Native Americans, Asian Pacific Americans share no common historical trauma for slavery or colonization. We share no “Asian” language or ethnic or nation or color. What we have in common, most of us would rather not.

There is an undeniable strategic value in our unity. Americans know so little about Asian cultures, in general, that the stereotypes and biases projected upon any one group bleed over onto the next. We have none in common, and it wouldn’t do any good to resist some and not the other. To a group, Asians have sometimes been held up as “model minorities” and at other times pigeonholed as spies and interlopers; but always, it seems, we are held at a distance, no matter how “American” we may become. This is at least partly because our role in American society is largely defined not by our unique contributions per se, but by our assigned roles in the unfolding drama between America’s power and capital, and between blacks and whites.

Each wave of Asian immigration to American shores has been triggered by U.S. immigration policy or military interventions in Asia. When American labor has gotten too expensive, due to union organizing victories and the like, immigration laws have strategically shifted to import workers from Asia, whether poor Chinese laborers in the 1850s to build the railroads or professional Asians in the 1970s to service the then-growing welfare state. U.S. military interventions in the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere likewise resulted in floods of Asian refugees at American gates. Today, the workers, farmers, and small landowners in Asia whose livelihoods have been crushed by the demands of U.S. multinational companies—now freed to ever to do business abroad—are being smuggled illegally into the country.

Predictably, backlashes against these workers have followed in each case. Laws excluding Chinese from becoming citizens, owning property, marrying, or attending public schools with whites were enacted in the mid-19th century. In 1942, the U.S. government interned 110,000 Japanese Americans at their homes, possessions, and savings and forced them into concentration camps upon their release—jobless, penniless—the government served as an employment agency, bidding the many requests for tenants.

The 1980s economy sparked another wave of anti-Asian violence. In 1982, Chinese American Vincent Chin was beaten to death with a baseball bat by unemployed auto workers who thought he was Japanese (and virulently not a single day old). In 1987, Navajo Mori was beaten to death by a gang at or nears in New Jersey, home of the infamous “chickee” (a vicious reference to the Indian bimbi). Today, many Asian workers serve as a sort of middle-class scapegoat between blacks and whites, and between corporate elites and workers—just tragically in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots. Even the much-harangued Asian Americans are harassed and excluded on the basis of their accents, their degree often devalued and held to higher-than-usual standards. For all the hatred regarding their success, most of them still make less money than whites with comparable educations. Undocumented Asian workers take the jobs nobody else wants, toiling in sweatshops and factories. In one particularly egregious case, dozens of Thai work-
was recently found to have been held against their will in a barbed-wire-enclosed southern California sweatshop between 1990 and 1997.

The model minority myth—consciously encouraged by embattled elites in Asian communities—likewise inserts Asians into the larger drama about blacks and whites. While an education can be had and a living made based on model minority myths (at least for some), it is at the cost of indulging the racist delusion that there can be some “good minorities” in implicit contrast to those other “bad minorities,” who have only themselves to blame.

Part of the double-bind of Asian Americans is that retaining our Asian heritage can be almost as difficult as becoming American. The American media continues to be fascinated with Asian misery and senseless oppression. When Americans gain a peek into life in Asia, it is invariably a horror scene: Indonesians eating bark, Chinese women drinking pesticides, Thai prostitutes chained to their beds, dead bodies in rivers, contaminated blood supplies, mudslides, train wrecks, massacres. Non-Asians may be strangely comforted by these tales of distant woe. But what could anyone with ties to those countries feel, beside sorrow, shame, rage, alienation, or: Thank God we’re here and not there!

The story of Asian American history, in these ways, is a story of not belonging, of alienation from America and Asia. Yet, despite all this ambivalence and contradiction about our place in U.S. society, Asian Americans have plied upon the broader American stage and have made lives and history change as a result.

People such as the human rights advocate Yuri Kochiyama; the feminist activist Arundhati Roy; the queer activist Udachi Void; the radical poet Janice Mirikitani; the public intellectuals Glenn Omata, Peter Kwong, and Mari Matsuda; the filmmakers Richard Fung and Bruce Tajima to name just a few, among many others, are building an impregnable radical Asian left to improve all of our lives.

Their legacy—the future of victory—are today’s vibrant Asian American immigrant worker movements, the growing institutions of Asian American Studies in universities, a flourishing Asian American arts community, and more. These people and the institutions they have built against the odds are the Asian makers of American history. They have and will continue to forge America to reckon with the realities of a diverse, multilingual, yellow and brown, ever-monstrous American.