
Keith Aoki, Secret Asian Man

*Lisa C. Ikemoto**

This is a good space, one made by Keith.

I met Keith in 1993, the year he started law teaching. I remember him in Orlando at the American Association of Law Schools (AALS) conference. I remember him at the first Conference of Asian Pacific American Law Faculty (CAPALF) at Boston College. It was as if he burst onto the scene. Or rather, it was as if by his presence, he enabled us, a bunch of nerdy, self-conscious law professors, to imagine ourselves as part of anything so hip as a “scene.” He was unapologetically, unabashedly exuberant. He was a counter to cynicism and pomposity and taking oneself too seriously.

Over the years, we learned more about him. When Keith came to King Hall, we talked about him as a renaissance man, a polymath. We talked about his brilliance, his contributions to the academic literature, his productivity and creativity as a scholar, his amazing energy, his generosity as a colleague, a teacher, and as a mentor. All of that was so true.

There were other words and phrases we did not shout as loudly, at least not before the chancellor approved the offer letter. Keith was also a strategic contrarian. He disliked conflict, but he was a provocateur, a fomenter of rebellion. He embraced contradiction; he embodied contradiction. He acted the jester and spoke as the oracle. He was, above all, perhaps, a subversive. He was all of those things, with glee, purpose, irony, and sweetness. He made both the collaboration and the fight fun. He made us remember why.

On the CAPALF listserv a few weeks ago, memories spilled out. There was a thread about CAPALF III, in Los Angeles, and an evening party at my house. After the food, the music started. Bob Chang and Hiroshi Motomura brought their guitars. Keith rolled out the Bob Dylan repertoire. It was classic Keith and classic Dylan, all sung with a wink, a rasp, and a grin. At some point, Keith told us that as a kid

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when he heard “Secret Agent Man,” the theme song to the 1960s TV show, Secret Agent, he had heard it as “Secret Asian Man.” And that’s how he sang it for us — Secret Asian Man. At that moment, Keith inserted Asian Americans into popular culture long before it was ready for us. None of us will forget. He filled our memories with possibility.

At an early CAPALF event, maybe that one, Fred Yen identified himself, ironically, as “the model minority.” He owned up to getting good grades, being clean cut and wearing glasses, and, most telling of all, playing the piano. We all laughed, and then paused for a moment to recognize our own stakes in the myth of the model minority. Keith, the Secret Asian Man, in his biker jacket, his Aloha shirts, his man in black uniform, and his straight-laced suits, offered us alternity — he enabled each of us to imagine ourselves as he was, a counter-culture hero, with our own disguises and our own theme songs.

Keith probably would have objected to this event today. He would willingly accept friendship, thanks, respect, and collaboration, but not honors or accolades. I think that, as he so often did, he would have deflected this kind of attention — by popping off with a smartass remark, or riffing yet another amazing idea, with an invitation to collaborate on that idea or to collude in undermining a prevailing one. Even more likely, he would have begun talking of the others he cared about and respected. He would have talked about Mona, Sarah and Rachel, with love and pride; he would have updated us about Steve, about Jamie, Ibrahim, and Hari. He would have asked about our mutual friends, about Neil, Maggie, Fred, and Bob, and so many others. I’ve spent little face time with some of you. But over the years, Keith has joined us together.

I don’t know whether you’ve ever played Pictionary with Keith. Way back when, Frank Wu hosted a party in DC and we started a Pictionary game. Keith’s drawings, of course, were wonderful. We thought we were toast. But Keith didn’t use them to win. He used them to play and more importantly, as invitations to participate in the games. He lured us into dropping our default competitive stances, and we played together. Keith has left us a lot of pictures, smartass observations, amazing ideas, experiential and virtual relationships. All his deflections worked to our benefit.

When I said that this is a good space, one made by Keith, that’s what I meant. Keith has joined us together, with his usual and persistent, sweet and subversive grace.

For that, too, I honor him, whether or not he would have wanted it.