

Asian Immigrants and Black Americans

Fighting for the Same Piece of the American Pie

Sterlin Reaves

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What does the metaphor in the subtitle above mean? What do you infer will happen between the two groups that are fighting for the same piece of that pie?
2. Where you grew up, were there people of different national origins who ran certain businesses in the neighborhood? What was that like?

We Didn't Know Them Well

Growing up in West Philadelphia in the 1990s, my neighborhood was inhabited mostly by African Americans. There was also a small but noticeable Asian community. Back then, we referred to all of them as "Chinese," but now I know they were

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from different Asian countries. They lived in our community and owned businesses, but nobody really knew them very well. Sometimes, we got in arguments with Asian store owners, and they would yell at us in their language, and we didn't understand what they were saying.



A convenience store in Toronto was redesigned to create the exterior shots for the show, "Kim's Convenience," which is about the life of a Korean family that owns a corner store. License: [CC by 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

We thought that they weren't from here and that was why they didn't fit in. What I never considered back then, but what I'm thinking about now is: Isn't everyone except (indigenous people) an immigrant? Didn't we all migrate by choice or by force to this land?

Tension Between Us

My ancestors were brought here against their will, as enslaved people. But a lot of immigrants come here because they are forced to for a different reason. Maybe they are escaping war or some other problem. Despite our similar circumstances and apparent reasons to relate to each other, there was always this unspoken feeling that we were *fighting for the same piece of the American pie*.

That feeling, real or imagined, created a tension between both groups, and it was always *simmering right below the surface*. I sympathize with

those who *desperately seek salvation* in America. Black Americans have been here for centuries, and there has been no salvation.

The U.S. is a blend of so many cultures. But when white people brought Africans here as slaves, they didn't make an effort to preserve African culture. In fact, the opposite happened. Enslaved people were punished for speaking their own language and practicing their own religion, sometimes by death. Most Black people in America can't even trace their ancestors because of how we were bought and sold and separated from our families and our roots. For many of us, our names come from the slave masters of our ancestors, not from our families.

Thinking about it now, I realize that we are all facing similar struggles, but we haven't always figured out how to *make common cause* together. Immigrants and Black Americans both want the same thing, which is to make a better life for ourselves and our families.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What does the author learn by reflecting on his childhood neighborhood and the dynamics between his community and the Asian storekeepers?
2. Revisit the phrases in *bold italics* in the text. What do they mean?
3. According to the author, why was it hard for Black Americans and Asian immigrants to make common cause?
4. Write an essay or create a slideshow describing a racial or ethnic tension that you grew up with or currently experience. What pits the two groups against each other? What could be done about it?

Sterlin Reaves has written numerous articles for The Change Agent. He is a 45-year-old inmate in Pennsylvania. He's using his experiences to educate himself and be a "change agent." You can write to him at SC-Sterlin Reaves-dx5999, PO Box 33028, St. Petersburg FL 33733.



Photo by Kathy Kojimoto

Research these moments in U.S. history to find out more about the connections and tensions between Asian and African American communities:

Late 1800s. Chinese grocers in the Mississippi Delta: Read this story, “Dismantling the Barrier between Asians and African Americans,” in the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#).

1992. Riots in Los Angeles following the police beating of Rodney King and killing of a Black teen by a Korean grocer. Read about in this [NPR article](#).

2020. Unity between Blacks and Asians in response to anti-Asian violence and anti-Black violence. Read about it in this [Time Magazine article](#).