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The Racialization of Asian-Americans in the United States

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**UC HASTINGS CENTER FOR RACIAL AND ECONOMIC
JUSTICE CONFERENCE:
“CONNECTING THE THREADS THAT BIND:
CONTEXTUALIZING LEGALIZED VIOLENCE AGAINST
ASIAN AMERICANS”**

SEPTEMBER 10, 2021

*Michael Omi, co-author of the groundbreaking book *Racial Formation in the United States*, gave a speech at the Center for Racial and Economic Justice Conference titled, “The Racialization of Asian-Americans in the United States.” Featured here is a transcript of a Q&A between the moderator Carol Izumi and Omi.*

**The Racialization of Asian-Americans in
the United States**

MICHAEL OMI

Biography:

Professor Emeritus of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

Michael Omi is the co-author of *Racial Formation in the United States*, a groundbreaking work that transformed how we understand the social and historical forces that give race its changing meaning over time and place. The 3rd edition of the book was released in 2015. He is also the co-editor of *Japanese American Millennials: Rethinking Generation, Community, and Diversity* (2019). At Berkeley, he served as the Associate Director of the

Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society (HIFIS) from 2012-2016, and in 2020 he was the inaugural Chair of the Asian American Research Center (AARC). Professor Omi is a recipient of UC Berkeley's Distinguished Teaching Award — an honor bestowed on only 240 Berkeley faculty members since the award's inception in 1959.

Transcript

QUESTION:

Your groundbreaking work has changed the way we conceptualize race. How might we understand change, and continuity in the racial images and representations of Asians in the U.S.?

ANSWER:

Thank you, Carol. I will try to address some of those questions, and hopefully do so in a concise manner to allow time for the other terrific speakers on this panel.

As Carol mentioned, most of my academic work has centered on the notion of race as a social concept. This work, with my co-author Howard Winant, critiques a prevailing notion of race as something fixed and static. It's a rejection of the idea of race as a biological or genetic category of human variation. There are many debates about about this idea within the genomic sciences, fields such as pharmacogenomics, and other related sciences as well. For the moment, I just want to say that most scientists agree that race cannot be defined with any precision as a biological or genetic category of human variation. Race is a social concept, I would argue, whose definition and meaning varies across time and place. What race means depends on the society one finds oneself in at a particular historical moment or juncture. Races are made. History is filled with examples of race-making where we can trace historical shifts in racial definitions and categories, and, perhaps more importantly, the meanings that we impart or attach to these different categories and definitions. Much of this history is a legal one, especially in how these definitions and categories, and the rights and privileges attached to them, get encoded within the law.

Asian Americans have experienced a rather unique form of racialization, if you will, and it's fundamentally a history, which some of the other panelists will detail, of exclusion. This history includes, for example, the denial of citizenship and legal rights as reflected in the restrictive immigrant laws between the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the liberalization of those laws

in 1965. But also, we had the consequences of Asians being deemed ineligible for citizenship, which was affirmed in the Takao Ozawa case in 1922 and the Baghat Singh case in 1923. Both those cases raised troubling questions about what it meant to be white. And it might be interesting to note that the right to become a naturalized citizen, regardless of race, was not affirmed until the McCarran Walter Act in 1952.

As “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” Asian Americans faced issues like the denial of legal rights to own property, both in the state of California and in a number of other states. Or, as in the case of *California v. Hall* in 1954, Chinese did not have the right to testify against whites in a court of law. And across historical time periods, there has been both persistence and change in the patterns and content of Asian American racialization. For much of the 19th and 20th century, Asian ethnic groups in the United States were regarded as a threat, the dreaded and feared “yellow peril.” This image shifts in the 1960s, in the post-World War II era, to an emergent notion of Asian Americans as a group that was successfully assimilating into the mainstream of American life. There's historically always been this kind of dynamic between regarded as a threat or as a model minority, and there's a relationship between these images. They're not diametrically opposite images. Think about, for example, Asian Americans as a model minority who are seen as doing too well. They are overrepresented in colleges and universities and occupy key positions in the Silicon Valley economy. From this vantage point, Asian Americans “success” can be seen as a kind of racial threat. So, there's always a reciprocal dynamic regarding how Asians are racialized.

While the COVID pandemic has been given racial meaning as the “Wuhan virus,” it's important to recognize that these negative representations of Asian Americans have very deep historical roots and precedents. For example, during the 1900s the Chinese were blamed for an outbreak of the bubonic plague in San Francisco. As a consequence, patterns of residential segregation were even more strictly enforced and the push to exclude other Asian immigrants received increased backing.

Another point regarding Asian American racialization is that the prevailing state of U.S.-Asia relations has always had a dramatic and profound impact on what happens to Asian Americans. The incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II and the FBI surveillance of Chinese Americans during the 1950s McCarthy anti-Communist era are illustrative of this dynamic. Today, the nation's political and economic tensions with China regarding trade, human rights, claims to territorial waters are very clearly evident and increasing and impact Asian Americans. These political and economic tensions will have a profound effect on how Chinese Americans, as well as other Asian Americans, are viewed. Despite being here for several generations, Asian Americans are continually seen as “perpetual foreigners” whose citizenship and allegiance to the United States is always in question. They've always been seen as not truly part of the cultural and body politic.

To illustrate this point, in a March 2021 AAPI Data political survey, almost two-thirds of Asian American respondents reported that people have asked them where they are from and assume that they're not from the United States. This was a higher affirmative response rate to the question than from several of the other racial and ethnic groups surveyed.

The final contextual theme that I want us to consider is how anti-Asian hate crimes affect relations between Asian Americans and other groups of color, particularly Black Americans. Media attention in the United States is often drawn to racial tensions between groups, but little is done to contextualize relations between groups of color, or to highlight issues of collaboration or solidarity. In the United States, a racial hierarchy is clearly evident and different groups are situated and positioned in relationship to other groups. It's important to examine the historical and contemporary ways that different groups have been positioned in this racial hierarchy and how they have structured the types and overall tenor of relations between groups of color.

Prevailing cultural representations, for example, portray Asian Americans and Black Americans in diametrically dissimilar ways. Asian Americans are often viewed as a model minority, whereas Black Americans are frequently criminalized and regarded as a social problem.

In the case of anti-Asian hate violence, the predominant image being presented in the media is that of Black perpetrators assaulting elderly Asian Americans. But a study released in June 2021 by political scientist Janelle Wong, found that more than 75 percent of the perpetrators of anti-Asian hate crimes were in fact white. As Professor Wong notes, the popular misconception of who the perpetrators are is a function of how crime is racialized and understood in the U.S. as a "Black problem." In conclusion, I would argue that this is a crucial historical moment for both Black and Asian Americans. It represents a time and an opportunity for both groups to collectively confront and challenge racist violence. But to do so, they must deeply examine the roots of hate, understand the different representations and expressions of it that each group encounters, and think boldly and creatively about how to strategically address ongoing hate crimes. Thank you.