

A Conversation about Asian Pacific America and President Barack Obama: Interview with Dr. Konrad Ng

INTRODUCTION

When Dr. Konrad Ng met his future wife (and President Barack Obama's sister), Maya Soetero, in 2002, he had already carved out a place for himself in the dynamic field of Asian cultural studies. Today, he pursues his intellectual art as an assistant professor at the Academy for Creative Media (ACM) of the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM). His work focuses on Asian American film and new media aesthetics. This scholarly devotion to an ever-evolving, visual medium seems especially apt given his personal history—which unfolds in a global, yet also American, tableau of experiences: a Malaysian Chinese, who grew up in Canada, obtained his doctorate at UHM, and is now part of the nation's first family. Here, Dr. Ng shares his reflections—political and otherwise—on his scholarship, API America, and the president.

I. DR. KONRAD NG: ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICA, ACADEME, & AESTHETICS

Growing up as a racial minority in Canada, how has it been being part of the racial majority in your new home of Hawaii?

First, thank you for the invitation to contribute to the Asian American Law Journal. As a scholar of Asian cultural politics, I appreciate how this journal treats Asian America as an optic to explore American history, jurisprudence, and culture. I join in the celebration of its fifteen years of important and timely scholarship.

This question is interesting. The islands' Native Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific heritage certainly offered an immediate sense of familiarity and comfort when I arrived in 1999. However, I also experienced what I think many first-time visitors realize: life in the archipelago is more complicated than what is represented in films, television shows, and history textbooks—or for that matter, in the advertising campaigns by the tourism industry. I became interested in the disjuncture between Hawai'i's popular representation and lived experience—that is, what kinds of voices, issues,

and problems were overlooked when the industries of tourism, military, and state government were dedicated to promoting a singular representation? How one understands Asianness in Hawai'i is part of this disjunctive dynamic. While more people "look like me," the cultural and historical politics of Asianness in Hawai'i is different than the Asianness that exists on the continental United States. Consequently, different social, cultural, and political agendas and understandings must apply to this place.

I don't think this attitude is unique to someone coming from Canada. Similar perspectives are being presented at professional conferences for Asian American Studies and American Studies.¹

Tell us about your work at the ACM and the trajectory that led you to UH and Hawaii.

I am so happy to be part of the Academy for Creative Media (ACM). It is a terrific new undergraduate program at the University of Hawai'i (UH) that offers the critical study and production of narrative storytelling in cinema, animation, and video game design. I teach courses on film and new media aesthetics, history, and criticism with a focus on Asian and Asian American cinema and cultural production.

How did I end up in Hawai'i? During the year before I came to Hawai'i, I was finishing my M.A. and working with at-risk teens in the court system. At the time, I was wondering if I was putting whatever talent and experiences I had to good use. I enjoyed working in social services and I believed in my work, but I also developed a growing desire to do something different. Many things appealed to me—continuing in a different branch of social services, working in government, applying to graduate or law school—and in the absence of a clear direction, I submitted applications for a variety of positions and programs. One school that caught my attention was the doctoral program in political science at UH. The program appealed to me because there was innovative scholarship being done on cinema and identity politics. Colleagues praised the faculty and I liked the progressive nature of the program. I was accepted at UH and awarded an assistantship to fund my study. I loved it. Three years after I started the program, I fell in love with the woman who would become my wife and unbeknownst to me at the time, she was the sister of the future President of the United States.

1. See generally CANDACE FUJIKANE & JONATHAN Y. OKAMURA, ASIAN SETTLER COLONIALISM: FROM LOCAL GOVERNANCE TO THE HABITS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN HAWAII (2008); JONATHAN Y. OKAMURA, ETHNICITY AND INEQUALITY IN HAWAII (2008).

Please describe your academic interests and current scholarship.

Prior to my position at the ACM, I was the Curator of Film and Video at a marvelous museum called the Honolulu Academy of Arts. I was also a film programmer for the Hawaii International Film Festival and the administrative manager for a cultural studies graduate program co-coordinated by the UH and the East-West Center. So, my working environments were always about exploring, studying, and expanding our practices of representation. I became interested in how the national imaginary affects the identity of Asian artists and the narrative and aesthetic dimensions of their work. My feeling was our attachments are more complicated than what can be expressed by basic descriptions like “American” or “Chinese” or “Asian.” To this end, my dissertation examined representations of Asian cultural identity in narrative and experimental feature films and short videos from Asia and the United States. I was interested in how technologies of the moving image could craft alternate imaginaries for understanding Asianness. That is, rather than treat cultural identity as the static outcome of citizenship, how have artists used the aesthetic properties of cinema and new media to express lives shaped by contemporary forces, such as diaspora, exile, transnationalism, colonialism, militarism, imperialism, or globalism?

During the 2008 presidential campaign, I saw similarities between the exploration of Asian identity in narrative and experimental films and the creation of Asian Pacific American (APA) new media political expression: both sought to expand the meaning of citizenship and offer portraits of cultural life that are often overlooked. The emergence of these new media works during the Obama campaign offered an extraordinary portrait of America’s evolving media ethos. My current project is documenting and examining APA new media voices from the campaign trail—such as Asian Americans for Obama (www.asianamericansforobama.com) or South Asians for Obama (www.safo2008.com).

Overall, the focus of my scholarship is to transform the cultural and political discourse of Asianness in America. I want to engage and challenge stereotypes, empower voices and in general, excavate excluded experiences if those perspectives impact the outcome of political and cultural life. The objective is to help perfect a social consciousness of mutual recognition.

II. A (FIRST) FAMILY MATTER: A MULTICULTURAL HOUSEHOLD, PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN & SCRABBLE

You immigrated to the United States in 1999. Nine years later, you are a member of the first family. How do you feel about this, and what is it like to be part of the new face of American families?

I can say with all certainty that my being part of the first family felt like an absolutely remote possibility until a few months ago. When I met Maya in 2002, there was no talk in the family about seeking the presidency. Even after Obama announced his bid for the Presidency, I became focused on securing the nomination and didn't allow myself to sort through how it might feel to win. Now, after I see pictures of the inauguration or read/hear the words "President Obama," I fully realize how we have cut a new profile for the first family and the symbolic, historic, and political meaning of our portrait.

I hope that the diversity of our family's face introduces new iconography into the American experience and offers a point of connection for people across the country and around the world. I should note that I believe our narrative was also new for Asian and African Americans. Consider that Obama was born in Hawai'i, lived in Indonesia, and speaks some Indonesian. Maya was born in Jakarta and is of Indonesian descent. She speaks Indonesian and Spanish and her brother is black. Maya and Obama were raised by a single mother (who was white) with the help of their grandparents (also white) in a 1,000 sq. ft. rental apartment in Honolulu. Of course, their depth of character goes well beyond my description; but up until the start of the campaign, their narrative was an uncommon popular biography for Asian and African Americans. Hopefully, this kind of biographical diversity can help us form more complex or imaginative understandings of what is possible and desirable in identity.

How is President Barack Obama as a brother-in-law? Do you have any anecdotes about the president that characterize your relationship and/or his character?

He is great. He is a loving family man. He is incredibly talented, generous and has a great sense of humor. Maya and Obama are very close and they are both blessed with the ability to express intellectual curiosity and dexterity in a down-to-earth way. My conversations with Obama tend to be about film and our daughters. The last thing he usually says to me is: "Take care of my sister."

One thing about Obama and Maya is that they have a loving brother-sister relationship—until it comes to Scrabble. The game transforms their

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relationship into a competitive, but healthy, sibling rivalry. Maya has said that Obama can be an “indelicate” winner at Scrabble and he has performed victory dances after winning games. Maya claims to have felt badly for winning their last game since it was just before the election. I wasn’t so sure that she felt badly at all. Their competition is fun to watch.

What role did you and your wife, Maya Soetoro-Ng, play in the campaign? How did your participation impact APA political interest?

I helped organize outreach to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in states across the country—it was important to me to have APA voices in the mix—and I helped organize the campaign in my home state of Hawai’i. Basically, I campaigned, made phone calls to voters, fundraised, blogged, and participated in other new media activities. When Obama announced his bid for the presidency, he argued for the need to transform the American political map and change our political discourse. For me, that meant growing the electorate. The country needs to empower people who have been overlooked in our politics and work on building coalitions across demographics.

Maya spent most of her time on the campaign trail, discussing her brother’s character and platform as well as listening to people’s stories. Before their grandmother, Madelyn—or “Tutu,” as we called her—became seriously ill, Maya campaigned across Hawai’i and in states, such as California, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, and South Carolina.

One amazing aspect of the campaign was the internet-savvy, grassroots, horizontal nature of its strategy and structure; this meant that most of what we did for the campaign was available to all Obama supporters. Programs such as www.My.BarackObama.com helped organize and empower supporters by being an open portal to the campaign.

We met so many people who embraced the call for service and who, by the end of the campaign, became competent community organizers. We worked with many hardworking, talented and dedicated campaign staffers of Asian and Pacific descent in all areas of the campaign.

Can you describe your life before the campaign/election and after? How has it changed?

We are basically the same people. Throughout the campaign, it was important to maintain a sense of consistency and normalcy to our lives in the greatest extent possible, especially for our daughter (who many noticed as the sleeping girl during the inaugural opening concert at the Lincoln Memorial) and for Tutu before she died.

III. AMERICAN COSMOPOLITAN, COSMOPOLITAN AMERICAN:
PRESIDENT OBAMA ON APAS & APAS ON PRESIDENT OBAMA

What about President Barack Obama's experience growing up overseas do you think he finds particularly valuable, and how do you see him applying that to shape his current administration?

I think this is a question for Obama to answer. He has spoken publicly and written extensively about how his overseas experiences have shaped his thinking. *Dreams of My Father*² and *The Audacity of Hope*³ continue to offer rich and insightful portraits of Obama. He has traveled to many places in the world and lived overseas. Our family spans across continents. I was born "overseas" and I think that the experience of being abroad, however long or short, affords people a degree of cosmopolitan thinking—that is, the capacity to recognize that one is embedded in a world writ large and a capability to know what the world thinks of you and why they may think that way.

From your personal and academic perspectives, how do you think President Barack Obama's childhood in Hawaii, a majority APA state, has informed him? How does this translate into how he approaches policies impacting APA communities?

Dreams of My Father offers the most informative insight on Obama's childhood experience in Hawai'i. He grew up in a majority APA state and as such, the APA community is familiar to him not as a static or idealized entity, but as a living, complicated body of people in flow. He is, and will continue to be, a good listener when it comes to APA voices.

It is important to note that Hawai'i is far from being perfect as a place. Many matters specific to Hawai'i remain unresolved, such as outstanding issues relating to Native Hawaiians, environmental issues that affect the Pacific, the role of the military, and continual questions over the health of the economy, education, and social welfare. Obama has been visiting Hawai'i annually since he left for college and is thus, cognizant of what people experience in the state. Though the Presidency takes him farther away, Hawai'i is never far from his mind.

2. BARACK OBAMA, *DREAMS OF MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE* (Three Rivers Press 2004).

3. BARACK OBAMA, *THE AUDACITY OF HOPE: THOUGHTS ON RECLAIMING THE AMERICAN DREAM* (Random House 2006).

Hawaii is a place where many racial and ethnic identities have come together. How do you think spending time in Hawaii helped President Obama to understand his own racial identities to successfully navigate the politics of race at the national level?

This is another question for Obama to answer directly. I do believe that *Dreams of My Father*, the chapter on race in *The Audacity of Hope*, and his Philadelphia speech on race (March 18, 2008)⁴ are the definitive accounts of his stance on race. In my experience, Hawai'i is a place where conversations about race are far from perfect, but people here remain in constant dialogue, which is a more progressive situation than many places in the world.

How do you see the electorate changing given the increase in non-traditional immigration paths, such as your family's? How about the impact of racial shifts in American society?

I am curious about how attitudes and beliefs about the American landscape will shift during the Obama administration—not necessarily because of Obama and his policies, but because America is undergoing profound changes. The U.S. Census Bureau projects a much different America than the one that we currently live in; we are becoming ethnically, racially, and linguistically more diverse. There are other important changes taking place as well—such as changes to the structure of families, the nature of work and recreation, etc. During the campaign, we heard from many people who identified themselves with Obama and our family not only because of the diversity of our portrait, but also because they, too, were immigrant families, scholarship kids, were raised by single parents and grandparents, or spent portions of their lives overseas. So, we are becoming more diverse. But for me, the crucial question remains: How do we fulfill the promise of this new America—and in turn, how do we encourage an actively engaged citizenry?

What changes in society need to happen for us to see an Asian American President?

There are so many talented leaders serving this country and improving the lives of people in immediate and meaningful ways—so it is hard for me to offer a prognosis for an Asian American President. I will say this: the election of Obama and the inclusiveness of his administration suggest that

4. Barack Obama, *Barack Obama's Speech on Race* (Mar. 18, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html?em&ex=1206763200&en=1877f15179da1aad&ei=5087%0A> (online transcript of then Senator Barack Obama's Speech on Race, as provided by his presidential campaign to the *New York Times*).

America has the capacity to fully embrace character as a model for leadership at the highest levels. I didn't think that I would see an African American President in my lifetime. And now, well, I am a firm believer that an Asian American President is possible.