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Xenophobia Japanese and U.S.-style

Foreigners are always a handy scapegoat

By Kat Avila | Web Published 10.24.2003

"We would continuously call for the government to work with us against crimes of illegal foreigners in Tokyo."
- Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, from the JAPAN TIMES, October 18, 2003



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Wherever you go, you are going to find xenophobic politicians. Replace "illegal foreigners" with "illegal aliens" in the above quote. It has a familiar ring, doesn't it? For public safety (as well as political) reasons, Japanese police will be more assertively hunting down foreigners who do not possess the paperwork to lawfully stay and work in Japan. Foreigners, no matter what their origin or what the color of their skin is, are always a handy scapegoat.

Of course, it works both ways. There is a lot of Japan-bashing by those same Westerners who conversely find the Japanese to be foreign in their worldview. I have been following, with a certain amount of wryness, letters published in the DAILY YOMIURI from Westerners complaining about how bothersome some Japanese people are for wanting to practice English with them, or how racist the Japanese are for doing the selfsame things smug Republican cowboys whoop over from the safety of their gated communities.

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I have discussed these issues with adult Japanese students of English. The English Only movement encourages language bullies: "Hey, you [plus/minus a racial spitball]! You're in the U.S.-of-A. Speak English only!" In Japan, there is a little twist - these people have morphed into language extortionists: "Hand over the yen first, baby, then I'll speak English with you. Otherwise, get out of my face. I only have so many English words to spare."

Segueing into the issue of Japanese racism, it emerges from our discussion that the face of racism is the face of fear - fear of the unfamiliar, the uncomprehensible, the uncontrollable. Though a rare occurrence, I have watched Japanese get up and look for other seats on a crowded train because I was a "foreigner."

A student says a previous teacher had the same experience. The students explain it is mostly because of shyness, of the possible embarrassment of being put on the spot to answer a question in English. We talk about the development of racism from the point where different sets of cultural traditions and values collide into each other.

All this makes me reflect back on what has happened, is happening, and will happen in California. What responsibilities do I have as a member of a particular community or communities - to nurture, protect, and help preserve it/them? How does one engage in community building while another community threatens to tear it down? When the borders of communities are defined ethnically and linguistically, how do we move forward for the good of all? What compromises have to be made, if any?

These should be ongoing concerns for the Californian everyman and everywoman, especially if recent election results are indicative of wider societal divisions between Americans of European and African extraction, with Latinos sandwiched in the middle. What kind of community do you want to be part of in the future? Hopefully, it will be one where there is little room for xenophobia.

*Kat Avila
(buscandocalifornia@yahoo.com)
wants the governor of Tokyo to know
that she is LEGAL (so don't come
knocking on my door).*

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(323) 259-0388 Fax (310) 496-2972 info@latinola.com

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