

Assignment 1: “Autobiography & History”

(due by Friday, Jan. 14)

In the late 1960s, the field of Asian American Studies was founded on an important idea: the relationship between autobiography and history. This idea was adapted from the work of sociologist C. Wright Mills. Writing in the 1950s, Mills emphasized the importance of connecting peoples’ lives to history and turning “personal problems into social issues.” According to Mills, when each person gains insight into their life’s intersection with history, this discovery is “in many ways is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one.” Moreover, based on this new understanding, each person can become an active agent to create social change. According to Mills, the U.S. educational system robs people of this understanding by separating the study of history from gaining insight into their lives — i.e., in most classrooms, the study of “history” is isolated from each student’s autobiography. As a result, most Americans see history as something that is outside of them rather than as something embedded in their lives.

Early scholars in Asian American Studies, such as historian and activist Yuji Ichioka, adopted Mills’ ideas to uncover the “buried past” for Asian Americans and to create a new approach showing the ways that Asian immigrants not only were shaped by historical forces but also shaped America’s history. In other words, Professor Ichioka overturned the traditional perspective of historians who until then had studied Asian immigrants as “Orientals” acted upon by the racism of Whites. In its place, he pioneered a new perspective: that of “Asian Americans” as actively responding to racism, asserting their rights, and uniting with others to promote democracy and justice. This new perspective emphasized the connection between understanding history and autobiography and using that awareness to change society. This new perspective defined the mission of Asian American Studies.

For this essay assignment, each student will write a three-to-five page autobiography linking their life to history. Provide some background information about yourself (where you were born, where you live, what are the important things in your life, what are your life aspirations, etc.). However, in the tradition of Asian American Studies, focus your essay on three main questions: 1) How does your life intersect with history? (Have certain historical events, such as war, immigration, etc. shaped your life or influenced your life plans?) 2) Why is the discovery of the intersection of your life with history “in many ways a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one”? 3) Finally, how can you use your consciousness about the intersection of your life with history to shape the future and create a new history for future generations of Asian Americans?