

The Language of Identity

GRACE POORE

The term “woman/women of color ” is widely accepted in the United States and Canada as a category to distinguish nonwhite women from women of European ethnicity. It implies the politicization of definition—where women whose legacy of oppression as a by-product of racism can assert their difference from the privileged norm of whiteness. In nearly the same way, other terms denoting identity have become a part of nonmainstream and, in some instances, also mainstream vocabulary: such as South Asian, Latina, woman with disability, undocumented resident.¹

In this essay, I question the ongoing usefulness of terms, born out of struggles to assert ethnoracial identities, to those they are meant to empower because we (as minority and majority) have taken these terms so much for granted that we not only excuse co-optation of culture and the language of identity by white people of varying shades of political and cultural correctness, but we also overlook misappropriation of the struggle for language of identity by communities of color.

To illustrate my points, I will juxtapose different situations within the United States as well as draw analogies between situations in the United States and situations in Malaysia. In a country like Malaysia, where I was born and raised, the multiethnic makeup of society is organized according to cultural grouping. Nonanglicized names are the easiest markers of whether a Malaysian is Chinese, Malay, or South Asian. Our names are particular to our

ethnicity: Wong Wai Sum is Chinese, Rani Parameswaran is South Asian, Zakiah Abdullah is Malay. Even with an anglicized first name, it is easy to identify a Malaysian's ethnicity and, usually, religious background by her family name: Jessica Wong, Alice Parameswaran, Phoebe Abdullah. Similarly, Malaysians can almost always identify each other by look: Chinese look Chinese, Malays look Malay, and South Asians—well, we do not look Chinese or Malay; we look South Asian.

Most Asians in Asia, or wherever in the diaspora we may be living, are not familiar with or choose not to use the term "South Asian." I became familiar with the term in the late 1980s and have found it useful for describing people from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In fact "South Asia" seemed more appropriate than "Indian subcontinent" because it shifts the geographic frame of reference from one country (India) to a whole region made up of ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse peoples. Yet I could not quite extend the usage of "South Asian" to Malaysians even if many of us shared the ancestral heritage of the region.

My partner, who is from Sri Lanka, has in the past teased me about calling myself a Malaysian Indian when it is only my mother's side of the family that is Indian, specifically Indian Tamil, while my father's side of the family is Sri Lankan Tamil. The particular irony of this misidentification is that on my birth certificate, I am only defined by my father's Ceylon Tamil heritage, but according to Malaysian census takers, I am only defined by my mother's (no longer Tamil, but generic) Indian heritage. Until 1990 therefore, I was happily calling myself a Malaysian Indian because that was all there was—the only box to check off on all official Malaysian documents: Malay, Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, Other.

Despite the Malaysian policy of collapsing all South Asians into one category, South Asians in Malaysia make sharp distinctions, often acrimoniously, among one another—a practice less motivated by identity politics and more by ethnic chauvinism. This chauvinism manifests itself in the mutual stereotyping that goes on among each of these communities about the other's inferiority (and therefore its own superiority) regarding character, educational achievement, work ethic, and upward mobility.

For instance, during a family visit three years ago, I listened to my brother-in-law, a lower-middle-class (Indian) Tamil, express great pleasure at the Sri Lankan government's intent to bomb Jaffna. He felt justified in this pleasure because he clung to a historic "Indian Tamil" grudge against the high and mighty "Jaffna Tamil" arrogance. My brother-in-law's vituperative relationship with Malaysians of Sri Lankan (also read Jaffna) Tamil heritage is

based on collapsing the distinctions between Sri Lanka and Malaysia—and between two historically connected but also different communities, one in South Asia and one in diaspora. My brother-in-law is not an exception in Malaysia or among South Asians there. The old tensions which thrive on his side of the family disturb, but do not surprise, me. My Jaffna Tamil paternal grandmother, for example, was extremely vocal in her disdain for Indian Tamil people, including my mother, who she believed was inferior by virtue of caste and class. Ironically, my mother's family is from a higher caste than my grandmother's, but this was lost on my grandmother, whose views about Indian Tamils were "colored" by the status they were assigned as laborers in the plantation sectors.

Communist tendencies among Malaysian South Asians are exacerbated by the different "immigration" histories of each community of South Asians who came to Malaysia. These histories determined the kinds of jobs people had, the respect they could demand, and the "power" they could exercise within the confines of British-instituted immigrant hierarchy. The vast majority of Indian Tamils who first came to Malaysia were brought as indentured labor by the British East India Company to work the rubber plantations of British-occupied Malaya. The later wave of Malayalee Indians, who came from the South Indian coastal state of Kerala, were better educated and brought by the British to serve as foremen and middle management on rubber plantations. The Tamil and Sinhala people from Sri Lanka (to date, still referred to by others and themselves as Ceylonese) were not only better educated but also came mainly as immigrants to take up jobs in the British-run civil service—the railways, post office, telecommunications, and electricity board, for example. The Punjabi community from India came as later immigrants in search of new opportunities, many of them farmers who also instituted loan schemes for the growing South Asian population. In time, the composition of Indians grew—Sindhis, Bengalis, Kannada people, and, after independence, a small community of Gurhka people from Nepal, whose men were conscripted by the British army.

Despite this cultural mix, the largest South Asian communities in Malaysia are the descendants of Malayalees, Punjabis, and Tamils from India, and the Jaffna Tamils from northern Sri Lanka. These communities make up the bulk of what is classified as Malaysian Indian. Given the science and practice of keeping inventories, it is not surprising that the British during their occupation, and the Malaysian bureaucrats who have followed since, chose expediency over accuracy in categorizing all those who came "from that part of the world" as Indian.

The relationships among diaspora communities is shaped and mediated by politicized struggle. So is the language of politicized kinship. It was not until I came to the United States and met South Asians from South Asia and those born in the United States that I became increasingly irritated when all South Asians were referred to as Indian because we looked, well, "indian." Suddenly, as a matter of preserving my identity, which hinged on preserving distinctions, I dropped the "Indian" in my introductions and became a Malaysian Tamil. Then my partner's ribbing prompted me to take back the hidden Sri Lankan part of my identity, so that now I am a South Asian of dual Tamil heritage born and raised in Malaysia. This is a mouthful, but at least it is accurate.

Like the term "Indian" the U.S. term "of color" has also become a catch-all expression. It lumps women of various cultures and ethnicities into one group, a consequence of which is that employers, funders, and university officials (to name a few obvious culprits) who prefer some colors over others can simply use the term "of color" as a smoke screen to exclude certain colored people who are on the wrong side of the culture line. What a great way for us to be co-opted into a system that makes us feel included. And what a cop-out on our part to feel we've managed to "colorize" an office, a panel, a department, a funder's agenda—when the concept of multi-ethnicity that should be embedded in the words "of color" is conveniently ignored.

The term "women of color" was never about demographics. It was always a political definition. It was always about agency. Over time, however, it has become a demographic indicator, a matter of constituency. Consequently, irrespective of whether we are in New England, the South, or the California coast, the term "of color" is used like an honorific title to signify "inclusion" when often all it does is indicate, "not all white." But which non-white women are being included, and how many from which community are being included? These questions are never resolved when I see "women of color encouraged to apply." Rather, experience has shown that the job-candidate search has often been aimed at finding one particular color—to balance out the white ratio, not complete the rainbow.

As with "Indian" in Malaysia, "of color" denies distinctions of heritage, immigration history, nationality, language, and cultural practices. It disaffirms the different complexities involved in claiming identities. It connotes sameness when in fact there is multiplicity. It imposes oneness when in fact the dynamics of hegemony also operate among "minority" communities. It implies solidarity where, often, there is division. As with "Indian" in Malaysia, it unregisters internal borders.

"Of color" is not the only suffix to grow out of race politics that is caught in the cross fire between inclusion and nationalism. The term "Asian," which should include South Asians, continues to privilege East or Southeast Asians, rendering South Asians as the nonexistent Asians among Asians and non-Asians alike. I have actually talked to East Asians who do not consider South Asians to "be" Asians because they have never recognized "that part of the world" to be part of Asia. Rather, they see South Asia and South Asians to be "off by themselves somewhere." On the other hand, the term "South Asian," which seemed like a perfect solution to encompass the multiplicity of South Asian communities has slowly been co-opted, frequently by Indians who have fallen prey to and reflect Indian hegemony even beyond the subcontinent. As a consequence, South Asians from Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, or Africa are excluded from and in turn exclude themselves from the gatherings, collaborative projects, and political alliances being formed by an increasingly visible and vocal South Asian community in movements for gay rights, women's rights, and college students' rights in the United States. These exclusions further limit the geopolitical perspectives of the South Asian diaspora in the United States to North America, North American Indian, or both.

Not long ago, a Canada-based South Asian from Singapore exclaimed, "I am so glad that you are from my part of the world!" and began speaking in Malay to reestablish a cultural connection that the North American–South Asian diaspora had not provided her. "I am not a South Asian," she said in despair, "I am a bloody Singaporean. I eat with chopsticks." Although I could understand what this young woman was going through, I also realized in that moment that in Singapore, with its Chinese majority and Chinese ethnic chauvinism, she would not have been treated as just Singaporean but as uncategorically Indian, just as in Malaysia, with its Malay majority and Malay nationalism, I am always treated as Indian. Yet, for both of us, the classification "Indian" back home meant something different from what it meant here, in North America. Back home, our being Indian was reason for discrimination. In North America, being Indian was to be assumed for another.

"Asian American" is another term that was born out of political consciousness and struggle. Within the context of identity struggles in the United States, this naming recognizes the rightful place in the United States of Asians who are American. It also challenges the assumption that many Americans make about Asians as "not being really from the United States" when the reality is that several generations of Asian people in the United States have been born and raised here or became naturalized citizens more than twenty years ago.

While U.S. acceptance of the identity "Asian American" is another

victory in the struggle for setting the record straight in U.S. social history, the term, unfortunately, subsumes those of us who are Asian but not American. It imposes a false identity on those of us who have chosen deliberately not to become citizens of the United States for our own political reasons. When I pointed out to one Asian American that I was an Asian but not American who happened to be living in the United States, he retorted, "You are ghettoizing us." Only an Asian who is American could dare to diminish historical and cultural differences and claim my Asia as his. Only an American who is Asian could misappropriate the support I give to Asian-American struggles by refusing to recognize that my being who I am can co-exist with who he is. Only American chauvinism could conveniently glide over the reality that the United States is a superpower that exercises considerable exploitative economic and military power over many countries in Asia.

Cultural chauvinism is a precursor to "othering" our own and ourselves. It is the unspoken, unconscious justification for the East Asian/South Asian split in many parts of the world, the North American Indian/rest of South Asian diaspora split in the United States, the splits among and against people of mixed Asian heritage because of the Asia they do or do not have.

The assumption that all Asians in the United States want to be identified as Asian American negates our right to be in the United States without becoming American. It presumes our allegiance to Asian-American politics, which in some communities is so United States-centric that I've been appalled. Furthermore, dubbing all Asians in the United States as Asian American overlooks the reality that many Asian Americans know nothing about Asia, Asian history, and Asian cultures—making their ignorance about and stereotyping of people from Third World Asia as offensive as stereotyping by Euro-Americans and African Americans.

Not long ago, during a telephone conversation, I heard a new term that apparently has grown out of what I think is the tendency to "morph" identity politics into interchangeable "isms." The term was "woman of diversity." Talk about political chic! Whoever coined "woman of diversity" has "de-identified" the personal altogether. If "of color" turns our shades and identities into an indistinguishable brown, "of diversity" certainly completes the homogenization. The term could refer to a woman of different cultural heritage, a woman with a disability, a lesbian, an indigenous woman of the First Nation, a woman living with HIV/AIDS, or a woman living at the intersection of any number of these identities. Perhaps the intent of this term is to signal difference and acknowledge inclusion simultaneously. Yet all it does is erase difference, which in turn, makes inclusion redundant.

One of these days, there will be (perhaps it already exists) the term "post-woman of color" where "post" could be a statement about race, gender, and/or sexuality, so that "she" need not be woman-born woman or woman with non-Caucasian ethnicity. It has been pointed out to me that—since even before the antiessentialist debates, lesbians have been passing as heterosexual, women of color have been passing as white, and women have been passing as men—the concept of essential woman or, for that matter, lesbian of color is antiquated. Yet the fact remains that women are being raped, battered, and killed solely for being women, and lesbians of color are, as activist-organizer Diana Onley-Campbell observes, "the fringe of the fringe because of our color, our gender, and for many because of our economic class."

For me, language was never meant to be a culmination, only a movement toward transformative change. Yet the language and concepts of identity politics related to race have started to feel static. They appear to lag behind the realities of whom racism affects and how it affects different people differently. They prioritize racism (the racial bigotry by white people toward people of color, backed by institutional, political, and economic power) without confronting cross-racial hostility, racialism, and the violence of racialism.²

Take, for instance, the discourse of "claiming our (racial/cultural) identity." In a country like the United States, where capitalism intersects with so-called race awareness, exploiting third world cultures, and spiritualities pass for ethnic chic or multicultural liberalism. Somewhere along the process of asserting cultural pride, people of color have begun commodifying our own and other colored (particularly geographic Third World and indigenous) people's cultures. It is trendy to "credit-card" our way into someone else's spirituality and traditional health practices, with only a surface understanding of that spirituality or health tradition. It even seems permissible to misappropriate symbols and rituals out of context—"I like elephants" becomes the consumerist justification for buying a statue of Ganesh.

If we call white people's appropriation and commodification of our cultural legacies colonization, what do we call it when people of color commodify their own ancestral heritages? After all, people of color do have private import-export businesses in "native" artifacts. We do participate in corporate America's far-reaching multinational exploits. The reality is that U.S. people of color are also involved in the colonization of people in the geographical Third World—be it through economic ventures or military aggression (one cannot forget Vietnam and Iraq).

In the arts and academic arenas, multicultural liberalism comes in the form of funders, publishers, museum curators, educators, communications

experts, and racism managers who are not only white men but also white feminists, not only white people but also people of color—men and women, heterosexual and lesbian. I have heard people of color argue that a white blitz is attempting to gain access to the resources and gain control of the discourse on oppression, including racism. I have certainly seen this scenario play itself out in conferences and at the workplace. But by participating in multicultural exchange at the level of tokenism or exhibitionism, we allow ourselves to become color rations; we willingly become Benetton's color-coded people, with all the ethnic accessories, while remaining "minority," on multiple levels.

As women of color in the United States, we are all, on many levels, expendable to a system (irrespective of whether we are undocumented residents or documented residents, whether we are U.S. born or visitors, whether we have a green card or citizenship). For those of us who look or sound foreign, we are even more suspect; we are "aliens." The current anti-immigrant backlash not only throws back in our faces the distinctive identities we have tried to create but also increases arbitrary racist responses—overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, by white people. Anyone not perceived to be "American made" has equal opportunity to be subjected to American xenophobia—be it from the racist/racialist bus driver, school teacher, police officer, immigration officer, college loans administrator, or supermarket check-out clerk. They feel they can now show us how our difference is a threat to their identity—their country, their flag—all this fed by congressional reforms that scapegoat the black, brown, and yellow peoples who come to the United States.

As is often typical in situations where some groups of people viewed as suspect by a majority turn against one another to vie for favored status, I have heard some South Asian immigrants, with upper- and middle-class economic privilege, blame "those who can't speak English, have no education, and come in illegally" for giving "immigrants like us" a bad name. They blame welfare fraud on "Latina women with no job skills and African-American women with too many children." They blame high unemployment on lazy people of color—those others who are unlike them. The system has always ranked foreigners as "acceptable" and "unacceptable" by color, class, gender, and country of origin. This callousness is inevitable from a callous system. But when we who are the foreigners start ranking immigrants "like us" against immigrants "like them" and colored people "like us" against colored people "like that," we become dangerous to one another. At the end of the day, the distinctions we make will not protect our rights or our dignity from U.S. politicians and their constituencies who view foreign-sounding, foreign-

looking people as "the problem" no matter how well-behaved we might be. At the end of the day, any community of color can end up being the wrong color, with or without citizenship.

I am not surprised that the splintering within communities of color, combined with a virulently conservative Congress and a cleverly choreographed right-wing backlash, has created a despair among many of the activists working on rights for people on the basis of identity politics. This despair appears to have also claimed activists who are using cross-issue frameworks not limited to identity politics. A frequent complaint is: "Identity politics are getting in the way of forging a common agenda."

Identity politics are dangerous if they become the goal and not an organizing tool for social justice. Without constant vigilance, they are a process for rights-based organizing that can be co-opted and eventually corrupted. However, blaming the lack of a common agenda on multivocal politics begs the questions: How can we have a common agenda in the first place when significant numbers of people continue to be imagined out of community, strategies, and solutions? For whom would the common agenda be when differences in power and privilege among us have not been acknowledged and acted on in a consistent manner? What is it that is common among us? Who is the "us"? Who gets to talk?

We cannot form alliances by pretending that our differences do not exist. When alliances fail, it is not because there are different agendas but because groups with different identities clash over their different agendas—coalition politics fall apart when identity politics begin, but only when the politics being touted in the first place are infused not with desire for shared power but a "rattle-the-chains" approach to power: whoever rattles the loudest gets to hold the scepter temporarily.

In 1993, at the retreat of the Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Network (APLBN), out of 145 participants, seven were native Pacific Islanders. After the last day's plenary, a native woman from Hawaii confronted the network about paying lip service to the "P" in APLBN. She said that Asian members of the network used the terms "Asian" and "Pacific Islander" as if they were interchangeable, when in reality they are not. Her challenge to those of us who were not Pacific Islanders was: Make the network a space for both Asians and Pacific Islanders; otherwise take the "P" out. As a member of APLBN, I feel that the network should include Pacific Islander issues on our agenda whether or not we decide to keep the "P" in our name. There are several reasons for my position, but I will name two. First, Hawaii is a U.S. colony and several of the Pacific Islands have served as U.S. nuclear

testing sites. Therefore, Asian-American members in the network have a responsibility to confront their government's actions in the Pacific Islands. Second, indigenous people's land rights are no longer an issue that only white people can be held responsible for. For instance, I have to ask what my responsibilities are toward Native Americans, on whose land I am currently residing. Likewise, Asian lesbians and bisexual women who vacation in Hawaii (as people from so many other cultures do) need to confront the reality that while hotels and tourist companies carry on a booming business on the islands, many native peoples of Hawaii are denied access to their own land, decent wages, adequate medical care, and housing. We also have to confront the reality that within the multitiered society that exists in Hawaii, native Hawaiians are on the bottom—below whites, non-Asian Americans, and Hawaiians of Asian and/or mixed Asian descent. In my opinion then, the goal of the APLB network to bridge the divide between the different Asian lesbians and bisexual women in the United States would be in keeping with bridging the divide between those who are Asians and those who are Pacific Islanders on the U.S. mainland and annexed islands.

During the confrontation by the Pacific Islanders, I remember wondering how many people present that day recalled a similar confrontation by South Asian lesbians four years earlier in 1989. The South Asians were tired of being excluded by East Asians in the network, just as the Pacific Islanders were tired of being erased by the Asians. They had demanded from the network a commitment to stop the East Asian tendency to marginalize South Asians within the network. In 1993, when the Pacific Islanders raised their concerns at the retreat, South Asian concerns had still not been dealt with. So there we were—playing musical chairs with whoever felt most marginalized at a particular gathering until one group exploded, the confronted parties cried and apologized, and business went back to usual.

I use this example to point out that the confrontations by one community of color can sometimes be experienced by people from other communities of color as little more than dramatic theater, an opportunity for cathartic release, where the protest or walkout is reduced to an end in itself. Often this is precisely the outcome when white people are confronted about racism. Perhaps because of this, I expect more from communities of color. I expect East Asians to better understand the myopia of narrow ethnic politics in a multiethnic setting. I expect African-American women to better grasp the parochialism of Afrocentrism in a women of color setting. I expect South Asians to shun racialism any time, all the time.

The language of identity, when shorn of its political implications, is counterproductive to community organizing because it ends up glossing over the intricacies of different struggles. It feeds into reductive politics. It stops us from dealing with the challenge of making present the absences in our midst—not only of diverse voices but also of diverse perspectives. Basically, it mires us in bad process.

To clean up this process, I recommend the following: Counter coalition politics that degenerate into majority rule. De-center those who claim to represent us by banking on their "minority" status as a justification for the abuse of their power and authority. Intervene in situations when "angrier, louder" women use verbal combat to bully other women into silence. Question activism that neutralizes confrontation with imposed harmony. Intervene when "quiet diplomacy" kills issues that are deemed less pivotal to the struggle. Instead of pandering to it, confront the guilt induced by anti-oppression politics. While fighting for the rights we do not have, we need to recognize the privilege we do have and use it to make a difference in the lives of others without that privilege. And for many of us who have no choice, keep on voicing and pushing for accountability even if we are one out of many, few out of a majority.

The struggle to come up with language often mediates other struggles for rights and justice—all the more reason that it reflect the spirit and uncompromising integrity of shared resistance.

Notes

1. An undocumented resident is someone without legal immigration status in the United States and is labeled "alien" or "illegal alien" by the state, media, statisticians, and policymakers. Unfortunately, many activists and so-called progressive individuals also resort to the terms "alien" and "illegal alien" for convenience, with little thought to the racist connotations of such categorizing. Although the term "undocumented resident" is meant to describe a person's immigration status, to become undocumented is in fact to take on and live out an identity that for many people involves discrimination, marginalization, and demonization.
2. I use "racialism" here to refer to the power and position that one community of color uses against another community(ies) of color. In many parts of the world, where there are no white people, the dynamics of racialism work in nearly the same way as racism does in the United States. Despite the ongoing legacy of racism in the United States, I think that racialism is also alive and well here in some parts of the country. Just because white people have the power to be racist

does not automatically mean that different communities of color therefore have no power to be racist among one another—or should be excused for their bigotry, particularly when it causes and creates ethnic conflict and racist hatred. Consequences of racism include discrimination, callous treatment of others, and cross-racial violence. While holding white people accountable for their racism, we must hold each other accountable when there is racism.

Being “Amreekan” FRIED CHICKEN VERSUS CHICKEN TIKKA

NAHEED HASNAT

*Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds,
The Compassionate, the Merciful,
King of the Day of Judgment
'Tis Thee we worship and Thee we ask for help.
Guide us on the straight path.
The path of those whom Thou has favored,
Not the path of those who incur Thine anger
Nor those who go astray.
Quran, Surah 1:1*

God, Don't Let It Be Some Stupid, Misguided Muslim

While I was watching the five o'clock news on April 19, 1995, my eyes tried to absorb the devastation the Oklahoma bombing had caused. The massive bomb, placed inside a rental truck, had blown half of the nine-story Murrah Federal Building into oblivion. One hundred and sixty people died that day, many of them young children. It was deemed the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil. After I took in the devastation, the next thought that raced through my mind was, “God, don't let it be some stupid, misguided Muslim.” The memory of the World Trade Center bombing was once again reawakened in me, as well as in the rest of the nation, as the media, in its pursuit to find the “truth,” began to link the incident to an Islamic fundamentalist conspiracy. Muslim-Americans around the country held their breath, waiting fearfully for what might happen if the blame was laid at the feet of a Islamic terrorist group.

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