

# 43 Rethinking Alliances: Agency, Responsibility, and Interracial Justice

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RECENT writing on coalition-building tends to be ahistorical, focusing primarily on a search for "common ground"—the necessity and difficulty of locating common political-economic interests between Korean Americans and African Americans, for example. Or, it focuses on culture—fostering understanding of differing group cultural behaviors—or on social structure—exploring ways in which dominant institutions construct racial conflict. These focuses yield important insights. They, however, also constrain the field of inquiry; they tend to obscure a foundational component of groups living peaceably and working politically together.

That foundational component is interracial justice. Interracial justice, as I conceive it, reflects a commitment to anti-subordination *among* nonwhite racial groups. It entails a hard acknowledgment of the ways in which racial groups have harmed and continue to harm one another, along with affirmative efforts to redress these harms with continuing effects. Interracial justice includes two related dimensions. One is conceptual, requiring a recognition of situated racial group power, and consequently constrained yet meaningful group agency in addition to corresponding group responsibility. The second dimension is practical. It entails messy, shifting, continual, and often localized processes of interracial healing.

## **Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians: Apology and Redress**

In summer 1993 Asian American groups called for an Asian American apology to Native Hawaiians and for multimillion dollar reparations. Those Asian American groups represented churches within the Hawai'i Conference of the United Church of Christ. Their call for redress, offered as a resolution at the Hawai'i Conference's 171st Aha Pae'aina (annual meeting), complemented an-

other pending resolution of apology on behalf of the entire multiracial Conference for the participation of white missionary predecessors in the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. In their resolution, the Asian American groups recalled Asian disapproval of the dethroning of Queen Liliuokalani in 1893 by white business and religious leaders supported by United States officials and an American warship. They also acknowledged "a certain bond" between Hawaiians and Asians during the first half of this century as social-economic-political outsiders in white oligarchically controlled Hawai'i. They also addressed 100 years of oftentimes oppressive group interactions—confessing that "we as Asians have benefitted socially and economically by the illegal overthrow" of the sovereign Hawaiian government and that "[m]any Asian Americans have benefitted while disregarding the destruction of Native Hawaiian culture and the struggles of Na Kanaka Maoli."<sup>1</sup>

The Asian American groups then addressed current relationships arising out of those historical interactions—"a particular dynamic . . . between Native Hawaiians and Asian Americans, rooted in mutual misunderstanding and mistrust," resulting in the "use of stereotypes and caricatures to demean and dehumanize" and giving rise to the persistence of "racist attitudes and actions." Finally, while acknowledging ambiguity as to "motives, results, characterizations, and causes of the events [surrounding the overthrow]," the Asian American groups focused on "the anguish of our Native Hawaiian sisters and brothers" within and beyond the Conference and sought to begin a "process of repentance, redress, and reconciliation," offering "our support to their struggle for justice."<sup>2</sup>

From one vantage point, by proposing an apology and reparations, those Asian American groups were seeking to live out religious beliefs about "peace and justice." From another, they were seeking to alter Asian American relationships with Hawai'i's indigenous people by addressing racial status and position and "how structures and strategies of domination created under colonialism are transferred and redeployed by the formerly colonized."<sup>3</sup> From both perspectives, the Asian American groups were employing theology and law to rearticulate racial identities relationally and thereby to build bridges between groups. They were endeavoring to address perceived injustice, historical and contemporary, arising out of relations between two racial groups as a foundation for contributing to social structural change in Hawai'i. In effect, they were attempting to give new meaning to the legally constructed, internally dissonant racial category of Asian Pacific American.

Anonymous hate phone calls and heated debate in several other largely Asian American churches preceded formal presentation of the finished resolution to all 120 churches at the Conference's Aha Pae'aina. The resolution's attempt to cast reconciliation in terms of relations between Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians met immediate challenge. Ministers and congregations contested any unified meaning of Asian American. One congregation comprised primarily of fourth- and fifth-generation Chinese Americans was outraged by the resolution, finding it both demeaning of Hawai'i's Chinese Americans and lacking in moral

("I didn't do anything wrong") and legal ("what right do they have") justification. The largely Korean American churches tended to express indifference, hinting that any responsibility for complicity in the white-controlled oppression of Native Hawaiians in the first half of the century lay with Japanese and Chinese Americans. The Samoan American churches stood silent, leaving unexpressed feelings of present-day discrimination against Samoans by others, including some Native Hawaiians. Clergy of the self-identified Hawaiian churches in the Conference and congregation members, most of whom were of some combination of Hawaiian, Asian, and white ancestry, expressed wide-ranging views about the significance of, and indeed need for, an apology and redress from the Conference generally and Asian American churches specifically. Others observed that mixed ancestry blurred the lines between "Hawaiians" entitled and not entitled to benefit from reparations.

The passionate testimony of an eighty-year-old Chinese American minister, formerly of a Hawaiian church on Oahu, illustrated the complexity of the inter-group issues raised by the apology/redress resolution. Reverend Richard Wong, by a letter presented at the Aha Pae'aina, opposed the resolution in part because the term "Asian-American" in the resolution encompassed Chinese Americans who he felt were not legally or morally culpable.

As an Asian/Chinese, we Chinese look back at our [relations] with Native Hawaiians. We feel that we have not exploited nor dehumanized them. But in fact, we have accepted them enough to marry them. Today, the so-called "Hawaiian names"—Apaka, Ahuna, Achiro, and so on—are unions of Chinese in Hawaii. . . . Please do not clump Chinese with other Asian-Americans who may have taken advantage of these Oahuans [Hawaiians on Oahu]. Secondly, if the Asian-Americans fear they have deeply denied Native Hawaiians, they should offer their own apology [and reparations].<sup>4</sup>

By identifying himself as "Asian/Chinese" and by objecting to the "clumping" of "Chinese with other Asian-Americans," Reverend Wong's testimony raised the issue of pan-racialization: Is Asian American (even leaving out Pacific Islanders for the moment) a homogenous racial category? If not, is it nevertheless a meaningful category? In what situations? These questions about Asian American as a racial category give rise to questions about the category's shifting borders: Under what circumstances do individuals faced with justice issues shift between pan-racial and ethnic identities? How do differences concerning history, culture, economics, gender, class, mixed ancestry, immigration status, and locale contribute to malleable victim and perpetrator racial identities? How do unstable racial identities detract from or provide opportunities for deeper understandings of interracial harms and group responsibility for healing?

Reverend Wong's testimony also raised the related identity issue of intra-racial group distancing. His testimony referred to "Asian/Chinese" as "we" and "Asian-Americans" as "they" ("the Asian-Americans . . . they should offer their own apology"). By excluding we/Chinese from the broader category of

they/Asian-Americans he appeared to concede forms of Asian American complicity in the oppression of Native Hawaiians while simultaneously distancing Chinese Americans from an identity as an oppressor. Sometimes intra-racial group distancing flows from a desire to enlarge subgroup benefits; sometimes to avoid subgroup blame. Intra-group distancing in the context of group acknowledgment of partial legal or moral responsibility for oppression of others reveals the illusive internal boundaries of Asian American identity. Most important, Reverend Wong's testimony inverted the notion of Asian American foreignness. Asian American foreignness often is contemplated in two related ways. At the level of global identity, the "Oriental" as objectified "Other" encompasses Asians in America. Edward Said's notion of Orientalism explains the construction of alternatively exoticized or demonized West Asian "Orientals" as the oppositional predicate for the construction of subjectified, valorized white "Occidentals."<sup>5</sup> Stretching to include East Asia, all Asians are "Orientals" and the foreign "Other" for mainstream America.

At the level of national identity, mainstream America tends to focus on Asian ancestry and morphology, lumping Japanese nationals, for example, with Americans of Japanese ancestry. Whether considering economic competition or redress for the World War II internment, a shockingly large segment of white American society fails to distinguish between Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans. The same is true for other Asian American subgroups. No such lack of discernment occurs for Irish nationals and Americans of Irish ancestry. The lumping of Asian Americans with Asian nationals folds Asian Americans into foreign nationals, making them non-American and therefore easier targets during economic or political hard times for other Americans' enmity and violence.

Common to constructions of Asian American foreignness and to an extent their critiques is an often unstated referent. Asian Americanness is determined by the norms or perceptions of white mainstream America or Asian American resistance to those norms or perceptions. Reverend Wong's testimony and the Asian American apology/redress resolution are illuminating, I suggest, because they moved these constructions and critiques to a different setting and inverted them. Speaking as an "Asian/Chinese" about the "denial of Native Hawaiians," Reverend Wong's statement subtly yet significantly moved Asian American foreignness beyond Anglo American perceptions of Asian Americans.

In addition, the positional shift expands an emerging African American/Asian American/Latino framework for groups of color. It constructs Asian Americanness in part from the perspective of indigenous peoples, America's first people who remain outsiders in America. From this outsider perspective, Asian Americans are sometimes viewed as late-coming settlers who have "made it," as foreign insiders—foreignness inverted.

Third-generation Japanese Americans in Hawai'i self-identified as "local" rather than Japanese American. They did so partially as a response to many indigenous Hawaiians' negative perceptions of Japanese, especially Japanese national businesses and second-generation Japanese Americans. These perceptions

were of Japanese and haoles (whites) from the continental United States exercising inordinate control over the Hawai'i economy, state bureaucracy, and private lands, much to the detriment of Hawaiian culture and the "aina," or native land. These "foreigners" were perceived as having wrested insider control. Identifying with "local" situated young Japanese Americans alongside increasingly activist Native Hawaiians in terms of culture and community preservation and in terms of resistance to these perceived outsiders in control of the islands. Local identity thus reflected culture (appreciating the amalgam of cultures) and social structure (collective opposition to foreign control over development of the islands).

Indeed, in the mid-1970s some Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians worked in coalition under the banner of "Palaka Power," or localism, to advance local interests through law. They were instrumental in the enactment of several state statutes designed to lessen in-migration and outsider economic influence and in the restructuring of the state constitution to recognize Native Hawaiian rights. A recent study reveals that many Hawai'i Asian Americans continue to self-identify with their own subgroup (for example, Chinese American) and with local rather than Asian American. While subgroup or ethnic identity maintains ancestral-cultural attachments, local identity links Asian Americans with Native Hawaiians and other groups. It does so by creating a collective culture and an oppositional Hawai'i-based identity rooted in resistance to increasing external socio-economic control.

Despite the continuing appeal of an encompassing local identity for some Asian Americans and the success of past coalitional efforts, many Native Hawaiians now question if not reject collective identification symbolized by "local." They criticize the way local identity erases significant differences in history and current needs among racial groups and, more important, trivializes Native Hawaiians' unique cultural and legal claims to land and self-governance as indigenous peoples. They assert that in crucial social and legal respects Native Hawaiians are different from Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Americans and more recent immigrant groups. These Native Hawaiian criticisms of an essentialized local identity emphasize time (distinct histories), place (varying attachments to land), culture (disparate practices and values), and power (control of business, land, and government). They implicitly reposition Asian Americans as foreign insiders. In doing so, they underscore the instability of a narrowly circumscribed Asian American identity. They also illustrate the decentering of whiteness. Whiteness, although of continuing significance, cannot be seen as the singular referent for determining racial identities or defining racial justice.

## Healing and Interracial Justice

As mentioned earlier, interracial justice presupposes a recognition of situated group power and therefore constrained yet meaningful group agency and corresponding responsibility in the construction of racial identities and interracial conflicts. It also entails messy, shifting, continual, and often localized processes

of interracial healing. Both, I have argued, are predicates to racial groups living together peaceably and working together politically. Myriad questions concerning efficacy and authority surround notions of healing among racial groups: Is healing linked to individual psyches or to the public rearticulation of group images? Which forms of healing repair surface wounds while leaving oppressive social structures unaddressed? Who within a group, or within a subgroup of a group, decides which healing steps are appropriate and sufficient, and what are the risks of leadership cooptation? I endeavor here only to suggest that interracial healing approaches must be multidisciplinary and guided by antisubordination principles.

Law does not directly address healing. The actual healing of injured bodies, minds, and spirits and the repairing of broken group relationships generally lie beyond the law's reach. Law instead addresses healing indirectly through the multifaceted idea of justice. Some conceive of legal justice in a manner that ignores healing completely. For them, legal justice simply means dispute resolution; the disposition of claims according to substantive norms through fair process. This version of legal justice tends to turn a blind eye to the social and psychological impacts of dispute resolution outcomes and procedures on the participants and their communities. . . .

Why examine Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians? I have not, as have others, described Hawai'i as a race relations model. I do nevertheless find the dynamics of Asian American and Native Hawaiian relations in Hawai'i to be particularly relevant to more generalized inquiry about interracial justice. Despite many important differences, Hawai'i now and several parts of the United States of the near future bear a critical resemblance in terms of racial demographics. Asians and Asian Americans (including many recent immigrants from Southeast Asia) comprise a politically and economically significant portion of Hawai'i's population. They are of diverse cultures and disparate socio-economic classes and have multiple identities. Documented and undocumented workers from Mexico are among the state's fastest growing immigrant labor groups. Hawai'i's indigenous peoples are asserting historically-rooted claims to land and self-governance and are rapidly becoming players in the state economy. African Americans, although small in numbers, continue to suffer overt and structural discrimination. Whites are the largest single group. Measured against all nonwhite groups however, they are a numerical minority and no longer dominate elective political offices. They do continue to exert dominant control over private business and media. The Hawai'i economy has transformed from an agriculture/military economy to one that is service-oriented with many lower-end jobs filled by recent immigrants. Group stereotyping addresses not only racial characteristics but also social structural power. For example, an anti-Asian American "backlash" has developed from a "mythology" of Asian American, particularly Japanese American, economic and political dominance. While Japanese Americans are highly visible in elective offices and are over-represented in public sector employment, "contrary to popular misconception," they "do not have the highest occupational status . . . [and are] especially absent in terms of corporate power."<sup>6</sup>

Predictions about California demographics for the year 2020 bear important similarities and differences to Hawai'i's current demographics, as do anticipated demographic changes throughout the country. One common dimension of changing demographics across America is the salience of relations *among* racial groups generally and issues of interracial conflict and healing particularly—issues of interracial justice.

For the Asian American churches, reconciliation among the many racially diverse churches of the Hawai'i Conference through an apology to and redress for Native Hawaiians emerged as a localized issue of interracial justice. Racial misunderstanding and sometimes antipathy among member churches needed to be acknowledged. Only when present pain rooted in past harms was addressed and, to the extent appropriate, redressed could there be justice. And only when there was justice could there be reconciliation and a foundation for genuine hope and cooperation. As discussed, the Asian American churches' proposed resolution of apology to Native Hawaiians and accompanying redress initially generated heated debate within and beyond those churches. That debate, often challenging the racial categories and racial politics of the resolution itself, ranged from strong endorsement to ringing denouncement. The process was messy and conflictual. The participants at the United Church of Christ Hawai'i Conference's annual meeting discussed earnestly but could not agree upon what happened historically, who was involved, who was culpable, what redress if any was appropriate.

The Asian American churches' resolution was heard along with a broader resolution calling for an apology and redress from the multiracial Hawai'i Conference itself. While observing the extended discussions, I sensed that nothing productive would result. When it appeared that the Conference polity could reach no consensus on appropriate action, Reverend Kekapa Lee, a Native Hawaiian-Chinese American pastor of a small church on Maui, stood and spoke: "I would like to ask all those willing Hawaiians to please stand." A dozen or so of the 400 people in the room stood. Lee continued,

Those of us who are standing are Hawaiian people—people who lived in this archipelago called Hawai'i for generations. . . . Some of us are hurt deeply by what took place 100 years ago. Some of us have not a consensus on the role of the [church in the overthrow of the Hawaiian nation]. That is not the point. [T]he call for apology . . . [is intended] to sever this *pilikia* [troubled feeling] that we might move on. We want to put this behind and we call upon all of you who are not Hawaiian to *kokua* [cooperate]—even though some of us Hawaiians are not totally worth this.<sup>7</sup>

Another thirty Hawaiians rose, slowly. Lee spoke again.

And I have a very heavy, heavy, heavy heart because I don't understand why an apology is such a big thing. . . . Some of us are hurting and in pain because of this, and we're asking your support and *kokua* . . . because there are many things that face our church and our community as Hawaiians and we want to move on but feel that this apology is so important.<sup>8</sup>

While Reverend Lee continued, many more Hawaiians rose. At first sixty, then eighty, finally perhaps one hundred; almost all the Hawaiians in the polity, including those who earlier spoke against the resolution, stood. The emotion was palpable. It was only at that moment, I believe, following days of fractious discussion, that most of the non-Hawaiians there (including many White and Asian Americans) grasped the depth of the continuing pain experienced by Hawaiians within their own Conference. It was only then that they appeared to begin to understand how their refusal to acknowledge that present pain and its myriad historical sources erected huge barriers between groups within the Conference, barriers to addressing collectively the "many things that face our church and our community." It was then that many of the earlier disagreements emerged in a new light. The members of the Conference polity then by consensus adopted an amended version of the broader resolution directing the Conference to apologize to Native Hawaiians for the Conference's predecessor's participation in the overthrow of the Hawaiian nation and to begin a discussion about reparations.

A difficult year-long self-study followed among church members and leaders within the Hawai'i Conference. Disagreements continued about the extent of historical complicity of the Conference's predecessor in the overthrow of the Hawaiian nation and about the appropriateness of reparations. In 1994, self-study culminated in a solemn apology service and ceremony and with a commitment by the Conference to continue discussions about land reparations. Those discussions are ongoing. In 1995, the national corporate board of the United Church of Christ, in furtherance of its own apology and that of the Hawai'i Conference, despite tight financial times, offered Native Hawaiians \$1.25 million in the form of an educational trust as partial reparations.

Has some degree, or form, of interracial justice occurred? And if so, has it contributed to racial groups better living together peaceably and working together politically? There are, of course, no clear answers, just more questions. What are the likely effects of the apology, the partial reparations, the Conference resolution, the Asian American resolution, and the tumultuous processes surrounding them? What, if anything, will have changed in terms of individual feelings, group relations, and church structure? In the larger community and throughout the state, how will images or representations of interracial relations have changed, if at all? Is what appears to be interracial healing meaningful for Native Hawaiians, and if so, will it be lasting? How will participation in the apology/reparation process have changed the Asian Americans involved and Asian Americans generally? These questions of interracial justice merge into what may be a task of paramount importance for communities of color in the 21st century: rethinking alliances.

## NOTES

1. Motion 5 of the 171st Annual Meeting of the Hawai'i Conference of the United Church of Christ: "A Vision of a New Day: Promoting Solidarity and Reconciliation Through an Act of Apology by the 171st Aha Pae'aina, Directing a

Public Apology to Be Made on Its Behalf, and Directing Redress by the Hawai'i Conference of the United Church of Christ," in Ho'o Lokahi, 171st Aha Pae'aina, June 15-19, 1993, Hawai'i Conference, United Church of Christ, at 82.

2. *Id.* at 81-82.

3. JEFF CHANG, LESSONS OF TOLERANCE: RETHINKING RACE RELATIONS, ETHNICITY, AND THE LOCAL THROUGH AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN HAWAI'I 1 (1994).

4. Dean Fujii (reading letter of Reverend Richard Wong), Transcript of Proceedings, Aha Pae'aina, June 19, 1993, Hawai'i Conference, United Church of Christ, at 5.

5. EDWARD SAID, ORIENTALISM 4-15, 201-11 (1978).

6. Jonathan Y. Okamura, *Why There Are No Asian Americans in Hawaii: The Continuing Significance of Local Identity*, 35 SOC. PROCESS IN HAW. 172 (1994).

7. Reverend Kekapa Lee, *supra* note 1, at 11.

8. *Id.*