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Frank H. Wu

UC Hastings College of the Law, wuf@uchastings.edu

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Becoming Asian American: An Interview with Keith Aoki

Frank H. Wu*

INTRODUCTION

Keith Aoki and I were friends. He and I had in common, among other things, that we both came from Detroit, a place that exemplifies so much of what is great about twentieth-century America and what is tragic too, from the advent of the assembly line and the success of the labor movement to racial segregation, white flight, suburban sprawl, and urban decay.¹ In the course of researching a book about the killing of Vincent Chin, a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese American beaten to death with a baseball bat by two white autoworkers — who apparently blamed him for the success of Japanese car companies — in the Motor City during the recession of the early 1980s, Keith spoke with me about his memories of the city and the era.² I'd like to share this

* Copyright © 2012 Frank H. Wu. Chancellor & Dean, University of California Hastings College of the Law. This interview, approximately 30 minutes in length, was conducted by telephone on June 24, 2007, and it was digitally recorded using QuickVoice. A copy of the audio file has been provided to the editors of this journal. Research Associate Chelsea Zuzindlak and Research Assistants Catherine Ngo and Adam Regele provided invaluable help; Mr. Regele transcribed the text. The Estate of Keith Aoki has granted permission to publish this transcript.

Deletions of material are noted by an ellipsis (“...”).

¹ For a few of the many works on the history of Detroit, see, for example, THOMAS J. SUGRUE, *THE ORIGINS OF THE URBAN CRISIS: RACE AND INEQUALITY IN POSTWAR DETROIT* (Princeton Classic ed. 2005). See also REYNOLDS FARLEY ET AL., *DETROIT DIVIDED 14-52* (2002). See generally YVES MARCHAND & ROMAIN MEFFRE, *THE RUINS OF DETROIT* (2011) (depicting Detroit in photobook highlighting dilapidated condition of the once grand city); MICHELINE MAYNARD, *THE END OF DETROIT: HOW THE BIG THREE LOST THEIR GRIP ON THE AMERICAN CAR MARKET* (2004) (discussing the impact of imports on Detroit's historical control of American automobile manufacturing); ANDREW MOORE, *DETROIT DISASSEMBLED* (2010) (depicting Detroit in photobook highlighting dilapidated condition of the once grand city).

² See Frank H. Wu, *Embracing Mistaken Identity: How the Vincent Chin Case Unified Asian Americans*, 19 *ASIAN AM. POL'Y REV.* 17, 17-18 (2010); see also DVD: *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Christine Choy et al., New York: Filmmakers Library Inc. 2004).

interview, because it not only tells the story of an individual who was unique, but also offers insight into the choices made by members of communities that feel compelled to give up their commonality for conformity.

Before Keith was a law professor, he was an artist; he belonged to the *avant-garde* in both professions. And before Keith was Asian American, he was white. In his own words, "I was born in 1955, but did not become an 'Asian American' until sometime during the summer of 1994."³ Here he is, explaining his life before this transformation.

WU: Let me start off by asking, when were you born and where were you born?

AOKI: Okay. I was born in 1955 at Henry Ford Hospital, November 1955; Henry Ford Hospital is in Detroit. My parents at the time were living in Wyandotte, Michigan, which is this downriver suburb of Detroit. My father was working as a chemist at Wyandotte Chemical.

WU: Did your parents grow up in Detroit? Or, how did they get to Detroit?

AOKI: Neither of them were born or raised in Detroit.

My father was a second-generation "Nisei" who was raised in California, actually around Woodland, California. He was born in Knight's Landing, which is an island in the Sacramento River, which at the time was segregated, and basically the Japanese farmers lived there.⁴ He was born in, I think, 1928, and my grandfather came over

³ See Keith Aoki, *Critical Legal Studies, Asian Americans in U.S. Law & Culture, Neil Gotanda, and Me*, 4 *ASIAN L.J.* 19, 19-20, 22-23 (1997). Aoki discusses how he learned to be Asian American in the essay, and this interview is in some sense a companion piece. He describes, for example, playing war and "pretending to kill 'japs' with toy guns, at least until my mother informed me that I was a 'jap' and shouldn't be saying such things." *Id.* His sentiments are consistent with a theme expressed by other Japanese Americans. Screenwriter Desmond Nakano, also Japanese American, tells a similar story. See Bernard Weinraub, *Turning the Tables on Race Relations*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 6, 1995, at C11 (quoting Nakano describing playing war with his brother, who was yelling, "Kill 'em! Kill 'em! Kill the Japs!" and realizing his brother was saying, "Kill us"). Likewise, one of the earliest books on Japanese Americans asserted in its opening pages, "Scratch a Japanese American and find a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant." HARRY H.L. KITANO, *JAPANESE AMERICANS: THE EVOLUTION OF A SUBCULTURE* 3 (1969).

⁴ For the history of Japanese Americans, see, for example, STEPHEN S. FUGITA & DAVID O'BRIEN, *JAPANESE AMERICAN ETHNICITY: THE PERSISTENCE OF COMMUNITY* (1991); BILL HOSOKAWA, *NISEI: THE QUIET AMERICANS* (2002); HARRY H.L. KITANO, *GENERATIONS AND IDENTITY: THE JAPANESE AMERICANS* (1993); PAUL R. SPICKARD, *JAPANESE AMERICANS: THE FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF AN ETHNIC GROUP* (Rutgers Univ. Press 2009) (1996).

from Japan in 1906 and was in the San Francisco harbor when the earthquake hit. Had he gotten here a little earlier or later he would have gotten caught up in the earthquake. My father was a farmer from a Japanese immigrant father.

My mother was born in Honolulu in 1928 as well, and my maternal grandfather was a contractor and he decided to take his whole family back to Japan in November 1941, so this is right before Pearl Harbor and he sensed something was in the air and wanted to have his family in Japan during the war.⁵ She spent her teenage years in Japan and she was able to be repatriated — unlike some her older brothers — because she was a minor when she foreswore her U.S. citizenship and a minor when she swore patriotism to the Emperor.⁶ She came back to stay with her sister, who was living in the Detroit area.

So both of my parents were settled in the Detroit area in the late 1940s, early 1950s.

WU: So you had an aunt in Detroit, too?

AOKI: Yes.

WU: How did she get to Detroit?

AOKI: She was, I guess, repatriated prior to my mother, and she got married to some guy who was in the business of chicken sexing.⁷

⁵ For the history of the internment, see, for example, GREG ROBINSON, *A TRAGEDY OF DEMOCRACY: JAPANESE CONFINEMENT IN NORTH AMERICA* (2010). See generally ROGER DANIELS, *CONCENTRATION CAMPS USA: JAPANESE AMERICANS AND WORLD WAR II* (1981) (discussing history of internment, key players, and role of racism in removal decision); PETER H. IRONS, *JUSTICE AT WAR: THE STORY OF THE JAPANESE-AMERICAN INTERNMENT CASES* (1993) (documenting debates and legal responses to Japanese internment); TETSUDEN KASHIMA, *PERSONAL JUSTICE DENIED: REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS* (1996) (providing a summary of policies and events of internment gathered from testimony at commission hearings, governmental records research, and analysis of related writings and accounts).

⁶ Renunciants were able to regain their U.S. citizenship. *Acheson v. Murakami*, 176 F.2d 953, 965-66 (9th Cir. 1949). More than 6,000 applied for renunciation; 5,589 were granted it. ALICE Y. MURRAY, *WHAT DID THE INTERNMENT OF JAPANESE AMERICANS MEAN?* 17 (2000). Almost all of the renunciants subsequently sought to rescind their applications. *Id.*

⁷ Japanese Americans came to dominate the profession of chick sexing, by which day-old chicks are sorted into male and female (to facilitate destruction of the former and nurturing of the latter). Japanese Americans used a Japanese technique, different from that developed elsewhere, which involved examining the anatomy of the chick's vent (rear). See, e.g., R.D. MARTIN, *THE SPECIALIST CHICK SEXER* (1994) (explaining history and methods of sexing); Brian Doyle, *The Joy of Sexing*, *ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, Mar. 2000, at 28-31, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/03/doyle.htm> (describing process and types of bird sexing); Richard Horsey, *The Art of Chicken Sexing* 107-08 (Univ. Coll. London, Working Paper, 2002), available at <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/PUB/WPL/02papers/abstracts/horsey.html> (addressing difficulty of acquiring skills like that of chicken sexing when people perform other categorizations with little to no

[laughing] His name was Nakamura, and lived in Detroit. So she went to Detroit. They later moved to Seattle.

WU: I see. Do you have any siblings?

AOKI: I have a younger brother, who is four years younger than me. I'm 51. He's in his late 40s. He lives in Illinois. He works for a scientific instrument company.

WU: Okay, so you were born in '55. Where did you grow up? In the city?

AOKI: Well, I spent the first three years in Wyandotte Michigan, and I have just very few memories of it — a lower-middle-class, working-class city on the Detroit River. My parents moved into a ranch house in Trenton in 1959, and it was your typical ranch house, your typical 2.5 children, kind of a lawn in the backyard, and a garage. The demographics of Trenton at the time must have been ninety-seven to ninety-eight percent white.⁸ I think even in 2007, Trenton was 96.0 percent white and 0.07 percent Asian.⁹ So it was a very white community.

WU: Okay, do you have any sense why your parents chose to live there?

AOKI: My sense is my father, after the internment, he said to me particularly when I was a kid: “[A] nail that sticks up gets pounded

training); *see also* GO FOR BROKE (MGM 1951) (fictional movie based on earlier documentary about the 442d infantry regiment, in which new recruits harass one among them for his work as a chick-sexer, despite his high level of education).

⁸ The Detroit metropolitan area was among the most highly segregated in the United States. According to the 1960 Census, Detroit had a population of 1,670,144, of which 1,182,970 (70.8%) was white, and 482,223 (28.9%) was black; Trenton had a population of 18,439, of which 18,408 (99.8%) was white and 3 (0.016%) was black. *See* U.S. Census BUREAU, NUMBER OF INHABITANTS, MICHIGAN 24-79 (1960), *available at* <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/37722966v1p24ch2.pdf>.

In 1960, the total Japanese American population in the United States was 464,332, which constituted 0.26% of the total population; in Michigan, it was 3,211, which constituted 0.04% of the total population. *See* MICHIGAN-RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN: 1800 TO 1990, at tbl.37 (2002), *available at* <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab37.pdf>; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER POPULATION, FOR THE UNITED STATES, REGIONS, DIVISIONS, AND STATES: 1960 AND 1970 (100-PERCENT DATA), at tbl.C-5 (2002), *available at* <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tabC-05.pdf>; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, UNITED STATES — RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN: 1790-1990, at tbl.1 (2002), *available at* <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab01.pdf>.

⁹ According to the 2000 Census, Trenton had a population of 19,584, of which 18,981 (96.9%) was white and 73 (0.37%) was black. U.S. DEPT. OF COMMERCE, PROFILES OF GENERAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, 2000 CENSUS OF POPULATION AND HOUSING: MICHIGAN tbl.DP-1 (2001), *available at* http://www2.census.gov/census_2000/datasets/demographic_profile/Michigan/2kh26.pdf.

down.”¹⁰ He was very much into the late '50s conformism. To make an illustration of how assimilationist he was, the guy went out and played basketball.¹¹ He was like five-foot-one, and he would get these basketball trophies. He was really into assimilation. We wouldn't speak Japanese at home. He was into telling me “you're an American,” etc.

There was a dissonance, because sometimes they'd eat Japanese food, etc. So they're sending mixed messages. Blend in, but at the same time they were trying to make some sense of whatever strands or threads of Japanese culture that they could continue to hold onto.

WU: Who'd he play basketball with?

AOKI: It was a league from the company he worked for — Wyandotte Chemicals.

WU: Ok, so everyone else was white and taller?

AOKI: Yeah.

WU: And you went to public school?

AOKI: I went to public schools from all the way up from kindergarten up through high school, including Wayne State as an undergraduate.

WU: Okay, so when you were in school, who were your friends?

AOKI: White people. [*Laughing*] There literally were no other Asian families in the entire city of Trenton.

WU: No one who you remember playing with as a kid? Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Indian?

AOKI: No. And no blacks or Latinos either.

WU: Okay, and you said your parents ate Japanese food sometimes. Where did you buy that?

AOKI: There was a place north of Detroit. We lived south of Detroit. There was a kind of, I guess, a social center for the Japanese community in the 1960s. I can't remember what the name of it was. They would take me there and then they would stock up for what they'd need for six months and then go once or twice a year there.

¹⁰ See EVEN MONKEYS FALL FROM TREES: THE WIT AND WISDOM OF JAPANESE PROVERBS 100 (David Galef ed. & trans., 1987) (listing phrase “the protruding nail will be hammered” as Japanese proverb).

¹¹ Aoki's father played in a predominantly white league, but there is a lengthy history of Japanese Americans organizing Japanese American or integrated sports leagues. Sports have been an important means of fostering ethnic solidarity. See, e.g., MORE THAN A GAME: SPORT IN THE JAPANESE AMERICAN COMMUNITY (Brian Niiya ed., 2000) (revealing influence of sports on Japanese-American community); cf. Haruo Nogawa & Sandra J. Suttie, *A Japanese-American Basketball League and the Assimilation of Its Members into the Mainstream of United States Society*, 19 INT'L REV. FOR SOC. SPORT 259 (1984) (showing that participation in Japanese American youth basketball produced an ethnic solidarity effect but no assimilation effect).

WU: Okay. So they — you did sometimes associate with some people of Asian descent. Did they know other people there?

AOKI: My parents, when they came there — and this is kind of foggy to me — but they were part of an Episcopal church that had an outreach to help Japanese people who were relocated to the Midwest. There was a kind of church social group that we would get together with other Japanese families during the late 50s, early 60s. Probably the most well known of that group was this guy, Rick Inatome, who founded Inacom, who went on to become a computer millionaire.¹² But they were all people who found themselves in Detroit or Michigan after World War II, and the church kind of had this social hold for them to socialize and meet.

WU: And do you stay in touch with any of those people?

AOKI: Not really. I mean, I talked with Rick Inatome maybe fifteen years ago when Inacomp was just taking off, and it was kind of right around the time I was going to law school. But I didn't really stay in touch with that group.

WU: So you didn't grow up being close to any of the kids who were part of that group.

AOKI: No.

WU: And when did you first meet other people of Asian background?

AOKI: Probably when I went to junior high school and high school. There was another Japanese family that lived in Trenton and Actually there were two other Japanese families with kids who lived in Trenton who I was familiar when I was in junior high school. One had a girl {} named Lisa. Meeting her was really very strange: late 1960s, early 70s, being Japanese, and everybody else was white. Rather than gravitating toward one other, we actually kind of stayed apart from one another, in terms of Lisa and myself. The other Japanese kid, he was kind of a science nerd, so I kind of hung out with him a little bit, but we weren't that good of friends. He actually ended up going to New York University Law School and is now a partner at some New York firm right now.

WU: Really, okay.

AOKI: I considered myself extremely racially isolated. One of the things, I think this is a mixed message that my dad had; he, having felt the brunt of racism, was very much into being supportive of the ACLU or the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Most of the neighbors were autoworkers who worked at the Chrysler stamping plant. They

¹² See Mike Brennan, *Rick Inatome Has His Job Stress in Deadly Perspective*, DETROIT FREE PRESS, Sept. 15, 1997, at 9F.

generally came from the Deep South. A lot of them voted for George Wallace in 1968.¹³

One of the things I remember in 1967 was a very strange conversation with a backyard neighbor of mine, who said, “Well, the black people are, like, rioting and shooting up Detroit.” And then he said, “But you’re not like them. You’re like whites.” Basically he was saying my family was okay since we weren’t like the blacks. But it was very schizophrenic environment.

I think you might remember — well you’re ten years younger than me. Detroit, it was great being a teenager in Detroit in the 1960s, if you had a car. Motown was being played all the time on the radio; it was really hitting its apex.¹⁴ And at the same time there was this real strong country music, kind of Buck Owens stuff, in the summer.¹⁵ I grew up with this kind of miscegenated musical era, of wanting Motown, wanting *The Temptations*,¹⁶ and at the same time hearing a lot, and liking, some of this redneck, country and western music. It was a very schizoid culture.

WU: Yeah, now what kind of car did you drive?

AOKI: A Mustang. A 1966 Mustang, the second year it came out.¹⁷

WU: How were you able to buy a Mustang?

¹³ For information about the appeal of the Wallace campaign, see DAN T. CARTER, *THE POLITICS OF RAGE: GEORGE WALLACE, THE ORIGINS OF THE NEW CONSERVATISM, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN POLITICS* 336-43 (2d ed. 2000). For a discussion of race relations in the North, see, for example, THOMAS J. SUGRUE, *SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY: THE FORGOTTEN STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE NORTH* (1st ed. 2008).

Stanley Greenberg famously identified “Reagan Democrats” in a study of Macomb County, which is north of Detroit, but demographically similar to the downriver communities where Aoki grew up. They were formerly Democratic voters who became Republican voters because of the civil rights movement and other social issues. See STANLEY B. GREENBERG, *MIDDLE CLASS DREAMS: THE POLITICS AND POWER OF THE NEW AMERICAN MAJORITY* 26 (1996); see also Stanley B. Greenberg, Op-Ed., *Goodbye, Reagan Democrats*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 11, 2008, at A29.

¹⁴ For information on the history and impact of Motown, see, for example, GERALD LYN EARLY, *ONE NATION UNDER A GROOVE: MOTOWN AND AMERICAN CULTURE* (2004); NELSON GEORGE, *WHERE DID OUR LOVE GO?: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MOTOWN SOUND* (Univ. Ill. Press, 2007) (1985), GERALD L. POSNER, *MOTOWN: MUSIC, MONEY, SEX, AND POWER* (2005); SUZANNE E. SMITH, *DANCING IN THE STREET: MOTOWN AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DETROIT* (2001).

¹⁵ See, e.g., EILEEN SISK, *BUCK OWENS: THE BIOGRAPHY* (2010) (chronicling Buck Owens’ life and country music fame).

¹⁶ For more information regarding the Temptations, see generally MARK RIBOWSKY, *AIN’T TOO PROUD TO BEG: THE TROUBLED LIVES AND ENDURING SOUL OF THE TEMPTATIONS* (2010).

¹⁷ The Ford Mustang was best-selling and iconic. See MICHAEL MUELLER, *MUSTANG: AN AMERICAN CLASSIC YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW* 18-281 (2009).

AOKI: It actually was my mom's, and she let me drive it.

WU: That's great. Do you remember the riots in '67?¹⁸

AOKI: Yes.

WU: What is your memory of it?

AOKI: I remember my biggest experience of it was watching it on TV. It started off at the Palm's Motel and then spread. I remember going outside with my parents and my neighbors and looking at the smoke in the sky. And so it was this sense of conflagration, the sky falling apart.

Since I was thirteen, I was a precocious reader, so I would have picked up on some of the politics that were going on. It wasn't just race relations; it was Vietnam and a whole bunch of other things that began to catch fire that summer.

I had a very big and early split with my father over the Vietnam War. By the time I was thirteen or fourteen, I was saying, "This — this war is nonsense."

My dad was like law and order kind of. He did vote for LBJ, but he was like, "We've gotta stay, we have to draw a line in the sand." And I was saying, "What the hell are we doing over there?" So we never really patched that up.

I started reading *The Fifth Estate*, which was an underground newspaper that came out by the time I was a freshman in high school.¹⁹ And I got swept along into kind of hippy era, in terms of growing my hair long, mustache, wire frame glasses, singing protest songs, in the late 1960s, early 1970s, when I was in high school.²⁰ That's also a form of white assimilation; I was trying to assimilate with my white contemporaries.

WU: So you had long hair?

¹⁸ See generally SIDNEY FINE, *VIOLENCE IN THE MODEL CITY: THE CAVANAGH ADMINISTRATION, RACE RELATIONS, AND THE DETROIT RIOT OF 1967* (2007) (providing a detailed historical study of the 1967 riots); JOHN HERSEY, *THE ALGIERS MOTEL INCIDENT* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 1997) (1971) (describing the Algiers Motel Incident during the 1967 riots and finding that law enforcement was likely responsible for the murders and beatings).

¹⁹ The *Fifth Estate* was a radical underground newspaper founded in Detroit in 1965 that came to be known for its anarchist-libertarian philosophy in the 1970s. *FIFTH ESTATE, 1967–2003* (on file with the Labadie Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan).

²⁰ For more information on the American musical, cultural, and political landscape in the late 1960s and 1970s, see, for example, TODD GITLIN, *THE SIXTIES: YEARS OF HOPE, DAYS OF RAGE* (1993); CHARLES KAISER, *1968 IN AMERICA: MUSIC, POLITICS, CHAOS, COUNTERCULTURE, AND THE SHAPING OF A GENERATION* (1997); MARK KURLANSKY, *1968: THE YEAR THAT ROCKED THE WORLD* (2003); RICK PERLSTEIN, *NIXONLAND: THE RISE OF A PRESIDENT AND THE FRACTURING OF AMERICA* (2009).

AOKI: Yeah.

WU: What was your draft number?

AOKI: I turned eighteen the year that the draft was abolished. Prior to that, I contemplated either going Canada or maybe doing something stupid like shooting a toe off.

WU: When did you first get to know African Americans?

AOKI: Actually not until I went to Wayne State University, and actually not in a major way until I went to law school.

WU: And so you finished high school, where did you go to high school?

AOKI: Trenton High School. Similarly, the demographics were ninety-six to ninety-seven white. I was basically in a college prep line of going to high school, and I ended up graduating a semester early and going with a bunch of friends to try to become a rock star in California.

WU: What was the name of your group?

AOKI: It was initially called "Alpha." Then we changed it to "The Wizards." I had a teacher in high school that actually used to make fun of me, calling me "Rice Paddy Daddy."

WU: Really? What was his name, do you remember?

AOKI: He told I should start a band called "Rice Paddy Daddies and the Viet Cong." His name was Matthews, and I would say he was terribly clumsy with his racial epithets he was throwing around. A third-generation Japanese American has very little to do with, say, Ho Chi Minh or the Viet Cong. He thought it was really funny and that's how he would refer to me

WU: What instrument did you play?

AOKI: I played bass.

WU: And were you the founder of your band or the leader?

AOKI: No. One of the things, in that time, the early 60s, everyone played guitar. So you played guitar, it was hard to get into a band; but if you had a bass and played bass, everybody wanted you. So I started to play bass. I'd taken violin when I was younger — typical Asian American stereotype. [*Laughing*] By the late '60s, I said I'm going in a sense to not play violin, but I'm going to play bass. You understand, when I joked with friends, look, I'd say the band we're doing must not be that good if you have an Asian American bass player. [*Laughing*]

Asian Americans aren't known as bass players generally. Blacks generally are really the kick-ass players historically. That's the stereotype.

WU: How long did the band exist?

AOKI: It existed up until about 1973. It was kind of like a gang, we all hung out with each other, etc.

WU: And how long were you out in California?

AOKI: About nine months, we were hanging out on the beach, Point Dume, which is just north of Malibu. We'd starve. We'd pitch a tent and sleep on the beach.

WU: And did you actually get any gigs?

AOKI: No. [Laughing] Mom and Dad were sending us all the money we'd live on. One thing I did when I was out there was I did hitchhike up to my grandparents' farm in Woodland and spent a couple of weeks working on the farm with them. What is interesting is that my uncles and my grandparents hated César Chávez and the farm workers, because they — my grandparents — were basically essentially farm owners, and so they wanted basically to rip off or pay as little as possible to farm workers.²¹

Looking back, there was always really weird racial clues or markers in my background. Living in white suburbs, and white people saying we were just like whites, or going to visit my uncle and listening to them bitch about the farm workers and stuff.

And I literally didn't put it together 'til much later.

WU: What kind of farm was it?

AOKI: A tomato farm. I think they had about 100 acres. My grandfather was interned at Gila River in Arizona.²² And fortunately they had a neighbor who took care of their crops that year and sent them the money so they could invest it. And so they had a little nest egg when they came to invest. Other families lost everything. With that nest egg, they were able to build back up in terms of buying acreage and resume farming.

WU: Okay, so you did that. When did you come back to the Detroit area and enroll at Wayne State?

AOKI: I think fall of 1973.

WU: What was Detroit like in '73? What memories do you have? Do you remember the oil crisis at all?

²¹ For a sympathetic portrayal of Japanese American farmers, see, for example, DAVID MAS MASUMOTO, *COUNTRY VOICES: THE ORAL HISTORY OF A JAPANESE AMERICAN FAMILY FARM COMMUNITY* (1987); DAVID MAS MASUMOTO, *EPITAPH FOR A PEACH: FOUR SEASONS ON MY FAMILY FARM* (1996); DAVID MAS MASUMOTO, *FOUR SEASONS IN FIVE SENSES: THINGS WORTH SAVORING* (2004); DAVID MAS MASUMOTO, *HARVEST SON: PLANTING ROOTS IN AMERICAN SOIL* (1999).

For a discussion of César Chávez, see, for example, Randy Shaw, *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century* (2008).

²² See JEFFREY F. BURTON ET AL., *CONFINEMENT AND ETHNICITY: AN OVERVIEW OF WORLD WAR II JAPANESE AMERICAN RELOCATION SITES 59-100* (2002), available at http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/anthropology74/ce4.htm (showing Gila River chapter).

AOKI: There is a lead up to the oil crisis. Detroit and Wayne State in 1973 was blown out. The riots in 1967 had driven out investments. There was the Renaissance Center that was constructed, but it was really weird to go down there. It was fortified. Rather than being the center of the city, it looked like it was trying to build a rampart to keep the city out.²³

I always majored in art. I was part of what was called the “Cass Corridor School.” I’ll send you this cite to this book that was written about the Cass Corridor School.²⁴ It was basically like Jackson Pollock, except in sculpture. It was brutal. It used industrial material. Artists used things like chainsaws and axes to do their artwork. Like the way Jackson Pollock was gesture painting, so make your arms and whatever to be reflected in the art you make. The Cass Corridor School was taking a physicalist approach to making art.

A couple of the well-known people from the era are a guy named Gordon Newton — the Detroit Museum of Art has a couple of pieces, and Bob Sestok.²⁵ Stuff was really physically imposing. It wasn’t very pretty.

Those were my professors at Wayne State. So that was the kind of work I was doing.

²³ John Portman and Associates designed the Renaissance Center in the Brutalist style. See ERIC J. HILL & JOHN GALLAGHER, *AIA DETROIT: THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS GUIDE TO DETROIT ARCHITECTURE* 26-27 (rev. ed. 2003).

²⁴ See Dora Apel, *Art and the Industrial City*, in *UP FROM THE STREETS: DETROIT ART FROM THE DUFFY WAREHOUSE COLLECTION* 14,14-25 (Jeffrey Abt ed., 2001) [hereinafter *UP FROM THE STREETS*]. A permanent exhibit on the Cass Corridor School is housed at Wayne State University. *Cass Corridor Culture: In and Around Wayne State, 1960s–1980s* (Wayne State University Art Collection); see also WAYNE STATE UNIV., *ART AT THE ADAMANY: A GUIDE TO WORKS FROM THE UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION AT THE DAVID ADAMANY UNDERGRADUATE LIBRARY* (2010), available at http://artcollection.wayne.edu/publications/art_at_the_adamany_web.pdf (showing exhibit catalog). One of Aoki’s works is included in the Wayne State University collection. Aoki, Keith. *Untitled*, automotive paint on paper, 1977 (Wayne State University Art Collection, Detroit). <http://artcollection.wayne.edu/picture-of-the-week.php?id=100>. An exhibit of Cass Corridor art was mounted at the Detroit Institute of Arts. See DETROIT INST. OF ARTS, *KICK OUT THE JAMS: DETROIT’S CASS CORRIDOR 1963–1977* (1980) [hereinafter *KICK OUT THE JAMS*] (showing exhibit catalog). Aoki was interviewed about his art by the Detroit Institute of Arts shortly before the exhibit. See DETROIT INST. OF ARTS, *WORKS IN PROGRESS VI* 34-42 (1979) (showing exhibit catalogue with interview of Keith Aoki by Mary Jane Jacob and Diane Spodarek).

²⁵ See The Detroit Inst. of Arts, Gordon Newton: Selections from the James F. Duffy Jr. Gift (2001). Otherwise, both his and Newton’s work was exhibited in *Time and Place: Art of Detroit’s Cass Corridor* from the Wayne State University Collection (Apr. 24, 2009–June 26, 2009). See also *KICK OUT THE JAMS*, *supra* note 24, at 24; *UP FROM THE STREETS*, *supra* note 24, at 11-12, 18-25, 35-37, 50-55.

And I would hang out at the New Miami Bar with them, and that was my scene, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer and talking art trying to recreate the kind of “boho” abstract expressionist thing that went on in New York in the 1950s.²⁶ What it took as a badge of honor was that the art was an urban distillation — real sense of the gritty and urban. The sense that we are so tough we are sticking with Detroit. It was very interesting school of work. It mixed a lot with rock and roll at the time; the MC5 were playing around — this was before the studios had hit it really big.²⁷ Bands that played at the New Miami It was kind of a mixture of total punk rock and really tough physical art.

You asked me what I think. Those are some of the best years of my life. Of course it’s great being young. It was kind of nice to be part of a movement that was underground, and kind of to experience a subculture. Also, the thing about it, it also was also very white: a lot of refugees from middle class suburbia who really wanted to get “boho.” It wasn’t what you’d call an integrated movement, in terms of the art world.

WU: So at that time, so most of the people you hung out with at that time were white?

AOKI: Yes. About the fuel crisis: coming up around 1978, I had a show at the Detroit Institute of Art. And particularly an artist from Michigan gets a show there, and your head gets big, and you say, “I’m going to go to the big time — I’m going go to New York!”

And around 1978 I was getting ready to move to New York. I had gotten accepted to graduate school at Hunter College. In ’78, I was falling out of my connection with Detroit, and I was aware that people who were working in the auto factories who drove Toyotas and other types of Japanese cars were getting their tires slit or their windows broken. And so friends of mine said that this was going down. I actually, I think — I’m not sure — the bar where Vincent Chin was killed, but I think I’ve been in that bar. There was a place called Starvin’ Marvin’s, and I’m not proud to say that I hung out in places like that, but it was like a sleazy topless bar in Allen Park. If that wasn’t the place Vincent Chin was, it was a place very similar to Starvin’ Marvin’s.

²⁶ See generally IRVING SANDLER, *THE TRIUMPH OF AMERICAN PAINTING: A HISTORY OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM* (1976) (providing history and critique of abstract expressionism).

²⁷ See generally BRETT CALLWOOD, *MC5 SONICALLY SPEAKING: A TALE OF REVOLUTION AND ROCK N’ ROLL* (2010) (providing a biography of the MC5 band); DON MCLEESE, *MC5: KICK OUT THE JAMS* (2005) (telling the story behind MC5’s controversial rock music album).

At the time I think I was kidding myself that I hung out with whites and I do white things, so things like people beating someone to death with a baseball bat is not going to happen to me. When I read about the Vincent Chin attack and incident, I was like: "Woah." They thought he was Japanese. I'm actually Japanese. Had I been in that bar, that could have been me

WU: And so when did you leave Detroit?

AOKI: I left in fall of 1978. I basically was living in a loft in the lower east side of New York.

WU: Any other thoughts about Detroit or the '70s or '80s, that you want to share, or being Asian or anything at all that pops into your head when you think about any of these subjects?

AOKI: One thing that I think, in particular in light of the *Race, Rights, Reparation* book, the internment — while there were reparations and ultimately redress — I think it was successful in what it intended to do.²⁸ It was intended to fragment the Japanese community and isolate the fragmented members of that community.

I give my family as an example of that. A lot of people in California who went through the internment were able to come back and recover some kind of sense of racial-ethnic-national community of being Japanese American. In terms of my family, the internment was 100 percent successful. I think it basically, in a thought, deracinated me, effectively including my sense of self until I was thirty, thirty-five years old; it fragmented from meaningfully connecting with other members of the API or Asian American community.

In retrospect looking back at being fifty-one years old, in some ways my attempt[s] to write in, to participate with, be part of CAPALF, Lat Crit, or critical race theory represent an attempt to reconnect with things that the internment denied me and my family.²⁹ I don't know how successful I am at it, but it those are projects I find interesting

²⁸ ERIC K. YAMAMOTO, ET AL., *RACE, RIGHTS, AND REPARATION: LAW AND THE JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT* 38-40 (2001).

²⁹ The two leading anthologies of work on Critical Race Theory are *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE KEY WRITINGS THAT FORMED THE MOVEMENT* (Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. eds, 1996), and *RICHARD DELGADO & JEAN STEFANIC, CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE* (2d ed. 2000). CAPALF is the Conference of Asian American Law Faculty, first held at Boston College in 1994. See *About CAPALF*, WM. MITCHELL C. L., <http://www.wmitchell.edu/lectures/Conference+Asian-Pacific-American-Law-Faculty.html> (last visited Mar. 13, 2012). LatCrit is Latina & Latino Critical Legal Theory, Inc., which grew out of a Hispanic National Bar Association Law Professors' meeting in Puerto Rico in 1995. See *LatCrit History*, LATCRIT, INC., <http://www.latcrit.org/latcrit/latcrithistory.php> (last visited Mar. 13, 2012).

because I'm sort of maybe trying to restore something that I felt was taken away from me.

WU: Right, right. That is, I think, something that is a recurring theme for people as I talk with them. Anyone else you would suggest I talk to, cousins or anyone who might have memories or might have been involved in any way whatsoever, not just with the case, but with Detroit in the '70s and '80s that you can think of who would be good.

AOKI: The last thing I can tell you is my father did not talk about the internment, until at least he was battling with stomach cancer³⁰ But one of the things my father and mother did tell me about like was at the time when Vincent Chin was murdered, they sent \$1,000 to his legal defense fund. They felt [they] were not terribly big contributors; but they told me later they felt like that could have been me who was murdered, so that they wanted to help the mother who was hurting over the loss of her son

³⁰ The reluctance of Japanese Americans to discuss the internment is a common theme in literature. See, e.g., GARY Y. OKIHIRO & JOAN MYERS, *WHISPERED SILENCES: JAPANESE AMERICANS AND WORLD WAR II* (1996) (sharing history of internment, first-hand accounts of internees, and images from detention camp sites where Japanese Americans were held).