

ECAASU Conference 2012
Keynote Speech
Duke University
February, 24, 2012

When I spoke with Ting-Ting [The ECAASU Program Committee Chair] and she said there would be 900 students in attendance, I thought for a moment that I needed to get a Q-tip to clean out my ears. She repeated the number and I had heard it correctly. After our conversation, it hit me. I felt fear, great responsibility, and excitement. To me, this speech is the most important one I've given in my life. To be part of a gathering of this magnitude that serves to foster and grow an up-and-coming generation of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, to me, there is no greater privilege.

When I was younger, I often times didn't have the language or the vocabulary, to discuss my racial identity. I knew I was Taiwanese and American, but there would be intermittent reminders, growing up in a small Southern town, that most people thought I was different. I had to discover who I was. I had few role models. I had my family, but my parents worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, such is the life of restaurant owners. My sisters rarely talked about race. The oldest, I would say had it the hardest, being just the 2nd Chinese family in the city, I saw my oldest sister become hardened to the playground taunts and she made it her life's mission to make those ignorant peers "pay." She was going to show them by being the best student in school, captain of the cheerleading squad, president of her college sorority, and one day, just maybe, she would be their boss. Then who'd have the last laugh?

My second oldest sister, she was, and still is, the sensitive type. She hates conflict and would often lock herself away in her room with her Strawberry Shortcake dolls. At least they were all-inclusive, multicultural tea parties. At school, she silently endured any kind of mistreatment. Burying herself in books, she dreamed of going away to an elite college, away

from the small town, Southern ignorance. She wanted to surround herself with intellectuals and after 15 years of higher education, eventually ended up in a land of *safety* and *acceptance* for people that look like her. San Francisco.

For me, as the wild, youngest child in the family, I had a temper and a loud mouth. I didn't particularly have much interest in school and would much rather be climbing trees and jumping off the roof into the swimming pool. Lesson learned, don't try that at home unless you like knocking yourself out with your own knee.

For me, the road to identity discovery was long, and I've finally realized that it is an unending journey. Upon going to college, working in the real world for some years, then going back to school for graduate studies, there have been so many changes I've made over the years. Much of the time, it's hard to parcel out who I really am and what I really want from the expectations externally imposed from both my family and society. As a sociologist, I know that I've been socialized from birth, or even beforehand if you count the way folks talk to babies in utero.

REDISCOVERY is a major goal for this conference. There are individual experiences and challenges for each participant to "build a new framework." To rebuild, we must recognize the frame in the first place, to understand that outside forces have constructed what we know of ourselves today. The 10-year-old with the mullet haircut (I'm from the Deep South people), had to wrestle with notions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality with very little guidance. Asian American women in the media were rare, Margaret Cho had a television sitcom briefly, but the writers were tailoring to whites, getting them to laugh at stereotypical portrayals of Asians. It. Was. Horrible. I could feel my anger swelling up at Margaret, so insulted that she

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would allow herself to be used in that manner, to give me hope, even just briefly, and then slap me in the face. At least, that's how it felt.

For Asian Americans, when it comes to mainstream media, moments of visibility are few and far between. It's rare for us to see someone on television that looks like us or our brother or sister or father or mother or cousin and for that media portrayal to seem real, everyday, accurate, and void of stereotyping. Within our Asian American Pacific Islander umbrella, it's even more rare to see someone from Southeast Asian, South Asian, or Pacific Islander descent on the big screen or on television.

Too often, even in attempts for inclusion, writers and producers miss the mark, perpetuating longstanding stereotypes like the episode of Glee titled the “Asian F.” Harry Shrum Jr. is pressured by his overbearing father to quit the Glee club because he received an A- on an exam. We can see when anti-Asian stereotypes are used to breed fear with a recreation of the movie “Red Dawn” about an invasion of the United States by what was originally scripted as Chinese enemies, but has now been substituted with North Koreans (not that those who are non-Asian can really tell the difference). Another recent example is Asian American actress Lisa Chan’s terrible choice to take part in Pete Hoekstra’s political ad that aired Super Bowl Sunday. Chan pretended as if she was in a far off Asian country, peddled her bike through a rice paddy to stop and in what was supposed to be broken English she told the camera, “Thank you, Michigan Senator Debbie Spenditnow. Debbie spends so much American money. You borrow more and more from us. Your economy get very weak. Ours get very good. We take your jobs. Thank you, Debbie Spenditnow.” These media portrayals only perpetuate anti-Asian stereotypes.

But, is it possible that we can be creators in our own RENAISSANCE? As the conference theme describes, “at its core, the notion of rebirth and reinvention epitomizes our notion of

renaissance.” Right now, we are in a moment when it seems as if we’re defying stereotypes with the emergence of NBA star Jeremy Lin. He has been catapulted into the limelight, largely overlooked, but that’s a whole other discussion we’d need to have about the intersection of race and constructions of masculinity. Before Lin, we’ve had Asian Americans creating and reinventing what it means to be Asian Americans: artists, YouTube stars, musicians all challenging stereotypes of the past. We have to continue to reinvent ourselves so Jeremy Lin’s case does not get chalked up to being just a one of exceptionalism or tokenism.

The fact that we are all gathered here, at Duke, assembled on a campus with a reputation and history of racial hostility demonstrates how REVOLUTION can create results. The Duke family made their fortune off the backs of slaves on a tobacco plantation. Today, this night, we are here to discuss the future of racial progress in the United States. Kinda cool, huh?

The last bullet of the conference theme is, REVOLUTION. Stated in the conference program, “The Civil Rights Movement started with a dream, that things could be different, that change was possible. In this context, we need to ask ourselves what does an Asian American movement look like? What change are we fighting for? At the heart of revolution is the understanding that there could be a new reality, a better one, and that people together can unite to bring it about.”

Now we may disagree on how to move forward. On one hand, you have those who are strategic and want to work within the limits of the law to promote fair and equal treatment. With activists on this front, we’ve seen constitutional amendments passed to free enslaved people, protect voting rights, eliminate discrimination in housing, and the list goes on. I applaud those efforts and the results have REVOLUTIONIZED the law as it was once written.

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Where we fall short, where the progress train tends to stall, is in enforcement of the law and creating any significant change in not only the ideology of white supremacy, but also the cost to people of color, psychologically, emotionally, physically and the material reality of unjust enrichment and unjust impoverishment. With that said, on the other hand, for racial progress Audre Lorde urges us to think outside the box, because we cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. It is WITH the law that our oppressive house was built, so we must dismantle it with our own tools that we create.

REVOLUTION can take numerous forms and it is my hope that we take from this weekend a host of, not only ideas, but also concrete plans on how to make our world better. In order to revolutionize the world you have to first DISCOVER or REDISCOVER who you are or who you want to be. That new self, must be invented or reinvented, created or recreated. That transformative process IS the Asian American RENAISSANCE. Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought* urges African American women to find, somewhere, some self-valuation. In a society that constantly tells Black women that they are worthless, subhuman, and inferior, she encourages them to find their own meaning and value.

Anti-Asian American sentiment can sometimes be more subtly masked in invisibility or exclusion. So, we must also do work to find ourselves and not just accept and imitate what people perceive us to be. There was once a Yellow Power Movement. Asian Americans walked alongside their brethren in the Black Power Movement. In this “post-racial” society it seems like we no longer want to see race or see our similarities as people of color. We are not so different and we want the same thing, to be treated as a whole person. To truly REVOLUTIONIZE life for Asian Americans, we must see that we share things in common not only the fight for racial

justice, but in other causes for equal treatment and equal rights. But before you can widely and globally expand a revolution, you have to start here [Hand placed on heart].

I opened this address saying that, “When I was younger, I often times didn’t have the language or the vocabulary, to discuss my racial identity.” My, how things have changed, now it’s like I can’t shut up about it. Each of our paths are different. There is not one road to rediscovery, renaissance, or revolution. When I was that 10-year-old, 20-year-old, and even just 5 years ago, I would not have imagined that I would be here, standing in front of all of you. I’ve changed, gone through a REDISCOVERY and RENAISSANCE. And, I am looking forward to working together for REVOLUTION.