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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ Polo

New to your neighborhood

A love letter to African America

Salaam suadara saudara hitam manis (Peace, dear black sisters and brothers):

This is that love letter I've long wanted to write you. A letter long owed. Owed because, here we are, living next door to each other, sweating the same workplace floors, determinedly dreaming a kinder America for our children and our children's children — but no one's introduced you and me, not to each other. Not the way our grandmas, yours and mine, always said we're supposed to.

I am a New American. And I am pleased to meet you. Thank you African America, for having us in your neighborhood.

We are what scholars call "international migrants." Evening news is full of our desperation. Lawyers define us as "refugees." Transnational tribunals and polished diplomats argue endlessly about what that word really means. American politicians abbreviate our families' sorrow and devalue our ambition by calling us "immigrants" — a word and a population most won't mention, unless someone else brings it and us up first. Usually not in a nice way.

I'm asking your patience with this rambling intro, because I'm trying to explain why I've taken so long in writing you this letter. This love letter. The thing is, we arrive here, on the confluence of your region's two generous river matriarchs, a bit rattled. Shaken badly, actually. Social scientists describe our families as either struggling with profound dislocation, or suffering from traumatic discontinuities. Or both. Leaving your cozy home, your ancestral homeland, hurts. Having folks we love disappeared or killed hurts even more. We know, you know this well.

And then, getting *into* America's robust mainstream is hard. And of course you know this too. So please, also now know that we newcomers are humbled by your pain, by your elders' and your ancestors' pain. From Jamestown to Memphis to Ferguson. 400 years of pain.

What's not working well

We found an apartment here, out here in River City's far east. While our elders were unpacking our plastic sacks, while our parents were dashing to catch their two-hour bus rides to work, while our bright babies were dressing well for their beloved

America's educational, financial, social, and law-enforcement systems have failed to compassionately integrate black and white families.

After 150 years of trying.

You and me expecting these staid institutions to conscientiously integrate black and our many brown ethnic streams into a shared American mainstream, is only asking for more heartbreak.

teachers — even our youngest noticed the whistling leak, loud as a punctured rubber boat, in our newcomer optimism. There's an enormous emotional and spiritual cost for access to American wealth. Mainstreaming is exhausting, individually. It's erosive, communally.

I mean no disrespect to settled Americans, to those Old World émigrés who cultivated this fertile continent. With great gratitude, our family recalls how the United States freed us from Imperial Japan's occupation army. Our elders still smile about how respectful Yank soldierboys were to our sisters and daughters. Everyone still laughs about the funny nicknames and thick Hershey bars they gave our kids.

Everywhere, everyone has always loved Anglo-American creativity and kindness. Here and today, we newcomers love the jobs, the easy credit, the interest on savings kept in safe banks. No corruption.

But because this is a love letter from a brown guy to black folks, and because a love letter is a sincere effort to lay an authentic foundation for a nascent relationship — that is, a baseline of honesty — let me begin mine by saying that some of our now-shared nation's mainstream institutions feel heartless, to us. Really loveless. I'm talking about the machinery of our mainstream — not our neighbors, not our bus drivers or school teachers. Not in their bones, not in their hearts.

This is bad, dear Black America, because in the absence of a proper sit-down introduction, in the absence of a relationship deliberately built around your and our honest disagreements, one made of

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