

Beyond the Hate: Demanding Community Accountability and Racial Justice at University of Michigan

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On September 15, 2005 at a residence near the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, two Asian students reported that two white students, standing on a balcony, urinated on them, threw objects at them and yelled racial slurs. Since The Michigan Daily brought the story to light in a September 21 article, much outrage and controversy has ensued over the facts and implications of the urination incident. The only official response from the U of M administration came eight days after the alleged incident in a tepid letter from President Mary Sue Coleman who condemned “incidents of bias” and advocated “inclusiveness” “tolerance” and “diversity.” Faculty, alumni and student groups on campus have been organizing to demand that U of M move beyond the rhetoric of “diversity” and “tolerance” and to implement concrete policies in support of racial justice and community accountability. Despite controversy around the details of the alleged assault, this incident has sparked a productive discussion as Asian/Pacific Islander (API) students and faculty at U of M are coming together to confront the shared historical and contemporary experiences of white supremacist racism, on campus and beyond.

API Historical Experience of Racism in the US

Since the 1800s, Asian/Pacific Islanders have come to the United States as a result of the shifting economic situations of their home countries and workforce needs in the United States. US immigration policies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries made it possible for workers, indentured servants, and other forced laborers from various Asian countries to come to the US. APIs were valued as “cheap labor” in the U.S. and immigration was allowed only insofar as market demand existed for Asian labor. Once economic needs had been satisfied, discriminatory immigration barriers such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (effective from 1882 through 1943) were re-institutionalized. But API workers contributed greatly to the economic expansion of the country, helping build the nation’s first railroads, working as contract laborers in the sugar plantations of Hawai’i, and eventually establishing vibrant business districts in major cities.

In the US, Asians collectively faced discrimination and racism. It wasn’t, for example, until after World War II that it became possible for any API immigrant to attain US citizenship. Despite the general tendency in the US to conflate all Asian ethnic groups, economic and military interests in the US have simultaneously served to drive a wedge between various Asian ethnic groups, subverting pan-Asian identity and preventing the possibility of pan-Asian solidarity. For example, during WWII many non-Japanese Asians would go out of their way to say they were not Japanese for fear of being targeted as the “enemy” and being sent to internment camps. We recognize this shared racialization by using the term Asian/Pacific Islander (API) to talk about our collective community that is comprised of diverse and distinct ethnic groups, and to honor the pan-Asian organizing that brought forth the growing Asian American movement.

The case of Vincent Chin speaks directly to the importance for pan-Asian organizing strategies. In 1982 in Detroit, autoworkers were increasingly losing jobs, and anti-

Japanese rhetoric was rampant in local media, as US auto companies and the UAW were all eager to force blame for job loss on Japanese imports. While the success of Japanese companies in the U.S. did have a negative impact on American car companies, the more significant factors leading to job loss were automation and the ability to exploit cheaper, often non-union labor in the south and Mexico. On a hot summer night in June 1982, Chinese American Vincent Chin was having his bachelor's party at a bar in Highland Park when he got into a verbal altercation with two white autoworkers, one of whom had just been laid off. After telling Chin, "It's because of you little motherfuckers that we're out of work," the two men followed him out of the bar, pursued him for several blocks and beat him to death with a baseball bat in the middle of Woodward Avenue. Neither men ever spent a single night in jail for the murder. The logic of "they all look the same" allowed Vincent Chin (a Chinese American mistaken for Japanese) to be targeted by white racists. As APIs continue to be discriminated against as a racial group, we continue to require a Pan-Asian movement to resist this discrimination.

The Vincent Chin case furthermore shows how API workers have been used as capitalism's scapegoats for injustices inflicted upon other workers in the US. Anti-API racism has proved a convenient mechanism for employers to divide workers on the basis of race, pitting ethnic groups against each other to ensure that racial differences would prevent them from uniting around shared economic interests. Today as the U.S. economy continues to deteriorate and as China becomes an increasingly powerful economic rival, it is possible that we will again see an increase in anti-API racism. We must build a movement today that can resist this tendency and demonstrate how we all have a collective interest in ending any and all forms of racist oppression.

Anti-API Hates Crimes

Despite this historic experience of anti-API discrimination and racism, many so-called experts have argued that APIs do not experience racism as much as other racial groups. Not long after the September 15 incident, Michigan Radio's Jack Lessenberry Show aired a story on hate and bias incidents. A woman representing the Anti-Defamation League stated that low statistics show that Asians do not experience much racial bias. This misrepresentation of the API experience with racism is often perpetuated throughout media. What is missing in these statistics is mention of the phenomenon of underreporting in which real manifestations of anti-API racism fails to be reported and documented.

The Asian American Justice Center (AAJC) has been collecting data and releasing an annual audit of anti-API violence, hate incidents and ethnic intimidation since 1994. AAJC's annual audit is the only comprehensive, nationwide, non-governmental collection and examination of anti-API violence. Over the years, AAJC has found that anti-API violence manifests in threats, intimidation, vandalism, assaults, murders, and sexual assault and battery. Recently, the study finds, there has been an increase of incidents at schools and on campuses. AAJC's analyses show that underreporting occurs in large part due to the lack of reporting by local officials and municipalities. Many states do not report race or ethnicity in their data, and local officials also often fail to classify hate-motivated crimes correctly. Since AAJC has begun their annual audit, they have found a general decrease in federal funds for local hate crimes investigation and racial conflict resolution, further diverting much-needed resources

and attention towards solving these conflicts. To compound these institutional challenges, there are language barriers, lack of knowledge of rights and resources available, and a general distrust among API communities toward local officials to follow through. AAJC stated that underreporting remains a large obstacle to address increased hate crimes on university campuses, and according to U of M Professor Phil Akutsu, a national study found that 70% of API students who experience ethnic intimidation or harassment do not report it.

Response to the Urination Incident

At U of M, the September 15 incident sparked many students to come forward with testimonies of their own experiences with racial intimidation. In many ways, this has been one of the most important results of the alleged hate incident. Town hall forums, meetings and teach-ins have provided a space for the API community to voice experiences that would have otherwise gone unheard and to mobilize resistance as a community. In one town hall meeting held at the Trotter House Multicultural Center, students and community members recounted stories that ranged from basic ignorance to outright sexual harassment. One attendee described her experience of living in Ann Arbor and having heard “every possible Miss Saigon reference,” while walking down the street. Others gave reports of being told to “go get a greencard” or “go back to where you came from.” For many attendees, these incidents were never reported or addressed. Mirroring national trends, there exists at the University a lack of knowledge of existing resources and the unspoken assumption that the University would not respond immediately or effectively to reported incidences.

As the recent response from the University has shown, students of color have no reason to assume otherwise. Many students of color find the letter from President Coleman to be too little too late, when the real need is to dramatically transform a campus climate which allows ongoing harassment of and bias towards APIs and other students of color.

Demanding Racial Justice at U of M

The University of Michigan prides itself on being a frontrunner of socially just policymaking, and in many ways it lives up to its reputation. The administration worked hard to defend their affirmative action policies in the Supreme Court battles in 2003. However, we believe it is not enough for the University to merely promote “diversity” and “tolerance” on campus. We cannot continue to be mocked, marginalized and pissed upon. We have no other option but to demand a radical transformation of the campus climate into a place where such incidences, whether they be overt hate crimes or more subtle forms of oppressive racist behavior, will no longer occur. These demands must be placed not only at the doorsteps of University officials, but before the entire campus community.

From the University administration, we must demand an end to policies that disproportionately and damagingly affect students of color and other marginalized student populations. For example, two years ago, when faced with a budget crisis, the University took the predictable and uncreative route of drastically reducing funding for all campus resources and departments servicing students of color, women and queer people. Such funding cuts were only halted as a result of continuous and determined

agitation by student organizers. Ever-increasing tuition rates and reliance on Eurocentric and class-biased standardized testing systems for admittance criteria are other examples of policies that disproportionately and damagingly affect people of color, as well as poor people.

We must demand that the University continue to support and strengthen affirmative action policies, intensify recruitment and retention programs for students of color, and bolster the campus resources that provide services to students of color. The University must also develop a comprehensive plan for addressing hate crimes in the campus community. We must be vigilant and go still further, insisting that U of M place the demand for racial justice as a central concern in all areas of University policymaking.

Improving the campus climate for students of color and other marginalized students may require us to develop U of M's Race and Ethnicity requirement to be more comprehensive and include more anti-oppression elements. Since 1991, the University has required that undergraduate students take one class fulfilling a "Race and Ethnicity" requirement. These classes aim to "address issues arising from racial or ethnic intolerance." Today, students can fulfill their "R&E" requirement by taking classes that do not expect them to acknowledge or confront issues of privilege and institutionalized oppression. An "anti-oppression" requirement would mean developing and implementing a curriculum to challenge white supremacy as well as classism, patriarchy, gender oppression, heterosexism, and ableism. Such a curriculum would require students to consider how they may have been privileged or harmed by systems of oppression and to think about what their role is in ending such systems. If it were to take on this and other bold initiatives, adopting rigorous standards of anti-oppression education, the University of Michigan would emerge as a model for other universities to look to.

Beyond administrative policy, however, the campus in general must work to end white supremacist norms of social behavior. White supremacy manifests itself through cultural appropriation, cultural ignorance and a failure of white students to acknowledge and confront their white privilege. The propensity of "racial" party themes on campus is one telling example. In 2002 one student co-op held a "40's and Fried Chicken" themed MLK Day celebration. Earlier this year there was a "Chinese Cowboy" themed party, which was also known as the "Howdy Konichiwa" Party (Konichiwa means Hello in Japanese). A Hawai'ian luau theme is equally degrading. White people may think of it as harmless and even a respectful tribute, but this assumption is only possible if one is ignorant of Hawai'ian resistance to US colonial violence, annexation and the rampant commodification of their culture that has persisted for centuries. People of color are not the cute, funny objects to be kept on the shelf of white culture and played with at will, nor do we enjoy being memorialized in racist stereotypes. The overwhelming ignorance of students at the U of M to the histories and struggles of people of color reflects shamefully low standards for an institution which claims such prestige.

Beyond the Hate

An ideal campus climate is one where people act with a sense of community accountability to one another. This means acting out of a shared sense of our own and other people's humanity. API students at U of M must take the opportunities arising from the September 15th incident to not only challenge white students at U of M, but

to challenge ourselves and other students of color. How do we take our higher educations for granted, seeing the experience only as a means to achieving high-paying careers? How do we operate with elitist, patriarchal, ableist or homophobic assumptions, which compound the oppression experienced by people within our own, as well as other communities? We must recognize such assumption as being just as oppressive as those racist assumptions held by ignorant white students.

During his talk at the United Asian American Organizations' teach-in, Professor Kurashige called on API students to consider two important concepts: responsibility and solidarity. Kurashige asked, "In what ways are we responsible to the legacies of our ancestors, who struggled through internment camps, anti-API violence and contract labor exploitation so that we could be here? What solidarity can we offer to those API communities still struggling today, in the U.S. as well as to those struggling in our countries of origin? Finally, in thinking about the fate of campus politics, what can be gained from alliances between API students, other students of color and progressive white students?"

There is a tremendous amount to gain when relationships between groups and individuals are able to transcend categories of identity and grow out of fundamental respect for our own and each other's humanity. However, we have to recognize that this kind of culture does not exist as naturally or easily as "multicultural fairs" and United Colors of Benetton ads would suggest. We should strive towards a "critical multiculturalism" where people come together without having to leave their differences, their struggles and their histories at the door. As visionary poet and theorist Audre Lorde said, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

The alleged hate incident at U of M has brought new questions into to the political dialogue around racial justice at U of M. It also helped to politicize greater numbers of students, particularly in the API community. We must seize the opportunity to see the potential within ourselves and strengthen our community, with the understanding that identity-based communities provide important networks of support and solidarity amongst all people of color. We must also be committed to further developing our critical understandings of the world, based on the struggles of other communities as well as our own. In doing so, we lay foundations for future struggles, broader visions and deeper solidarities.