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### **Author**

Chew, Pat K.

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# CONSTRUCTING OUR SELVES/OUR FAMILIES: COMMENTS ON LATCRIT THEORY

PAT K. CHEW†

## I. ROLES WE PLAY AND OUR INTERPRETATION OF THOSE ROLES

Our focus on this panel is how we construct ourselves. One ostensible way to construct ourselves is to identify the different social roles we assume—as teacher, lawyer, mother, Asian-American. Yet these roles only begin to capture our identities; how we personally interpret and perceive these roles informs us further. In our role as teachers, for instance, do we see ourselves as defenders, victims, aggressors, discriminated against, or those who discriminate against others? Are we social activist—agents of change—or soldiers of tradition? The point is that we do not assume these roles neutrally. We attach judgments and purposes to these roles. For example, do we think that being a victim yields some benefits that makes the victim characterization more attractive? Do we think that being a social agent is inherently positive?

I am sensitive to how we characterize our roles, in part, because of my own background. My parents immigrated from China as young adults, and so a number of Kevin Johnson's comments about immigrant groups resonate with me. There are generational differences that are heightened by one's immigration status: parent immigrants and their non-immigrant children often characterize their roles differently. My parents have strong feelings about some of these roles, and their judgments may conflict with my judgments.

Even the label "Asian-American" is one with which they would not identify. First, they would view the label as political, and hence undesirable. Second, they would react viscerally, "How can you group me with Japanese-Americans?" (My mother recounts proudly

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† Pat Chew is a professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, where she teaches corporate law, dispute resolution, international law particularly dealing with China, and interdisciplinary seminars on a range of topics. She received a J.D. degree with honors from the University of Texas in 1982 and an undergraduate degree in psychology and communications from Stanford University in 1972. She also did graduate work with honors in the School of Business and the School of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas.

how she protested against the Japanese invasion in China.) My parents would reject the label "Asian-Americans." Similarly, they would not accept being cast as victims—as targets of discrimination. For them, denial of that discrimination protects them from the reality of discrimination. Similarly, my parents would not attach positive connotations to the label "social agent." Their negative reaction, I hypothesize, reflects their generational perspective and is also linked to how they coped with their immigration status. As immigrants and minorities, they believe you do not become a social agent because you do not want to become so visible. You do not want to argue publicly that you are discriminated against because that would lead to unflattering publicity and other negative social repercussions. It is not a chance worth taking, given that your family is relying on your steady progress in education and work.

So when I consider how we construct ourselves, I realize there are at least two dimensions to our identities. One is the ostensible roles we play. The second is our value-laden interpretation of those roles and how we cast and carry out those roles.

## II. CLAIMS ON OUR IDENTITIES

Given that we assume these roles, and that these roles can be characterized in various judgmental ways—my next inquiry deals with claims. To what extent do we allow these roles and these characterizations to claim us? Of course, I am a mother, law professor, in some ways a leader, in some ways discriminated against—but to what extent do these roles and characterizations shape my identity? How do I sort out the various claims and decide which to emphasize and which to minimize, which to embrace and which to struggle against?

As I sort out these claims, an important part of the process is to understand the external pressures. To what extent will I permit others to impose their claims on my identity? I'm reminded of a past experience. I was doing my weekly grocery shopping at a large Pittsburgh store. As I was pushing my cart, busily selecting apples—I was oblivious to my Asian-American-ness. That aspect of my identity seemed irrelevant to what I was doing, and I would have presumed "invisible" to me and others. Yet another customer, a well-dressed middle-aged woman, apparently was not oblivious to my ethnicity. She approached me courteously, and asked in a slow cadence reserved for children and foreigners, "Do-you-know-where-the-milk-is?"

I looked Asian to her, and that apparently triggered an association with "foreigner" and not understanding English easily. Although I was not "claiming" my Asian-ness at that moment, this stranger was making that claim for me. Individuals, other groups

with which we associate, and as I've discussed in some of my writing, even the law and legal history—all make claims on our identities. Students, my law school, and a whole range of professional and community groups ask me to give speeches, be on committees, serve on accreditation teams, etc. Each time this happens, they focus on and target me because of one or more of my characteristics, perhaps because I am an established law professor, and often I suspect because I am a minority and a woman. They are claiming that piece or pieces of my identity.

This reminds me of Margaret Montoya's comments on what she calls our bordered and unbordered roles and identities. She describes how one's White identity meets one's Brown identity and how that boundary can move. I visualize our identity as very fluid. Boundaries not only move, they shift, are amorphous, wiggly, complicated, more defined and rigid in some places, and just beginning to gel in others. The question also arises, who decides how the lines are shaped and where the boundaries are? I am encouraged by a number of the speakers' comments. They applaud the power and freedom we have in shaping those lines, and thus in constructing our own identities. While we cannot totally control what claims others make on us, we can allow ourselves, to even take the initiative in, determining what claims we accept.

### III. MY MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY AND MULTISENSUAL IDENTITY

This conference has been a learning experience for me in a number of ways. In considering how we construct ourselves, we often study present experiences and recount past experiences. I sometimes write in a personal journal, for instance, as a concrete way to capture these experiences. After this conference, my journal will recall more smells, sounds, music, and touching from my experiences. I will think in more sensual terms, in part because of the way presentations from this conference were made. Recall the earlier presentation on "La Comunidad Latina" set around the kitchen table with the speakers recalling key women in their lives—I could almost smell the food cooking and hear the short hoe hitting the dirt floor. These presentations emphasized the many senses that we can tap when we think about our pasts. Using all our senses helps us to recreate more fully the experiences and the feelings they evoked.

This conference also has reaffirmed some parts of my multicultural self. As the sixth child of immigrant parents from China, growing up in the border town of El Paso, Texas, I took for granted that the world was multicultural. As I youngster, I would boast that I could stand on a high peak in the mountains around El Paso and

look out on the horizon—the United States at my feet, Mexico in the distance, and New Mexico over my shoulder.

Within my family, I was taught to speak Chinese and be Chinese. While my parents wanted me to assimilate economically and academically, they did not want me to assimilate socially and spiritually. One of my loving and indulgent mother's taboos was for her children not to date or marry someone who was not Chinese. She believed the shame it would bring to the family and the hardship it would bring me would be unbearable. El Paso has a very small Chinese-American community, so our summer vacations were spent in San Francisco and Los Angeles. There we could stuff ourselves with authentic Chinese foods, re-immense ourselves in an Asian environment—hearing the familiar tones of Cantonese and seeing crowds of yellow faces.

This conference also helped me realize that part of me is "Latina," not by blood but by experience. My family lived in the Lower Valley of El Paso in an area called Ysleta. Cotton fields surrounded our house. Farms dotted the region, typically owned by White families and worked by Mexican migrants and Mexican-Americans. We also had a grocery store very close to the border of Mexico and the United States in an urban, poor, and predominately Mexican and Mexican-American neighborhood called South El Paso. Growing up, it was as common for me to hear Spanish as English. I became part Latina by osmosis, by just living multicultural life.

I reflect upon how my multiculturalism is symbolized. This past holiday season, I visited my parents who continue to live in El Paso. Two things happened that illustrate my multicultural identity. First, my husband noted that my mother uses English words, Chinese words, and Spanish words—sometimes even in the same sentence. What struck me was that he was correct and that I had never really noticed. My family's conversations are interspersed with these various languages, vocally demonstrating the pieces of my cultural identity, including some Mexican-American culture. The second incident deals with food, which some other presenters have indicated can play such an important role in our cultural development. During the holidays, one of our family's festive meals consisted of tamales (both chicken and pork) accompanied by home made wonton soup. Delicious combination.

These two experiences symbolically capture my growing awareness of the Latina part of my identity. I hope that I am not being presumptuous because this is an overall pleasant possibility for me. Part of this increasing cultural awareness evokes some ambivalent emotions however. In our grocery store, virtually all of our customers were Mexican or Mexican-American, and our workers were

Mexican or Mexican-American. My family was always the "boss." I now realize how little I knew, understood, and in some ways, even cared about our customers and workers. And how little I knew or cared about what they thought of me and my family. Some of these realizations are self-critiques that I am finding useful, but also painful because they highlight how narrowly and in what a self-interested way I viewed the world. I am looking forward to expanding my view of who I am and who others are.

