



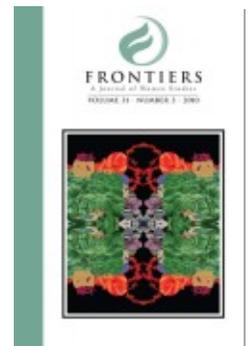
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Social Movements, the Rise of Colorblind Conservativism, and *What Comes Naturally*

MATT GARCIA

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Last spring I spoke at a University of Oregon symposium commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*.¹ Emerging from the presentations was equal admiration for another book, Peggy Pascoe's *What Comes Naturally*. In the presentation "Challenges to the Social Constructionist View of Race in the Post-Genomic Era," for example, sociologist Catherine Lee used Pascoe's work to explain how the social constructionist view of race had evolved and how the emergence of interracial relations and multiracial children had stoked research on the origins of race among biologists. Others talked about the importance of Pascoe's just-released book, and Pascoe's presence at most of the sessions and receptions influenced the discussions that shaped the weekend. It might be easy to attribute this appreciation of Pascoe to the fact that we were on a campus that has long benefited from her wisdom as Beekman Professor of Northwest and Pacific History and professor of ethnic studies, though I think the praise from reviewers and the many awards that *What Comes Naturally* has won are a testament to the influence she has had beyond Eugene and will continue to have for years to come.²

RECONSTITUTING (AND EMPLOYING) COLORBLINDNESS

What Comes Naturally makes so many contributions to the study of race and American law that we as contributors to this *Frontiers* discussion can only rely on each other to convey a fraction of its importance. In my contribution I would like to share how Pascoe's study of interracial marriage—in her book and in her award-winning *Journal of American History* article of 1996—has influenced my own work as a teacher and a writer, improving my grasp of

how the “resolution” of the miscegenation problem in the landmark 1967 case of *Loving v. Virginia* has had dramatic consequences in the realm of social movements.³

Pascoe’s discussion of how the decision in the *Loving* case contributed to the emergence of colorblindness as an ideology breaks this history out of the singular celebratory interpretation many of my students and media sources want to apply to the case. From my experience teaching a course on miscegenation and interracial relations for more than a decade now, I have noticed an increase in the percentage of students coming from interracial marriages and an even greater number of students who want to see the act of interracial love as an extension of the Civil Rights agenda of the 1960s. At Brown University, for example, the most active “identity-based” student organization on campus is the Brown Organization of Multi-Racial and Bi-Racial Students, or “BOMBS.” BOMBS hosts a series of events throughout the year, including the “Interracial Dating Symposium” during “Multiracial Week,” which I have been invited to several times and which I avoid like the swine flu. I stay away not only because I do not see myself as a couples’ counselor, and because I don’t relish discussing my private life with students, but because, invariably, many students cast their relationships or their own identities as bi- or multiracials as the salvation of the nation. Their perspectives remind me of my Mexican father’s speeches to me as a teenager after one of my numerous conflicts with my white family members over what I perceived as their “off-color” comments. My father loved to remind me that my dual heritage gave me special insight into both worlds, and he used to tell me, “Don’t you know, with your perspective, you could be president of the United States!” When one of my students’ fathers, working for the *Baltimore Sun*, wrote an article about my class on interracial relations, Robin Young, host of the NPR program *Here & Now*, invited me on her program to talk about the attitudes and opinions of my students. In our conversation Young repeatedly reached for the interpretation of Barack Obama’s ascendancy (then as candidate Obama) as evidence that we had reached a “postracial” moment. She also asserted that my students, whom she called “postracial,” were hungry to hear that race would be less and less important as the history of the *Loving* case and the social constructedness of race became more familiar to the American public.⁴

Pascoe’s book challenges such simplistic interpretations of the meaning of *Loving* by exploring the period between 1967 and 2000 in part 4, “The Politics of Colorblindness.”⁵ Not quite with the jaundiced eye I’ve cast above, Pascoe nevertheless challenges those who want to “lionize *Loving*.” While cock-eyed optimists saw the end of antimiscegenation laws as the triumph of tolerance, and some of “the liberal left” grew more committed to race-conscious rem-

edies, Pascoe shows how “the conservative right grew more committed to colorblindness” as a strategy (and reason) for dismantling affirmative action.⁶ Like others who have questioned the supremacy of the New Left in our reading of grassroots movements from the 1960s onward, Pascoe reveals the political savvy of the Right in this era. She exercises a healthy respect for people such as Ward Connerly, the black conservative University of California regent who sponsored Proposition 209, the anti-affirmative action initiative in California that passed with overwhelming support. Rather than dismiss him as an aberrant, self-promoting opportunist, she shows us how such leaders and beliefs are as much a product of the *Loving* case as Tiger Woods’s pop theory of his own identity, “Cablinasian” (*Caucasian, Black, (American) Indian, and Asian*),” or the celebrations of Obama as the first “postracial” president.⁷ In short this book is as much about our present and future as it is about our past. As Pascoe reminds us in the introduction to her first book, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West*, history is a “kind of conversation between the past and the present in which we travel through time to examine the cultural assumptions—and the possibilities—of our own society as well as societies that came before us.”⁸

Finally, *What Comes Naturally* has helped me to understand growers who challenged César Chávez and the United Farm Workers Union (UFW). My current book project explores the history of the farm workers movement during a period in which the UFW employed a consumer boycott primarily against grape producers to force the first labor contracts for California farm workers in 1970. While the boycott remained an important weapon through the first half of the 1970s, by mid-decade the union embraced a “legislative solution” that led to the formation of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1975. When funding ran out and growers lobbied to restrict additional appropriations in early 1976, Chávez and the UFW leadership responded with a statewide initiative known as Proposition 14 that would have insured, among other things, year-round funding and union access to workers on farms during union elections. The UFW chose to pull volunteers off the boycott picket lines to campaign for Proposition 14, all but killing the network of boycott houses that had helped produce the first contracts. For their part the growers formed a “No on 14” organization they called “Citizens for a Fair Farm Labor Law” and chose Japanese American small farmer Harry Kubo to head their campaign.

Kubo was an unusual choice for growers, given that Japanese American farmers had been treated as outsiders through most of the twentieth century. During World War II the state dispossessed Kubo and his family of their land and sent them to an internment camp at Tulare Lake, California. Although

Kubo regarded this event as “the darkest day amongst the people of Japanese ancestry,” he prided himself on overcoming the experience, as he told a 1978 interviewer:

If you have a chip on your shoulder and you’re going to feel sorry for yourself, you will never get ahead in this life. . . . I’ve seen too much of that, because you are an ethnic minority, you have lived under poverty, the government owes you a living, that is not an attitude Japanese-American people have; we’re going out and trying and this is what we did.⁹

As the head of the “No on 14” campaign, Kubo argued that increased access for union officials to farms constituted an act of “trespassing” and a violation of farmers’ property rights. Growers used Kubo’s internment experience as an example, presenting him on a poster with the message: “34 years ago, I gave up my personal rights without a fight . . . IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN.”¹⁰

Chávez viewed Kubo’s involvement as a cynical ploy by wealthy growers to hide behind a small farmer of color and interpreted Kubo’s concern for private property rights violations as disingenuous. In a letter to supporters Chávez ignored nuances in the anti-14 position, inserting a not-so-subtle jibe at Kubo by asserting that agribusiness had “started a slick campaign with . . . a small grower as a front, presenting Proposition 14 as a violation of property rights.”¹¹ Privately, the union circulated a memo on how to campaign for the passage of Proposition 14, advising members to challenge Kubo’s credibility as a spokesperson for the growers. “The big growers saw how bad Zaninovich [an outspoken Slavic grower] down in Delano got hurt by the bad press some years back,” the unnamed author observed, “and decided to put the willing Harry forward [*sic*] to take the flak.”¹² Throughout the campaign the union held that Kubo did not represent the majority of growers and that his message failed to accurately convey the consequences if Proposition 14 passed. Voters, however, disregarded this message. In November 1976 they defeated Proposition 14 by a 3–2 margin, a loss that the UFW never really recovered from.

Kubo’s leading role in the “No on 14” campaign could only have occurred in a post-*Loving* world. By 1976 growers admitted that internment had been a mistake. This history also became particularly useful in the context of a world where Nisei farmers like Kubo had not only recovered after the experience but also thrived. By overcoming the Internment to join the grower class, Japanese American growers became model minorities who were used against poor Mexican and Filipino farmworkers. Kubo’s own story allowed him to ignore the differences between the period of his class ascendancy and the 1960s and 1970s, when Mexican and Filipino workers butted up against new challenges such as undocumented immigration, stagflation, corporatization of farms,

and the persistent consequences of U.S. colonialism in Mexico and the Philippines. Although Kubo believed he was addressing the “human rights” of these workers by resisting the UFW, he contributed to their marginalization and powerlessness in a way that was new to the post-*Loving* era and continues to the present: the emergence of a color- (and class-) blind narrative of success, now spoken by a man of color.

Pascoe’s careful tracing of the erosion of racial classification prior to the *Loving* decision, and the rise of a colorblind ideology in the years following it, provides a powerful context for understanding Kubo and his appeal. Although it took fifty years, the majority of Americans eventually adopted the position advocated by those Pascoe calls “culturalists”: social scientists who challenged the biological foundations of race. In her study of the 1921 Arizona Supreme Court *Kirby* case, she asserts that these scholars held “not that there was no such thing as biological race but that race was nothing more than biology.”¹³ This intellectual precursor to colorblindness gained acceptance by many, if not most Americans in the mid-1960s, Pascoe tells us, after Martin Luther King Jr. shared “his famous dream of being judged not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character.”¹⁴ Ironically, during the 1970s conservatives, who had been among the most stubborn on this issue, became the strongest advocates for a meritocracy in which people in the United States would be measured by their abilities and not by the color of their skin. Colorblindness, in other words, did not ignore racial difference; it simply disregarded its importance and wanted social policy to follow.¹⁵

For Pascoe, Ward Connerly and his fight to dismantle affirmative action most embodied the rise of colorblind conservatism, though I would argue that Kubo and his fight for property rights demonstrates an articulation of these politics in a process of formation, what we might name proto-colorblindness. As a public figure he espoused a political message of racial uplift consistent with an emerging colorblind ideology that challenged racial minorities not to make excuses for their problems and to take responsibility for their own lives.¹⁶ In the years following his victory Kubo criticized both farmworkers—by extension Mexicans and Filipinos—and African Americans as two groups who, he argued, asked for government handouts and assistance based on their racial identities. He labeled farmworkers a “unique” people whose unpredictable nature made them undeserving of anything more than the minimum wage. According to Kubo, “some come early, some won’t show up at all,” but on average “they’re not responsible enough in a lot of instances to call up and say I won’t be there tomorrow.” Kubo reserved his harshest criticism for African Americans, whom he called a “handicapped people” for their presumed dependence on welfare. According to Kubo, by providing African

Americans welfare, “you destroy any incentive or desire [for them] to work on their own and to persevere.”¹⁷ Kubo contrasted these groups and others interested in government subsidies with Japanese Americans, who, he testified, pooled their resources and labor to become successful farm owners. Kubo believed that “if the Japanese-American can do it under these handicaps, the alien land laws, the fact that our parents couldn’t be naturalized and the incarceration during the war years, and they could still come back and have enough perseverance and determination to try, then anybody in this country could own a piece of land if they really wanted to.”¹⁸

Like Connerly, Kubo assumed his right to speak as a man of color and for people of color and reveled in the credibility he assumed his identity gave him to address such issues as welfare, immigration, property ownership, and labor. Although he and Connerly did not disavow the harsh experience of internment or slavery and discrimination, both argued that a colorblind American system based on merit in the postwar period allowed anyone, regardless of race, to succeed. Rather than deny the importance of their identities, they both drew on them to extend their reach over society and appeal to people with whom they felt an affinity. Thus, during the anti-14 campaign Kubo frequently honored Chávez’s hard work by admitting that “César Chávez has done some good things,” though he saw Chávez’s request for state intervention in managing labor relations as unacceptable.¹⁹ Kubo embraced his identity as a son of immigrants and a farmworker in his life after Proposition 14, assuming a seat on the local school board and accepting invitations to speak to immigrant children in the Central Valley.

In a speech to a local seventh-grade class, for example, Kubo told his mostly Mexican audience, “I’m one of you, too,” though he could not help but broaden the comparison to “Indians,” “Germans,” “Armenians,” and “probably thirty or forty ethnic groups in this country.”²⁰ For Kubo the struggles of farmworkers in the 1970s represented a version of his own life without the corrosive power of the state restricting their movement and ownership of property. As such, he articulated a philosophy dovetailing with the emerging neoliberal regime that eschewed state regulation of markets and touted individualism over social responsibility.

The example of Harry Kubo’s life and politics hews closely to the model-minority politics discussed most persuasively by Vijay Prashad, or the politics of racial uplift elucidated by Kevin Gaines, though it ultimately resembles the politics of colorblindness discussed by Peggy Pascoe in the final section of her book.²¹ Her attention to the shifting legal ground beneath the feet of people engaged in interpreting the meaning of race after *Loving* offers important historical context for the strategies pursued and the thoughts articulated by fig-

ures such as Ward Connerly, Tiger Woods, and Harry Kubo, minority spokespeople for the dominant order of things. Whereas most studies have focused on the ideas and opinions of the individuals in question, Pascoe's book turns to the rules of the game, that is, the laws that dictated who belonged to what racial category and how ordinary people challenged those rules. In this respect *What Comes Naturally* is an invaluable contribution to understanding racial formation.

NOTES

1. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1986, 1994).

2. See Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). The book's awards and honors include the Ellis W. Hawley Prize of the Organization of American Historians, the Lawrence W. Levine Award of the Organization of American Historians, the William H. Dunning Prize of the American Historical Association, and the Joan Kelly Memorial Prize of the American Historical Association. The book was also a finalist for the John Hope Franklin Prize of the American Studies Association.

3. Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 (1996): 44–69.

4. *Here & Now*, Apr. 7, 2008.

5. Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 287–314.

6. Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 303.

7. Woods declared his racial identity on *Oprah*. See also Francie Latour on *Here & Now*, Apr. 7, 2008; Gary Kamiya, "Cablinasian like Me," *Salon.com*, Apr. 30, 1997.

8. Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

9. Harry Kubo, interview with Sam Suhler, Oct. 13, 1978, 18, Special Collections, California History and Genealogy Room, Fresno County Library, Fresno, CA.

10. Poster, "34 Years Ago I Gave Up My Personal Rights without a Fight," Citizens for a Fair Labor Law, Campaigns, Political—1976—Ballot Measures—Prop. 14—General, n.d., Political Literature Collection, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

11. César Chávez to supporters, Sept. 1976, Political Literature Collection, UCLA.

12. "Memo on No on 14 Forces, as of September 5, 1976," UFW Information and Research Collection, Box 26–11, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

13. Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 125.

14. Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 301.

15. Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 302–3.

16. For the emergence of a colorblind ideology see Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 287–306.
17. Kubo, interview, Oct. 13, 1978, 27–28.
18. Kubo, interview, Oct. 13, 1978, 23.
19. Flyer for Citizens for a Fair Farm Labor Law, n.d., UFW Information and Research Collection, Box 26–11, Reuther Library.
20. Kubo, interview, Oct. 13, 1978, 44.
21. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Vijay Prashad, “Ethnic Studies Inside Out,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 157–76.