Americans are uniquely poised as Pacific Rim players to serve as “bridge builders” between the U.S. and Asia. Evelyn Hu-Dehart (1999) rightly asks about the political risks of this kind of talk. Similarly, Arif Dirlik (1999) points out that the turn toward diasporic thinking in the academy tends to reify “Chineseness,” which both dehistoricizes identity formation and renders Chinese people aliens in their immediate contexts. While the short term gains purchased by racial essentialism are obvious up front, the long term costs are often overlooked and deserve more consideration.

Underlying the processes of subject formation is the question of substance: what does it mean, politically speaking, to be Asian American? What are Asian American political interests? Should Asian Americans continue to struggle to define a unitary set of group interests or instead let their individual interests or values define their group memberships and identities? Should Asian Americanness be the exclusive or even primary way of organizing political responses to the world? Since Asian Americans experience the world not only as Asian Americans but also as women, Los Angelenos, Americans, Vietnamese immigrants, teachers, workers, transnational capitalists, gays and lesbians, members of the Third World, etc., to what extent should they embrace multiple, simultaneous definitions of ‘we’ and join various political configurations only some of which are defined by panethnicity?<sup>ix</sup> “Civic” comes from the Latin *civis*, which means community. This raises the question: whom is Asian American “civic engagement” supposed to serve? Who is the community in question? Asian America? America? A global citizenry? Are energy issues, global food shortages, deforestation, species extinction, nuclear proliferation and other such issues best addressed through race-based politics? There is no distinctly Asian American position on global warming, but Americans of Asian descent can, along with others, em-

brace a ‘we’ built upon the profound understanding first, that the domination of nature and animals is linked philosophically, analytically, and practically to the domination of women, people of color, and others, and second, that the planet’s survival depends upon transforming all of these relationships.<sup>x</sup> Asian American “civic engagement” may turn out to refer to Asian Americans going beyond current frameworks and working to develop and nurture broader communities that are not racially defined. Denied full membership in the U.S. polity, Americans of Asian descent may yet claim it in a larger arena.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> We can of course distinguish between public position-taking and private ruminations. Some who espouse the “American Dream” narrative in public may have private doubts about whether racism will ever be conquered. My concern here is with the public positions and their implications.
- <sup>ii</sup> Robert Vrooman, former chief of security at Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory, has publicly stated that Lee was singled out because he was of Chinese descent. The short list of suspects contained names of other scientists with very similar profiles, but none other than Lee was of Chinese descent. See Volpp 2001, 81.
- <sup>iii</sup> To be clear, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s itself drew heavily upon the American creed (the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice) and described itself as seeking to make the American Dream a reality for Black Americans.
- <sup>iv</sup> Governor Locke delivered this keynote speech at the national conference of the Organization of Chinese Americans on June 29, 1996. It was later published in the 1998-1999 edition of the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*.
- <sup>v</sup> Others include Robert Chang, Mari Matsuda, and Keith Aoki.
- <sup>vi</sup> One example of an activist organization with this stance is Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV), based in New York City. See Kim 2004.
- <sup>vii</sup> There is no existing survey data that ascertains to what degree Asian American individuals subscribe to one or the other narrative. We cannot infer from the act of voting that an individual espouses the “American Dream” narrative because one can vote for the same reason that a nonbeliever might go to confession—“just in case”. Do immigrants lean toward the “American Dream”

perspective? Perhaps, since this would be consistent with the aspirational attitudes that lead them to migrate. Yet precisely because of their aspirations, immigrants may be the most likely to become disillusioned with politics, as many in the Korean immigrant community did after the Los Angeles uprising of 1992.

<sup>viii</sup> 1952 was the year when the bar on naturalization was lifted for Asian immigrants to the U.S.

<sup>ix</sup> Many Asian Americans already do this. I am posing a normative question, not a descriptive one.

<sup>x</sup> See ecofeminist works such as Plumwood (2002) and Kheel (2008).