

# Cheap Talk,

**W**ithout substance," I thought to myself after having spent an hour with the staff of the Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race in October 1997. The staff members were at the time settling into their responsibilities and were open to advice, but mainly sought information from several quarters. I concluded, from their description of the board's mandate and from their queries, that the President's Initiative would simply provide a forum, even as the staff had made themselves available to us, a group of Asian American educators, for a wide discussion on the subject of race without legislative agendas or programmatic outcomes. Like other incidental presidential initiatives, this one was to be limited to talk—politic, bloodless, and cheap.

And there was lots of it—talk—called "dialogue," from college conversations to community forums to statewide "days of dialogue." As described in the board's executive summary of its work, board members

canvassed the country meeting with and listening to Americans who revealed how race and racism have impacted their lives. Board meetings focused on the role race plays in civil rights enforcement, education, poverty, employment, housing, stereotyping, and administration of justice, health care, and immigration. Members have convened forums with leaders from the religious and corporate sectors.<sup>1</sup>

And as put by its chair, John Hope Franklin, the board "traveled to many places, talked with countless Americans, heard many opinions and concerns" and served as the "eyes and ears" of the president on issues of race.<sup>2</sup>

To those of us in ethnic studies, such talk—focused, systematic, prodigious—has been constant and going on for years, in truth from the nation's founding, and across broad constituencies, indeed among all Americans. Some politicians and white Americans might have discovered race as a result of the President's Initiative, but scores of other Americans, especially racialized minorities, have long understood the sting and consequences of race in their daily lives. They not only talked about race; they experienced it. White privilege, too, was experienced, if unacknowledged.

I am herewith reminded, by way of contrast, of another presidential commission report written some thirty years earlier in the anxious aftermath of violent and widespread civil unrest in the United States. "This is our basic conclusion," the commissioners declared. "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." And of the distinction created by race consciousness, they wrote: "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."<sup>3</sup>

# er, Dialogue

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Those differences of race are documented in the more revealing addendum to the 1998 board's report, a statistical presentation of social and economic status by race.<sup>4</sup> In that document, we see the continuing separation, witnessed decades earlier, of America's peoples by race and its privileges and poverties. In 1995, for instance, poverty rates among African Americans hovered at 30 percent, while for whites, it stood at 10 percent; African American unemployment among individuals sixteen years and older was more than twice that of whites, and greater percentages of whites than African Americans graduated from high school.<sup>5</sup>

But those statistics also show a greater complexity to the figures of race in America than those of thirty years earlier. If the nation of 1968 was polarized between black and white, the nation of 1998 was more diverse. African Americans made gains in education, employment, and income, although the gap between themselves and whites has remained essentially unchanged over those three decades.<sup>6</sup> Asians and Latinos, due in large part to immigration patterns, reveal very different and mixed profiles. Asians are among the most highly educated of all racialized groups and have higher median family incomes than whites, but they also have poverty rates that exceed that of whites by more than 50 percent.<sup>7</sup> And Latinos, as compared with African Americans, have considerably lower educational levels and slightly

higher poverty rates but lower unemployment rates.<sup>8</sup>

Those contrasts under late capitalism point to a manifest conclusion about race in America—it was never a binary of white and black alone. And despite gestures toward a more inclusive universe of race, the 1998 board's report is mired in the racial binaries of white and black, white and nonwhite, both of which foreground and privilege the position of whiteness. The U.S. Census, instead, reported that in 1998, 73 percent of America's peoples were white; 12 percent, black; 11 percent, Latino; 4 percent, Asian and Pacific; and 1 percent, Native American. But in 2050, if current trends continue, whites will drop to 53 percent; Latinos will increase to 25 percent, blacks to 14 percent, and Asian and Pacific to 8 percent; and Native Americans will remain at 1 percent. "The complexities, challenges, and opportunities that arise from our growing diversity point to the need for a new language," the board offered, "one that accurately reflects this diversity."<sup>9</sup>

Despite that insight, the report cites the white-black paradigm and in particular the enslavement of Africans as foundational to subsequent and apparently less important unfoldings of white-nonwhite relations. As Franklin remarked, "This country cut its eye teeth on racism in the black/white sphere. . . . [The country] learned how to [impose its racist policies on] . . . other people at other times . . . because [it had] already become an

expert in this area."<sup>10</sup> The pattern was thus cut in black and white, then traced onto other, later cloths, according to that historical rendition. Further, as represented by the peculiar institution in the board's report, racism and racial subjugation were conceived of as exceptional and as aberrations in the nation's past or as "the darker side of our history,"<sup>11</sup> whereas another reading might generate the understanding that slavery was one among several forms of labor and racial bondage and exploitation and that a central and recurrent feature of America's history is that "darker side."

The board's notions of racism as largely an individual, and not a social, matter and of its eradication as a product of reaching a mutual understanding and thereby appreciation through dialogue surely influenced its readings of the past. As described in its report, the board strived to ignite "extensive dialogue" among Americans on how "problems of race have impinged on their lives and affected the Nation" and to therewith "refute stereotypes and provide opportunities for people to share their individual experiences and views, which may be different from others because of their race."<sup>12</sup> A parallel individuation is the largely correct, though also erroneous view, that each group has its own history and circumstance. Referring to Native Americans, board member Bob Thomas exclaimed: "Their history is unique, their relationship with our State and Federal governments is unique, and their current problems are unique." And as if racism could be measured or redress conferred: "While not large in numbers, their situation tugs at the heart."<sup>13</sup> Unique pasts and presents, although verities, are not the entirety. There are parallels and connections. Dillon S. Myer relocated, segregated, and sought to erase identities and cultures in his capacity as director of both the War Relocation Authority that held Japanese

Americans captive during World War II and the Bureau of Indian Affairs when it instituted its termination policy toward American Indians and the reservations.<sup>14</sup> And African American segregation upheld by the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) constituted the basis for school segregation of Asian American children as affirmed by that same court in its 1927 decision in *Gong Lum v. Rice*.<sup>15</sup>

Those connections, it seems to me, enable a more comprehensive appreciation of racializations than that proposed by the board, along with their origins and natures and the means by which to transform them. And although I limit my examples to Asian American history, the same case could be made for all of the other racialized groups and their social locations and articulations. Ignoring America's prerepublican past, one of the first and clearest racializations by the state was its 1790 Naturalization Act that defined citizenship for immigrants. Naturalization and, with it, rights and privileges accrued only to "free white persons," the act declared. That ability was extended to Africans in 1870. And although not envisioned by the founding fathers, their act denied Asian migrants naturalization for the most part from 1790 to 1952. Over the course of those years and in the challenges mounted by Asians to their racist exclusion, the very idea of race and racializations were contested, altered, and reinscribed, exemplifying not only the constructedness of race but also its profound and extended reach both within and beyond white and black.

Asians first tested America's racist definition of acquired citizenship in a California federal court in 1878 in the case *In re Ah Yup*. One of three litigants, Ah Yup was joined by Li Huang and Leong Lan. The co-litigants claimed that Asians were included under the category "white," a strategy that was followed by all subsequent claims almost

without exception, and Circuit Judge Lorenzo Sawyer, in his ruling against Chinese naturalization, employed the argument that formed the crux of later decisions that the Chinese, by everyday speech and scientific evidence, were "nonwhite."<sup>16</sup>

Between 1878 and 1909, American courts heard twelve naturalization cases that involved applicants from China, Japan, Burma, and Hawaii, along with two petitions from persons of mixed race, and one from a Mexican American. All claimed the cover of whiteness, and all were deemed to be nonwhite. Because of a treaty, however, the "pure-blooded Mexican" in Texas was allowed citizenship, despite the court's reasoning that science would define him as nonwhite. In contrast to the unanimity of the earlier period, the years 1909 to 1923 witnessed contradictory and confusing results. For the most part, in the twenty-five cases heard, courts continued to rule that Asians and mixed race peoples were nonwhite.

However, the distinction between white and nonwhite grew increasingly tenuous, especially in the light of disagreements over what constituted common speech and its divergences from scientific opinions, which themselves conflicted. Thus, Armenians were originally classed as Asians and hence nonwhite but were rendered whites by a court decision in 1909; Syrians were whites in 1909, 1910, and 1915, but nonwhites in 1913 and 1914; and Asian Indians were whites in 1910, 1913, 1919, and 1920, but nonwhite after 1923.<sup>17</sup>

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Armenians were rendered white by the court based upon scientific evidence, but Syrians and Asian Indians, despite scientific opinion that they were white, were classed as nonwhite because of common knowledge. The 1923 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Thind* codified that shift from both precedent and science in the matter of race. Bhagat Singh Thind was born in India, graduated from Punjab University, arrived in America in 1913, and served for six months in the U.S. army. In 1920, Thind was granted naturalization by a district court based upon anthropologists' classification of Asian Indians as "Caucasians" and hence, in the court's opinion, "white." But upon appeal, that original ruling was overturned finally by the Supreme Court in a decision marked by a rejection of scientific evidence and an embrace of everyday speech. "It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim

reaches of antiquity," wrote the Court in reference to scientific opinion, "but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today." The Court expanded upon its meaning: "What we now hold is that the words 'free white persons'

are words of common speech, to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man, synonymous with the word 'Caucasian' only as that word is popularly understood."<sup>18</sup>

The capriciousness of race extended beyond the courtroom and into other venues of



Photo by Kristen Clarke.

the state. Census workers in Louisiana, for example, classified Chinese Americans as whites in 1860 but as Chinese in 1870. They enumerated the children of Chinese men and non-Chinese women as Chinese in 1880, but they reclassified those biracial children as either blacks or whites; only those born in China or with two Chinese parents did they class as Chinese in 1890.<sup>19</sup> County clerks who issued marriage certificates, because of the state's miscegenation laws, had to determine the race of their applicants. Asian Indians were variously categorized as "brown," "black," or "white" by clerks who made those judgments based upon their perception of the applicant's skin color.<sup>20</sup> Racialization, as ruled by the Supreme Court, had indeed become the domain of the common man.

Asians, in their strivings for membership in the American community, tested the elasticity of the racialized category "white" and

created the necessity for a classification that was neither white nor black. Caught in a racial binary, Asian Americans chose the mantle of whiteness instead of making a claim to blackness, both of which would have conferred naturalization rights after 1870. That calculated choice was understandable insofar as white supremacy ensured and limited guarantees and privileges to its members only. But it also revealed the workings of racializations between and among nonwhite groups that lie outside the compass of the black-white binary but are crucial to it.

Lai Chun-chuen, a prominent Chinese American merchant, wrote to California governor John Bigler to protest the state's 1854 ruling, in *Hall v. the People*, that disallowed Asians, like American Indians and African Americans, from testifying in court for or against whites. In his letter, Lai took offense at that grouping and sought distance between

Chinese and America's racialized minorities. "Your honorable people have established a new practice," Lai reminded Bigler. "They have come to the conclusion that we Chinese are the same as Indians and Negroes, and your courts will not allow us to bear witness. And yet these Indians know nothing about the relations of society; they know no mutual respect; they wear neither clothes nor shoes; they live in wild places and in caves."<sup>21</sup> Although perhaps a reflection of his economic class, Lai's sentiment appealed to racism and racialisms that emanated from Chinese ethnocentrism and from America's racial formation.

Similarly, Bhagat Singh Thind's argument before the U.S. Supreme Court asserted that

people residing in many of the states of India, particularly in the north and northwest, including the Punjab, belong to the Aryan race. . . . The high-class Hindu regards the aboriginal Indian Mongoloid in the same manner as the American regards the negro, speaking from a matrimonial standpoint. The caste system prevails in India to a degree unsurpassed elsewhere."<sup>22</sup>

Thind's contention, accordingly, was that he was not only white but of the "Aryan race," that he was of "pure blood," that he was a member of a superior conquering group over primitive, indigenous peoples, and that he regarded the "aboriginal Indian Mongoloid"

with the same disdain for inferiors that white Americans held toward African Americans.

Although some Asian Americans might have claimed whiteness on the basis of racial and cultural affinities, some African Americans sought distance from Asians on the basis of citizenship and history. "The Negro is an American citizen whose American residence and citizenry reach further back than the great majority of the white race," wrote Howard University professor Kelly Miller in 1924. "He has from the beginning contributed a full share of the glory and grandeur of America and his claims to patrimony are his just and rightful due. The Japanese, on the other hand, is the eleventh hour comer, and is claiming the privilege of those who have borne the heat and burden of the day."<sup>23</sup> Unlike the alien Japanese, Miller argued, African Americans deserved America's promise of equality as citizens and as their "just and rightful due."

Those separations among racialized minorities were assuredly accompanied by solidarities crafted across racialized divides, and those conflicts derived from and sustained the raced, gendered, sexualized, and classed social formation even as those unities resisted social hierarchies.<sup>24</sup> To forge a new future, as the President's Initiative on Race proposes, there must dawn this realization of racializations as constructions that uphold the relations of power and a determination to dismantle them. The 1967 commission came

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close to that when it proposed to attack "the continuing economic and social decay" that result in discontent and "threaten democratic values fundamental to our progress as a free society."<sup>25</sup> It thus issued a call for "national action—compassionate, massive and sustained, backed by the will and resources of the most powerful and the richest nation on this earth" to fulfill "our pledge of equality and to meet the fundamental needs of a democratic civilized society—domestic peace, social justice, and urban centers that are citadels of the human spirit."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the urgency has fled us. Perhaps the soaring vision is gone. Perhaps the failures of previous efforts have stymied us. Instead of a "massive and sustained" national campaign of will and resources directed at economic and racial inequality, the 1998 board recommends stricter enforcement of laws, better data collection, educational enhancements, more studies and testing, and support of existing initiatives and programs, among other things. And it calls on individual Americans "to become informed about people from other races and cultures," "to think about race," "to get to know people of other races," and so forth. The cure, considering the enormity of the crisis, can astonish.

## Notes

1. *One America in the 21st Century: Forging a New Future*, Advisory Board's Report to the President (Washington, DC: 1998), 1.

2. *Ibid.*, i.

3. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 1, 2.

4. Council of Economic Advisers, *Changing America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being by Race and Hispanic Origin*, September 1998.

5. *Ibid.*, 21, 26, 36.

6. *Ibid.*, 21, 23, 33.

7. *Ibid.*, 20, 33, 36.

8. *Ibid.*, 21, 26, 36.

9. *One America*, 3.

10. *Ibid.*, 33.

11. *Ibid.*, 36.

12. *Ibid.*, 16.

13. *Ibid.*, 38.

14. Richard Driannon, *Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

15. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 52–53, 58, 160, 162.

16. Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle Against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 71–73; and Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 54–55.

17. Haney Lopez, *White by Law*, 61, 67, 203–207.

18. *Ibid.*, 86–90.

19. Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 167–168.

20. Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 68.

21. Quoted in McClain, *In Search of Equality*, 22.

22. Haney Lopez, *White by Law*, 148–149.

23. Kelly Miller, *The Everlasting Stain* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1924), 163.

24. See, e.g., Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, especially chapter two.

25. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 410.

26. *Ibid.*, 410, 413.