



Project
MUSE[®]

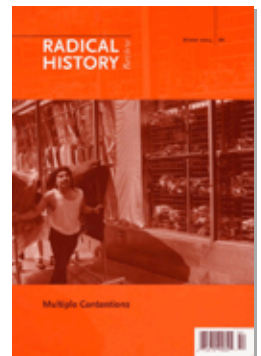
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Reflections of Self and Society

Okiihiro, Gary Y., 1945-

Radical History Review, Issue 79, Winter 2001, pp. 111-113 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



▶ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rhr/summary/v079/79.1okiihiro.html>

Reflections of Self and Society

Gary Y. Okhiro

I must confess to beginning with myself. My admission is all the more glaring in the light of discursive and social formations and the theoretical and political failures of experience and identity politics. But as I write this in the enveloping spaces of my study with its solitary window to the outside world, upon reflection I return to selective and vivid memories of my past.

The sun cast long shadows in the early morning chill of October 1968. I taught science at a rural high school in South Carolina and was walking on my way to school. I remember the day well because just in front of me was a group of students, one of whom wore an oversized pair of leather shoes without laces or socks. It wasn't fashionable; it was mired in need. The picture of this young man remains with me today, some thirty-two years later, mainly because it was a snapshot of the poverty that surrounded me and to which I could never get accustomed.

I was in the South among African Americans and the rural poor, training for the Peace Corps to teach in southern Africa. The Peace Corps had this peculiar idea that hanging out with black folk in South Carolina would prepare us for our work in Africa. I was fresh out of graduate school, and I entertained cocky dreams of middle-

class luxuries and false assumptions of unrestrained privilege. And here I was in South Carolina in the midst of momentous civil rights struggles and an increasingly ferocious war being waged by the U.S. in Vietnam.

I recall stepping into the home of the Singletons, black sharecroppers and my gracious hosts for the night, and seeing on the wall a framed certificate. “Oh,” I said in acute observation, “one of your children must have graduated from college.” “No,” Mr. Singleton replied. “That’s our daughter’s high school diploma.” My cheeks still burn with embarrassment over my innocence of struggles engaged and achievements gained. I had failed to recognize that impoverished black children in South Carolina often failed to make it through high school. The diploma was a singular accomplishment—I had to learn that hard truth.

It was not always so with me. I was tutored into extravagance. In truth, I was a child of poverty, having grown up in a sugar plantation camp in rural Hawai‘i without the benefit of hors d’oeuvres or pocket change. We weren’t rich. My mother was a barber, maid, and laundry worker, and my father a sugar-mill worker, garbage collector, and janitor. I should have known. My mother never made it through elementary school, and my father, through middle school. Neither had a high school diploma. They didn’t have a chance.

So when I decided on African history in graduate school, I thought I could make a difference. I would unearth the foundation of great African civilization, I thought, extol African liberators from imperial and colonial oppression, and plunk African nuggets from the tailing of European history. I would right past wrongs. And when Asian American studies met me on my return from Africa in 1971, I embraced it with the same passion I felt for the African past. It was a career and a cause.

Asian American studies began in 1969 as a people’s liberation movement. I knew it immediately. I chafed at white boots marching in an Asian land and resisted the draft and war. I felt the anger swell within me when I saw African workers in apartheid South Africa being whipped with leather intended for cattle. I knew that my grandfather and father, men in their sixties and forties at the time, were not “yard boys” for the bosses whose lawns they clipped. Our past, properly understood, I believed, would free us from the prisons of colonialism and exploitation, racism and discrimination. It would inform our present and determine our destiny. Or so I thought.

Now with hindsight, I must say that we in ethnic studies have erred in our once radical demand for revolutionary change. We, the founders, figured race as the central object of study and racial politics as the means toward our liberation. We diagnosed the problem correctly insofar as hegemony, in the form of white racial politics, mandated inclusions and exclusions in textbooks, the curriculum, the racial formation, and we pursued its counter—colored racial politics that sought inclusion even as it more or less excluded whites, the inauthentic, wider social formation of class, gender, sexual-

ity, and nation. We've since had diffident relationships with those constituent parts of the social formation, wedded as we are to the racial formation.

White racial politics determined much of our projects. Third World liberation movements were anticolonial, anti-European struggles, but they also installed European-inspired nation-states with their elites and masses. Likewise, ethnic studies in the U.S. (led by men) promoted nationalist agendas that resisted the white nation but also replicated some of its vicious hierarchies. Patterned on European states, the rise of nation promoted homogeneity and repressed heterogeneities for the sake of union. It was also and obviously patriarchal and hostile to feminist critiques and aspirations, and bourgeois and exploitative and repressive of the working class.

Whites defined the field of racial contest. They named themselves and others, and designated members and nonmembers of their community. Exclusions promoted desires for inclusions by nonmembers—integration—but they also inspired nationalisms patterned upon the original. Today, separatism, begun as self-determination, is normalized such that the U.S. Census counts and therewith allocates resources in large measure on the basis of racialized categories, and 50 percent of America's youth, according to a 1999 national poll, express comfort with the idea of a racially segregated society as long as everyone has equal opportunities. We might yet see the return of the past in the notion of “separate” but equal.

The once radical strategy of colored politics plays into the hands of the dealer—white politics—by reifying race and its assumed salience and solitude, by equating significance and democracy with numbers, and by erecting barriers to discourage and restrict border crossing. And is it possible that what was once temporary—a strategic essentialism, a means toward an end—has become, like other bureaucracies, academic disciplines, and politics, extravagant and self-perpetuating? Ethnic studies, so defined, is at an intellectual and political dead end.

Instead, ethnic studies and our politics should embrace the social and not the racial formation, and insist that race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation are related social constructions—the systematic exercises of power to maintain privilege and poverty. We do know that, but lack of ability, within the cells of our making, to articulate the links that bind us or envision the means for our liberation. Race-based ethnic studies is essentially conservative intellectually and politically. And our decision some thirty years ago to reclaim our America for our liberation has yielded us a putative revolution that has reshaped, but has also been complicitous with, the designs of the ruling class. If the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, it was because of whites and their opposition, colored racial politics. But the problem of the twenty-first century will continue to be the social formation in all its confounded complexity and fetching fullness.