

demeanor he didn't come up that way," Dorian said. "I'm telling him about my life story and how I come up from a bunch of tragedies."⁵⁶

What had been left unsaid? What else could he have told Mike? Questions were for the living, questions that could never be answered, but could never stop being asked.

Lives were complicated. The smallest things could trip you up. Those who could least afford it paid the most. Things could escalate in a heartbeat. The biggest mystery was how to turn it down without bowing down. And a life, in all its singularity and strangeness, was always worth the lifting, the telling, and the protecting, and never only for its fragility.

A couple-few cars passed them heading toward West Florissant. It was a Saturday in August, approaching high noon. They were almost home. A white Chevy Tahoe SUV marked "Ferguson Police" was just beyond the bend.

THE IN-BETWEENS

ON ASIAN AMERICANNESS

You went to college on the continent to become Asian American.

There were, as Jonathan Okamura once famously put it, no Asian Americans in Hawai'i. There were "Locals," there were Native Hawaiians, and there were *haoles*. Locals were the mostly nonwhite, often mixed-race sons and daughters who, during the early twentieth century, had forged a political and cultural identity oppositional to *haole* oligarchic rule. In that way, Native Hawaiians were always Locals. Locals weren't all Hawaiian. Some *haoles* were Locals. And if one had to ask, one wasn't a Local.

You were a Local. And by the time you were growing up in the spotless suburbs of east Honolulu, the *haoles* your age, especially the ones not descended from missionaries or politicians or profiteers, could call you "gook" and "chink" all they wanted, and it wasn't going to bother you. The words had no force, at least not in the way they might have to your parents or grandparents or great-grandparents. That was why *haole* kids had to push you around—to try to get you to pay attention.

You learned what it meant to be Asian American in Berkeley, California, where suddenly, significantly, you were a minority for the first time. When you rode home on your bike past the hippies in People's Park, they told you

to go back where you came from. On a Saturday night, frat boys swarmed you and your Chinese American friend, got in your face, ping-ponged the both of you around their circle while simultaneously shouting, "Get off our corner" and "We love you little guys." You went with the homies to the Cineplex to see Brandon Lee kick ass in *Rapid Fire*, only to have an easy evening end with white guys in a pickup truck hollering, "Fuck off you fuckin' chinks." You went days and weeks feeling like you had never been seen. You were conspicuous and invisible at the same time.

This was hardly the kind of bullwhip-and-machete, chafed-hands-and-stopped-back racism your ancestors survived. You were not even sure you could call it racism. Maybe it had just been drugs or drunkenness or testosterone or you weren't raising your hand high enough. But still, your body was registering a kind of a system shock. You drank, got high, talked louder and with more false certainty, overcompensated.

When your *maoli* forebears landed in the islands there had been no others. And when your Chinese forebears landed in the islands, the Kingdom of Hawai'i allowed any immigrant who had lived there for a year to become naturalized. There were no restrictions on who could be a citizen. Exclusion was for other countries, like the United States.

Your high school teacher Mr. Lee taught you that Chinese people had built civilizations while Europeans were still messing around in loincloths. (He was also the school disciplinarian, so you got to know each other well.) But your folks didn't rule anything. They harvested sugar and rice and watercress. They fought in boxing rings, delivered restaurant supplies, cooked for soldiers, fixed and

maintained American military equipment. They gave their neighbors fruit from their land. They bartered in the markets for meat. They died by runaway plow or intended bullet, their hearts gave out or the water took them. They survived overseers, bosses, gangs, each other.

Hawai'i's statehood campaign emerged at the same time as the Southern civil rights movement. In 1959, they were given a choice to vote to make Hawai'i a state. Two generations before, they had not been given a ballot but the threat of bullets. But they chose to vote for it. Many Locals saw statehood as a culmination of a nonviolent revolution against *haole* minority rule, offering some as-yet-nameless reward. Not everyone did, though, especially Hawaiians who knew what had been taken.

You were born into the generation after that vote, around the time that Asian Americans announced themselves in San Francisco and Los Angeles and Boston and New York. It was long before "Asian American" had been reduced to a demographic category. Back then the term was still a courageous provocation, like a black leather jacket or a brown beret.

On the continent, these angry young ones—most of them third-generation descendants of working-class East Asians—had invested in a Third World identity. They looked to anticolonial uprisings in Asia and Africa for inspiration. They spoke of revolution. They organized youths in Chinatown and Little Tokyo. They sold Mao's *Little Red Book* to the Black Panthers. They thought of Hawai'i the way some thought of the South or Aztlán, as a place where the answers were.

In 1980, Governor George Ariyoshi, the first Local Japanese man to rise to the highest post in the state, had given a soaring speech. In it he said,

It was here, in our red soil and black volcanic rock, that a new society was born. It was here that many from other societies gathered in disparate ways to start a new life and form a new society. It was here that sons and daughters of these early immigrants learned their lessons of tolerance and understanding and Americanism. It was here that they learned the verity that all men are truly created equal. . . . It was here that hard work and application were rewarded. This is the lesson of Hawai'i, and it is one that increasingly is being learned by the world.¹

You didn't know yet of these words, but in the islands these ideas were natural as salt-soaked trade winds. As you became Asian American, you figured that you had an advantage over all your friends born on the continent, even those who had come from countries where whites were also a minority.

Your peers in college were struggling to figure out who they were. They had been especially hobbled by the violence of negation, external and internal, everyday and irruptive. Some of them had never met another Asian apart from their parents. Some of them had never really known white people, growing up in what the professors called "ethnic enclaves." All this was unfamiliar to you. But you were there with them in Asian American Studies 20A, everyone trying to figure out what they had in common with the person sitting next to them. Together you were going to learn how to be Asian American.

There was an instability at the heart of Asian Americanness. Panethnicity, you learned, was a creation of the state—a provocation turned census category. The state had been blunt and overbroad. It lumped all kinds of

people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent together. It created new margins—if you were Filipino, Pacific Islander, South Asian, or Southeast Asian, were you really Asian? In classes, students debated fiercely: Did identity always need to be shaped from above? How can the object become the subject? Asian American Studies needed to constitute Asian American culture as much as it needed to describe it.

In your arrogance, your fury for living born of local pride, ignorance, and insecurity, you had it all figured out already. You thought maybe you didn't even need the class, but for the fact that that's where the girls were. Your swagger was a gift of birth. You and your folks put Ta-basco sauce in your saimin and ate your BBQ mix plate with chopsticks. You spoke your own pidgin: the sentences were structured as if spoken in Japanese, rich with loanwords from Hawaiian, Portuguese, Cantonese. You were a cultural chameleon, had spent a lifetime training in adaptation and code switching. Some days you probably felt like you came from superior stock. You wanted everyone, especially your Asian American friends, to come visit Hawai'i, see the proof.

Governor Ariyoshi gave that famous speech in 1980, during a period in which his government had come under fire from Filipino, Native Hawaiian, and Samoan activists who claimed that the state had discriminated against them in employment and educational opportunities.

The state administration was run predominantly by Local Japanese, Nisei who had come through the public schools at the height of the territorial Americanization campaigns. After World War II, this generation joined the

"Asian privilege" not out of concern for other people of color but because of a fear that whiteness itself might be eclipsed. What does it mean to be the evidence that racism is not real? To be fetishized by colorblind liberals and white supremacists alike? To be so innocuous that teachers and policemen and figures of authority mostly allow you the benefit of the doubt? To be desired for your fluid, exotic, futuristic, yielding difference? What does it mean to be the solution? For you, the Duboisian question is turned upside down. It haunts you.

Most of your life you have been in-between. The scholarship kid who wasn't a "hardship case" but still served your peers on the lunch line and wiped up after their cafeteria messes. The striver-class townie whose working-class grandparents lived in the country. The yellow face neither FOB nor ABC. The other nonwhite slammering in the mosh pit, cranking at the go-go, or getting down at the hip-hop jam.

You remember that children's rhyme. Actually, Rosie O'Donnell and Shaquille O'Neal reminded you:

Ching Chong Chinaman

Sitting on a fence

Trying to make a dollar

Out of fifteen cents

You remember trying to find your way between Black and white. You had taken every class you could with Ronald Takaki. He was the Seiji Ozawa of ethnic studies, a poof of white hair, a big laugh that shook his whole slender frame, an intensity that burned the sun. He had

grown up not far from you, gone to the same school you did. His voice reminded you of your folks, their rainbow optimism and sugarcane pace. He joked about his surfing prowess and talked story like your uncles. He had been one of the first professors of Afro-American studies at UCLA. He taught you about slavery, slaughter, repression, the white imagination, the American mosaic. He gave you signposts, analogs, dots to connect.

You followed Ling-Chi Wang, bespectacled and serious, an authentic Chinatown renegade who, along with his barricade-storming comrades in arms, had stood up to the American war machine, the Six Companies, and the Kuomintang. He had the mind and the aloof mien of a master strategist. You drew close to him when he disclosed in a near whisper all the elaborate plots that the powerful had hatched to deny Asian Americans our basic rights. When he told you of how the university had implemented plans to deny Asian applicants admission in order to please its white alumni, you pictured yourself as a soldier in an important battle.

It's these battles that continue to unsettle you. Dr. Wang had exposed a national trend among elite universities to cap admissions of Asian American students, not unlike what they had done two generations before to Jewish American students. Every pronouncement Dr. Wang made—which you and your fellow student activists repeated with less care and precision but much more fervor—was about fighting discrimination against people of color, preserving both affirmative action and a meritocracy that was supposed to treat white and Asian applicants equally. Soon, Asian American students were organizing all across the country—at UCLA, Brown, Yale, Stanford, Michigan, and elsewhere. They were ambushing

college presidents with pickets, writing papers that deconstructed the racial impact of admissions policies, organizing community town hall meetings.

You have noticed that nowadays they don't teach this history in Asian American Studies. It's not that heroic.

On matters of race, America teaches everyone to think in binaries—zero or one, this or that. There is no in-between. You know this, you refuse this, but you know how hard it is to complicate a conversation the Other prefers not to have.

You no longer believe in meritocracy. You believe now that merit is never neutral—what really is?—and that the rules are there mostly to preserve power. The right things happen for the wrong reasons. There are no pure worlds. There are only guiding values and the work of making spaces and identities in common. But it was not easy to learn this.

You thought it was a bougie Asian American thing to be most upset not when the rules are stacked, but when the rules are not followed. You mocked all the scare-quote “activists” organizing their campaigns against racist salespeople at the Acura dealer or “Ching-Chong” T-shirts at Abercrombie & Fitch. They were sold a colorblind consumer fantasy and they couldn't buy it. But you were the one who got your peers to change the name of your student activist group from the Student Coalition on Asian Admissions to the Student Coalition for Fair Admissions. And you wince now thinking about that, how fungible fairness is, how fungible bodies not yours are.

Back then, you thought anger was part of what it meant to be Asian American. Still, at the community forums, you were stunned by the immigrant parents' rage.

How dare they ruin our American dreams? We have only tried to play by the rules. You feverishly joined the fight. You wrote op-eds, you lobbied powerful men. You helped drag the chancellor into a state senate meeting where he was forced to lose face. The administration undid all the little rule changes that had led to the steep drop in Asian admissions. They appointed a patient, empathetic Sansei man to implement a new process that might be more transparent and race neutral.

But success had opened the door to the conservative right. They believed that fighting over the rules—like showing how hundreds of Asian applicants were eliminated from consideration when the university doubled the weighting of SAT English scores—was sandbox stuff. So after the battle was won on campus, national anti-affirmative action activists flattened the nuances, turned up the binaries.

They said that good Americans were being hurt by so-called quotas. You knew that when they pointed to Asians, they really meant whites. But soon you saw Asians filing lawsuits from San Francisco to Boston to undo public school desegregation orders and consent decrees. You knew most of Asian America favored affirmative action and opportunity programs by more than two to one.² But you were also learning that well-funded right-wing institutions knew how to use quotas when it suited them.

Demagogues quickly followed, mobilizing white electorates. More often than they lost, they won. Magnet high schools and “highly selective” universities became more Asian, sometimes even more Asian than white, while numbers of Black, Latino, American Indian, and Southeast Asians admitted plunged. And twenty years later,

whites were still three times as likely to be admitted to selective universities as Asians with a similar academic record.³

You felt dumb. You were the bougie Asian American. You were part of the ruination. You were Eldridge Cleaver's definition of the problem. Eventually you retreated, depressed and broken, from politics.

Gloria Anzaldúa, George Helm, and Jessica Hagedorn all realized that in-betweenness can create the stuff of epics. It is the mental geography through which we make the crossings that define us. It can also be a place of refuge. In Hawai'i, *pū'uhonua* were sites of mercy, where a warrior on the wrong side of the battle might find safety, where fugitives might find absolution. There, in between the space of the gods and the space of humans, they might rehabilitate and redeem themselves through moral, spiritual, and physical work. But these places were never meant to be places of permanent separation or disengagement. You did not go into a *pū'uhonua* to leave the world but to someday return to it. Unearned sanctuary is not a home.

These days, when demagogues talk about building walls, closing borders, checking papers, and sending people back where they came from, you think a lot about the story of Wong Kim Ark, a man who lived in between. He was born in 1873 and raised in the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown, long before it was a tourist curiosity, back when it was a segregated ghetto. In that era, Irish immigrant laborer Denis Kearney organized the Workmen's Party of California, which blamed Chinese labor for stealing jobs from white workers. By 1882, Kear-

ney had succeeded in getting Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Worried for their safety, Wong's family left after the Exclusion Act. But when he was seventeen, Wong decided to return to San Francisco, where he found work as a cook. In this way his story was like your own grandfather's, except that your grandfather's destination was Hawai'i. Wong returned again to China to marry and have a child and sailed back to the Bay Area in 1897. That's when he was detained. Wong was different from most other American-born Chinese only in that he decided to fight to have his citizenship recognized.

In the 1898 majority opinion, Supreme Court Justice Horace Gray wrote that the law was clear: "The [Fourteenth] Amendment, in clear words and in manifest intent, includes the children born, within the territory of the United States of all other persons, of whatever race or color, domiciled within the United States." The decision sealed the concept of birthright citizenship, an inextricable part of the foundation upon which present-day American diversity has been built. Indeed, its reliance upon the Fourteenth Amendment provided a perfect example of how the very idea of an immigrant or an Asian American is predicated upon the freedom struggle of African Americans.

The word "citizen" confers rights, rights that are invisible, that really appear only when they are denied. This is why Claudia Rankine has written of Blackness through the concept of "citizen," where the struggle to express the rights of citizenship too often outlives the body. You live in a racial state that formally denies difference, but in practice avows it, through the barrel of a gun or the conferring of papers.

The migrant is stateless, an embodied nowhere, a political nonbeing. But migration is what people do, on trains, as in Jacob Lawrence's great renderings, or on leaky boats or the undercarriages of buses you see in the flows of your mighty image stream. People migrate from hunger, war, poverty, hatred. They migrate because their homes have sunk, their homelands have been destroyed. They are no different from butterflies who migrate from the cold that would kill them. Sometimes, as with the Tohono O'odham, Apache, Yaqui, they become migrants because borders have crossed them. Sometimes they flee on rafts across the South China Sea, sometimes they die on rafts crossing the Mediterranean.

Migration is always a choice to live. The opposite of migration is not citizenship. It is containment, the condition of being unfree shared with all who are considered less than citizens. The migrant reminds the citizen of the rights that they should be guaranteed.

Nations are made of papers. Papers make the border. Papers also turn the migrant into the immigrant. The word "immigrant" is a formal legal term. It centers not the person, but the nation in which the person hopes to become a citizen. "Migration" centers bodies. "Immigration" centers bodies of law. The immigrant is therefore always troubled by the question of status: "legal" or "illegal." When the immigrant is between the migrant and the citizen, their freedom—and others' freedom, in turn—depends upon the answer.

How can a human being be illegal? Laws come from people. That is to say, they come from citizens. And yet what does it mean to be a citizen? Here you recall that there was a tragic coda to Wong Kim Ark's story. He had been declared a citizen at a time when the law denied the

right of naturalization to Asians not born in the United States. Yet later in life, Wong migrated back to China, never to return. In other words, he did what all those casual racists told you that they wanted you to do, over and again—to go back where you came from, except of course, like you, Wong had not come from China.

What does it mean to be in-between? It means one can afford to sit on the fence, decide not to take a stand, to always reserve the privilege—while the battle rages all around—to disengage. Did Wong disengage? You cannot be sure.

You have never been one to sit on the fence. But you constantly worry about what it means to engage. You have learned that between intention and liberation, a lot, maybe everything, can go wrong.

Two decades after Wong Kim Ark's case was settled, two men of Asian descent petitioned to become citizens. Neither Takao Ozawa, a Japanese American, or Bhagat Singh Thind, a South Asian American, had been born in the United States. Yet Ozawa had lived in Hawai'i and graduated from high school in Berkeley. Thind lived and worked in San Francisco. Their status was "illegal." Both sought naturalization. They were also in-between. Each of them petitioned to have the Supreme Court make them citizens because they were not Black, and so, they argued, they deserved to be afforded the rights of whites.

Both of them lost. Until the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, all but a tiny number of men, women, and children like Wong, Ozawa, and Thind would be able to become "legal." These cases still trouble you.

You have said to Asian Americans that it's time to get off the fence. It's time to declare your Asian American-ness. But where will you all land?

The University of California at Irvine was the first university outside of Hawai'i to become majority Asian American. During the 1990s, Asians and Blacks in the segregated fraternity and sorority system enjoyed rich exchanges, and out of this ferment sprang many of the first Asian American choreo dance groups influenced by hip-hop and Black Greek stepping.

Then came the decade. In 2013, a video of four frat brothers from Lambda Theta Delta, Irvine's oldest Asian American fraternity, surfaced on YouTube showing them lip-syncing to Justin Timberlake's "Suit & Tie." As it went viral, you and millions of others gaped in disbelief when a member came to mime Jay-Z's lines in blackface. At a place that seemed to have become the center, to borrow Long T. Bui's phrase, of Asian America's "model majority," the incident seemed proof that Asian Americans had just wanted to get down with Blackness until they could get up with whiteness.⁴

Late in 2014, Brooklyn rookie cop Peter Liang drew his gun while on a vertical patrol in an East New York housing project. He opened an eighth-floor door with the gun and, startled by a sound, fired a bullet into the unlit stairwell. It ricocheted and struck Akai Gurley, a young Black father, dead in the heart. Gurley had done nothing but decide not to take the elevator in the moment before Liang fired his gun. As Gurley lay bleeding to death, Liang offered no medical aid and fretted to his partner that he would lose his job.⁵

You had grown up around the Honolulu Police Department, where over the generations, the Queen's guardsmen and their descendants had gone to work. You knew what it meant to truly serve and protect. You had also lived,

worked, and experienced enough in the hoods of Cali to learn exactly what it meant to exist in fear of the police. You were outraged at Liang's recklessness and heartlessness.

But when he was indicted, months after the officer who had strangled Eric Garner was let off, you watched as Chinese American protesters raised signs saying "Justice for Peter Liang! Stop Scapegoating!" You read in disbelief the words of a spokesperson for a supposed Asian American civil rights coalition that no one had ever heard of before: "If it was not for Ferguson and not for Staten Island, Peter Liang might not have been indicted."

Did they really believe the killing of Akai Gurley should be less indictable because it came at the hands of an Asian American officer? Were they really arguing that if hundreds of thousands of people had not taken to the streets in a freedom movement against state violence, this Chinese American police officer would have been afforded all the privileges offered a white cop who had taken the life of a Black person? If they thought Liang's indictment was unfair, the real question was still: Compared to what? They wanted Peter Liang to be seen as white, and Asian Americans to be afforded all the privileges of whiteness.

When Liang was convicted, they cried out again over the supposed injustice of it all. But when Liang was sentenced, by an Asian American judge no less, to five years' probation, they were silent. Maybe, you mused, their protests had worked. Or maybe, even if they had not protested, it still would have gone this way. Soon Ja Du, the Korean American shopkeeper whose 1991 killing of fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins over a bottle of orange juice was fuel for the fire that became the Los Angeles

riots, had also been sentenced to five years' probation. Like Liang, she never served a day in prison.

One night you are in a public panel discussion in San Francisco about the TV show *Fresh Off the Boat*, of all things, and you find yourself redirecting a question about whether Eddie Huang is guilty of cultural appropriation because of his use of hip-hop. The crowd has leaned in, because you are the Asian American face of hip-hop scholarship, or some such shit like that. And you catch yourself wanting to talk about how Asian Americans are guilty of much worse than rocking a backward snapback and above-the-knee shorts with sockless high-tops. Through their successful anti-desegregation lawsuits, they have made The City's premier high school 65 percent Asian, and destroyed equal opportunity for Blacks and Latinos. Asian Americans are the least segregated racial group in the region and in the country, and there are some in the community who would use that power to make things worse for other communities of color. But saying all this might not be wise. So instead you mumble something vague about resegregation in The City, and when the event is over you're still troubled. Why did you hold back?

An older Chinese American woman comes up to talk to you, practically runs up on you, and says she wants to ask what you meant by resegregation. She says that her husband is an activist, does great things for the community, and is a leader of the efforts to support Asian Americans in the public schools by getting rid of "quotas" for Blacks and Latinos. You're horrified. You tell her you disagree with her husband. As she stares at you, you hear yourself telling her that you don't believe he is doing anything to help Asian Americans.

"I want to know what is wrong," she retorts, her eyes growing wide and her voice rising, "with wanting to protect our people from discrimination?"

It's over. You want to walk away from her at this point. You want to walk away from being Asian American.

You know her story just by hearing her Sunset District accent, by seeing the stress lines on her face. You recognize this anger. All those times they were taunted, beaten, humiliated in the schoolyard or the street, all those people in authority who made them feel subhuman, all those jobs or homes they never got because of the color of their skin, all those times they played by the rules only to see a white person get ahead. You can feel her rage. Or rather, you think you can feel her rage. Maybe in this moment you're not really Asian American.

And now you should shut the fuck up and go home, but you can't. You tell her the days are over when Asian Americans should think only in terms of their self-interest, that Asian Americans ought to think about what it means to fight for justice and equity for all. You ask her, quite loudly and quite rhetorically, if she wants to defend a public school system in which the resources are allocated disproportionately to Asian Americans. Is that what she wants? Because if that's what she wants, that's not your idea of an equal and just society.

You feel good. You know you're right. Of course you're right.

Now she's shouting at you and people are staring. The crowd that has gathered looks at her with a bit of pity, not because they have any idea what the two of you have been arguing about, but because your provocations have made her emotional. That's when you finally walk away.

But later, when the night is over, you can't help but ask yourself: Who is the real Asian American here?

You went to college on the continent and became Asian American.

You tried it on like a suit and tie, or a suit of armor, and it fit OK. You got older and your body changed. It grew wings and calluses. The suit felt too tight. You left it in the closet and laced back up your Adidas.

You held close the ideals of your teachers and the people you admired—Grace Lee Boggs, Yuri Kochiyama, Fred Korematsu. But you worried that their names would sound dry on your lips, because you didn't have the words yet to say what you really wanted to say. You wanted an identity that would be not just a weapon but a tool, something that would not just bludgeon but build, that would not only justify your pain—inherited and accumulated—but let you stay open to the world, let you connect and grow.

You had children and they clarified you. Chinese, Filipino, and Hawaiian blood coursed through them. Things had not changed that much. They would still be seen as their grandparents and parents had been seen. But when you saw and heard your son stand in the spotlight before a mic telling audiences his family's stories, you knew that things had changed enough for them to know that their eyes were never too small, nor their noses too wide, their skin too brown, their bodies too weak, their minds incapable.

When you were their age, you weren't so sure. They had already surpassed the grand Asian Americanness of your youthful imagination. Now you hope they and their

peers are learning to see everyone in their full humanity—their difference, their beauty, their glory; that they are learning compassion and a sense of proportion, learning to see beyond their own pain toward other people's suffering, toward the real justice they and those with whom they share this vision might be able to create together.

You know now that there has to be an ethics of identity, an expansive, moral design to the way one lives. When they choose to fight, because you know that someday they will have to, you hope it will not be merely for greater numbers and more power if those numbers lead away from equity, if that power is used to perpetuate injustice and inequality. You hope that they will know the only thing worth fighting for, as Grace Lee Boggs taught you, is to "create more human human beings and more democratic institutions."

WE GON' BE ALRIGHT
NOTES ON RACE AND RESEGREGATION

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