

Dad and his Ford at Yellowstone National Park

Just prior to the publication of this essay, my father suffered an acute thalamic stroke and was hospitalized for 45 days. As of April 2023, he is in recovery at home and undergoing outpatient rehabilitation. While the future is uncertain, we are grateful that my father survived and that he is making steady progress. This essay is dedicated to my father and my younger brother Michael (1980-2019).

# Ford and My Family

## **KATHERINE IN-YOUNG LEE**

WHEN I WAS SIX YEARS OLD, I remember my father coming home after work one day with an American flag. It was not the kind of flag that our white neighbors proudly displayed—perched on the side of their house, catching the wind. This was a flag that was purchased at a local store that might have been hand-held by a patriotic individual at a Fourth of July parade. It retailed for under ten dollars, most likely. My Korean immigrant father stuck the flagpole directly into the soil in front of our modest one-story house in suburban Detroit. While this seemed curious to me at the time, I don't remember querying my dad about his actions. I was six, after all.

The memory resurfaced much later in life, when I was in graduate school at the University of Washington. As one of the teaching assistants for a large survey course on American popular music, I was asked to select a topic for a guest lecture spot. It was either heavy metal or a special topic of my choosing. I went for the latter and decided to pitch a guest lecture on Asian American Jazz. I had to do considerable research to create the lecture, piecing together articles, recordings, and profiles from what I could find online. And through my professor, I even reached out to Anthony Brown, who was kind enough to send me relevant materials and recordings. I didn't have at my hands the excellent work that would later appear on Asian Americans and music by scholars like Deborah Wong, Susan Asai, and Grace Wang.<sup>1</sup> The more I learned about Asian American musicians such as Toshiko Akiyoshi, Fred Ho, Mark Izu, Jon Jang, and Francis Wong, the more I needed to understand the historical and political context that surrounded their artistic work.



Vincent Chin Photo courtesy of Renee Tajima-Peña

I had never learned about the history of Asian Americans at my high school in Canton, Michigan.<sup>2</sup> Nor had I ever heard of the formation of an Asian American movement or an Asian American consciousness when I was growing up. Perhaps the closest I came was being in the National Honor Society, since most of the Asian students that I knew in my high school were somehow in it. Then again, none of us really talked to one another about our Asian American identities. In college at the University of Michigan, I double majored in piano performance and musicology. I took courses in "Asian History" and "Musics of Asia," but still had little knowledge of the different diasporic histories of Asian Americans. In such a context, I had my work cut out for me in early 2001. As part of my extensive preparation for the lecture, I watched Christine Choy and Renee

Tajima-Peña's documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*<sup>3</sup> It was harrowing and haunting. After watching this film, I remembered my father's implanting of the American flag in our front yard.

This memory, I realized, coincided with the brutal beating and subsequent death of Vincent Chin in late June 1982. Because it was soon after this racially motivated murder of Chin by two white men that my father felt compelled to buy an American flag on his way home from work. Placing the American flag in our front yard wasn't my dad's way of showing his fervent patriotism. He was trying to protect our family.

### Anti-Japanese: Anti-Asian

There was a special brand of racism that was directed towards Asians and Asian Americans in 1980s metropolitan Detroit. Because of its legacy as the home of the Big Three automobile corporations of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler, Detroit has always been indelibly connected to the auto industry.<sup>4</sup> Detroit is the Motor City—the place where the assembly line intersected with the standardized, mass production of automobiles. It is the city where cars mean big business. During the 1980s, the increasing popularity of foreign imports began to threaten that big business and the livelihood of thousands of employees in metropolitan Detroit and Flint, Michigan.

While there were certainly other foreign companies making strides in the American market during this time, Japanese automakers received the largest share of the ire. Michael Moore's documentary *Roger & Me*—which chronicles the devastation wrought by GM's decision to lay off 30,000 auto workers in Flint—includes footage of a charity event where local Detroiters gleefully took a sledgehammer to a Toyota sedan.<sup>5</sup> Men and women alike took turns smashing in the windows and pummeling the hood and side of the car with a sledgehammer. This graphic bashing of a Japanese automobile by white individuals—presented as a local interest story by Detroit television news stations—was strikingly similar to the fate of Vincent Chin on the evening of June 19, 1982. Moreover, this car-bashing charity was not an isolated event in Detroit; members of the United Auto Workers also held similar bashes for the destruction of Japanese vehicles.

In Detroit, the rise of the Japanese auto industry during the 1980s pinched a central nerve. Japanese cars were outperforming Detroit-made automobiles in the domestic market. With fewer structural issues and better fuel efficiency, Japanese cars became known for their reliability, longevity, and affordability. A Japanese-made car was perceived as having better value over the long run. American automobiles, on the other hand, were deemed as unreliable and undesirable cars by consumers. This preference for Japanese cars over American ones eventually led the Big Three automakers to take drastic measures—shuttering plants and factories, outsourcing labor to foreign countries, and laying off autoworkers on an unprecedented scale. The economic recession of the early 1980s coincided with these sweeping layoffs, and unemployment reached its highest levels since the Great Depression. During this bleak time, the local economy tanked and Detroit was hard hit. The industry that had once built the Motor City had lost its dominance to a foreign newcomer. But even though there were European brands also in the same pool of imported cars, it was the Japanese automobile industry that was viewed as the archenemy.

Back in those days, one would have to think twice about driving a Japanese car in certain parts of Detroit. Tires might be slashed, doors could be keyed, or windows smashed. Worse yet, if the driver was Asian, they could likely be a moving target. Although the antagonism was directed toward Japan and Japanese automakers, Asians and Asian Americans in Detroit also became subject to racist harassment, attacks, and murder.6 It was racialized hate by association. The two white autoworkers who murdered Vincent Chin blamed the plight of the American auto industry on Japan. We know now what happened to Chin: before Ronald Ebens (a Chrysler plant supervisor) and his stepson (a recently laid-off autoworker) pursued Chin after an altercation at a strip club in Detroit, Ronald Ebens exclaimed, "It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work." We also now know that Chin was a Chinese American, working as a draftsman at a Detroit-based automotive supplier in Oak Park. Chin had nothing to do with the Japanese auto industry. When it was revealed to Ebens and Michael Nitz that Chin was Chinese by Chin's friends, this detail did not matter to the two white men.<sup>7</sup> While Nitz held Chin down, Ebens bludgeoned Chin repeatedly with a baseball bat. Chin died four days later due to injuries sustained from the beating. The horrific racialized hate crime also did not seem to matter much in the halls of justice of the Wayne County Circuit Court; despite pleading guilty to manslaughter, Ebens and Nitz were sentenced to only three years of probation and a \$3780 fine for murdering Vincent Chin.<sup>8</sup>

## Think Ford First!<sup>9</sup>

Having grown up in this particular climate in Detroit—where "Buy American" means more than bumper sticker slogans, and local forms of anti-Asian rhetoric and racism existed decades before "Stop AAPI Hate" campaigns—I have always taken comfort in driving a Ford vehicle. In fact, I cannot remember a time when our family didn't have a Ford in the garage or driveway. In nearly half a century, our family has gone through a veritable fleet of Ford sedans: Granada, Escort, Tempo, Contour, Fusion, Focus, and Taurus. We've owned multiples of these cars at times, with up to four Fords in the driveway. My parents had their own separate cars, and my younger brother and I would receive the hand-medowns. For several years in the 1990s, we also owned a blue Ford Aerostar minivan, which unfortunately coincided with my first years of driving. Although the Aerostar may not have been the epitome of cool in high school, it was, like all of the other vehicles, familiar to me. There is a certain degree of comfort with the machinery of a Ford—the feel and look of the steering wheel, dashboard, pedals, and distinctive sound of the turn signals. The blue oval emblazoned with the cursive font. It all makes sense to me.

But this level of comfort belies another important dimension that is specific to my experience of growing up Asian American in Detroit. Because of the antagonism that was leveled against Japanese residents—and by association, other Asians and Asian Americans in Detroit—I felt that driving an American vehicle was a way of proclaiming our Americanness, despite our undeniable Asian faces. By buying and driving only Ford vehicles, we were making a pointed statement: we have invested in America. We have invested in the local economy. For us, the all-American Ford felt like a kind of Motor City armor in the streets of suburban Detroit. Just as my father had planted the American flag in our front yard after Vincent Chin's death, owning Fords gave us a sense of security.

You may wonder, at this point in the essay: so, what's with the Fords? (What the Ford?) The answer is simple and requires me to narrate a bit of family history. My father worked for Ford Motor Company. In fact, he worked for nearly three decades as a research engineer at the Scientific Research Laboratory at Ford's headquarters in Dearborn, Michigan. And as an employee, my father received Ford Employee Pricing ("the A Plan") towards any new vehicle purchased from a Ford dealership.



Dad in Korea (1968)

My father first came to the United States from South Korea in 1968 to pursue graduate studies in computer science at American University in Washington, D.C. After becoming connected with the small community of Korean students who lived in D.C. during the early 1970s, my father met my mother's elder brother who was studying law at George Washington University. It turned out that they were from the same part of East Incheon and even went to the same elementary school. In 1972, my mother—a recent graduate of Seoul National University—went to graduate school at the University of Minnesota, majoring in psychology. It was my uncle who essentially set up my parents to one another. The two of them corresponded by

mail when my mother returned to Seoul after completing her Master's degree to teach at Ewha Womans University. After one year, she resigned her teaching position and came to the United States to marry my father in Washington, D.C. in 1975. I was born the following year.<sup>10</sup>

In 1977, my parents moved from Virginia to southeastern Michigan. My father worked for one year as a contractor for a consulting company. His first placement was at Ford. After that assignment ended, he was offered a regular job as a computer programming engineer by Ford Motor Company. This job offer proved auspicious, as he stayed employed at the same company for nearly three decades. For the most part, his job was stable and provided a decent salary and good benefits for our family. My mother's background in psychiatric nursing and psychology gave her the ability to work part-time as a supervisor at an adult behavioral health and developmental disability center and later, as a social worker. Her job

helped to pay for my piano lessons, which I started at age 6. In addition to handling all of the household duties, my mother drove me and my brother to our after-school extracurricular activities.

For our family, my dad's job at Ford represented stability. It also gave my parents the means to live out their immigrant aspirations. After surviving the Korean War and living through the post-war era of dictatorship in South Korea, my parents had no desire to return to their homeland. Without knowing anyone in Michigan, they took a chance and planted their roots in the Mitten State.

Unlike other metropolitan cities such as New York and Los Angeles, however, Detroit didn't have a substantial Korean American community in the 1970s, let alone a Koreatown. My parents made their home in the suburbs of Detroit and raised my younger brother and me in the midst of white American families in a cul-de-sac, and then later, in a large subdivision called Sunflower. Connections to the Korean community eventually came through the Korean churches—sprinkled throughout Detroit. There was only one Korean Catholic church community in the area; my parents joined this church in its formative years in the early 1980s and are still active members. Most of the first parishioners who comprised the Korean Catholic Church of Detroit were immigrants who worked as physicians and psychiatrists, small business owners, or were connected to the auto industry.<sup>11</sup>



Young Katherine Lee

#### **My Father and Ford**

My childhood seemed pretty normal in the suburbs of Detroit—except for the fact that we were the only Asian family in our neighborhood. I recall the occasional taunts of "Ching, Chong," from children on the bus accompanied by the racialized gesture of pulling up the corners of the eyes—known in the bully playbook as "slant eyes." This was run-of-the-mill anti-Asian racism that most any Asian American has experienced in their childhood. Growing up in the Midwest, I always felt relieved that

my name was easy to pronounce and didn't immediately mark me as Asian on the school roster. (When I became a naturalized citizen, my Korean name of In-Young became my middle name, and I was given the Catholic first name of Katherine.) This sense of "passing" as white with my American-sounding name was obviously dismissed once people took a look at my face. When I was younger, this sonic armor could only go so far before it betrayed its racialized chinks.

Yet, because I was raised to speak English fluently, I was culturally American and fit into mainstream American society well enough. My brother and I had white friends that lived next-door or down the street. The weekends often seemed to be our main portal to Korean friends and Korean culture. My parents made us attend a Korean school in Ann Arbor on Saturday mornings and Mass at the Korean Catholic Church on Sundays. During the week, we assimilated into the local culture. I grew up as a "passive bilingual," in that I could understand Korean, but did not grow up speaking it. It was only until I was an adult and lived in Seoul for several years that I became proficient in the Korean language.

When I was growing up in suburban Michigan I did not know much about what my father did for a living other than commute to Dearborn in the morning and return home to Canton for dinner. My dad wasn't one to elaborate on the goings-on at work. And truth be told, I never really inquired about his job as a child. It seemed like a mystery to me. Toward the end of his career, I learned a bit more. He worked as part of a team at the Scientific Research Lab, researching and developing control electronic technologies for hybrid and electric car prototypes. (Ford would eventually see Toyota and Honda surpass American auto companies by developing the first mass-produced hybrid vehicles in the late 1990s-early 2000s.) He also survived numerous "performance reviews" directed toward aging engineers when Ford would begin their periodic layoff sprees. These layoffs didn't just impact the autoworkers, but also the "white collar"

workers as well. My father never spoke of these difficulties to me or at the dinner table, but the concerns were relayed to me by my loquacious mother. In the evenings after returning from work, I remember him studying for various exams that he'd have to take in conjunction with his job. He would have to pass proficiencies or certification exams in order not to catch the eye of new managers looking to find reasons to terminate older employees. In middle school and high school, when I would see the headlines of *The Detroit News* reporting the latest efforts in corporate restructuring, downsizing, or the outsourcing of labor, I wondered if my father would be out of a job. But somehow, he always managed to survive the cuts. Some of his peers began to throw in the towel when management kept requiring them to become proficient with new software and programs. On the contrary, my father buckled down and studied hard for the exams. As an Asian immigrant with English as his second language, he knew that he would be subject to more critical reviews. When Ford announced in 2002 that it would be laying off 35,000 workers, my father began to plan for the worst and started to study to become a tax preparer.

In 2005, after 27 years of employment, he was finally offered an early retirement package at Ford, otherwise known as a buyout. He took it. But he had something in the pipeline—a part-time job as an employee at H&R Block during his last years at Ford. (He had gained some experience preparing taxes for the Korean priest at his church during his term as parish council president.) Ever since his retirement from Ford in 2005, my dad has worked as a seasonal full-time employee for H&R Block. Last year's tax season, at the age of 79, he worked full-time and served over 300 clients in southeastern Michigan. He remains hale and in good spirits, and has already begun studying for the next year's tax code revisions.

## The Road Ahead

Nearly two decades after retirement, my father continues to make use of the Ford Z Plan for retirees. Because, as he says, "Why not?" When I moved to California in 2012 for work, I started leasing Ford vehicles. I took advantage of my father's discount. So far, within the past ten years, I've leased two Fusions and a Focus—all different hues of red. My current car (which I now own) is a 2018 Ford Focus that was manufactured at



Katherine Lee and her Ford (August 2015)

the Michigan Assembly Plant in Wayne County. When I saw the Wayne County sticker on the vehicle's back window on the lot at a Ford dealership in Sacramento, I knew that this was my car.

My friends and colleagues have always thought it unusual or funny that I drive a Ford. They ask: "Why Ford?" They counter that one can get a Japanese or European car that has better mileage, longevity, and design. And in certain parts of California and among a certain demographic, hybrid or electric vehicles are the vehicles of choice for environmental reasons.<sup>12</sup> When I started to teach at UC Davis in 2012, I have to admit that I was shocked by how many sea glass pearl Toyota Priuses there were in the parking lots in the city of Davis. This was a sight that one would never see in Detroit—even to this day. With so many of the same-colored cars parked in the same lot, I wondered: How did people ever locate their cars? Did they wander around from Prius to Prius, listening for the two beeps? Of course, this was not an issue for me in those parking lots—as the Fords were few and far between in a place like Davis, California.

Back in Michigan, there remains a local brand loyalty to the Big Three. If one drives in southeastern Michigan (perhaps save for Ann Arbor), it will become quickly apparent that the majority of the vehicles on the road are GM, Ford, and Chrysler. Many of the peers that I went to high school with had parents or relatives who worked for the Big Three or who worked in an industry that was peripheral to the auto industry. They all drove American cars. From a practical point of view, it made financial sense to make use of the employee and "friends and family" discount. Ironically, this is even despite that the Big Three had leveled such damage to its own hometown employee base with layoffs and the overseas



Dad at Ford Rogue Factory Tour (July 2022)

outsourcing of labor to drive down costs for the sake of corporate profitability.

As I started research for this essay, I went with my father to the Henry Ford Museum and the Ford Rouge Factory. Although we had been to the museum nearly three decades prior, we had never been to the "Rouge," which now offers a public tour. Henry Ford first envisioned the River Rouge Factory as an integrated industrial factory complex where all aspects of sourcing and manufacturing could be housed in a single place. It was the largest complex

of its kind when it was completed in 1928 in Dearborn, near the Rouge River. To this day, it remains an impressive sight to behold. We happened to take the self-guided tour of the factory right after the start of the second shift. It's one thing to read about mass industrialization and Fordism, and it is another thing to witness it on the floor—quite literally, as the floor moves with vehicles on the assembly line and where autoworkers remain at their individual stations. When a vehicle approaches an autoworker on the belt, they install their respective part before the vehicle moves onto the next station. There is a steady rhythm to the assemblage of parts. In another bird's eye-viewing area, visitors could observe the advanced robotic technology that installs rear window glass with mechanized precision, in mere seconds. This orchestration of machinery and human power in motion was captivating yet sobering to watch. What was once a complex that once housed over 100,000 employees was now considerably downsized in terms of the human workforce, due to the increasing reliance upon highly advanced robotic technology.

The Ford Rouge Factory now exclusively manufactures the F-150 truck. According to a promotional video we saw on the tour, one F-150 is produced by the plant every 53 seconds.<sup>13</sup> With its latest goal of focusing on hybrid and electric vehicles within its line of Mustangs, crossover vehicles, SUVs, and its iconic F-150, Ford discontinued productions of sedans in 2019. And as of August 2022, Ford recently announced it was once again undergoing restructuring efforts in order to increase profitability. As a result, 3000 contract and salaried workers were laid off at the time of this writing.<sup>14</sup> A significant portion of the layoffs impacted Michigan employees.

This is an all too familiar cycle unfolding in the state of Michigan. It makes me wonder how this latest blow will reverberate in Detroit, a city that declared bankruptcy in 2013. Will the blame be placed on the robots who obviate the need for human labor (and salaries with benefits)? Or will the blame be placed on other companies currently outperforming Ford in the energy-efficient vehicle market? If that is the case, will a company like Tesla receive any shade since it's at the top of the electric vehicle market? Or will there somehow be a new way to spin anti-Asian rhetoric in this car-conscious city as the COVID-19 pandemic persists?<sup>15</sup>

As for my parents, they'll likely still continue to buy new Ford vehicles although they're disappointed that their reliable choice of sedans has now disappeared. I asked them if they would ever consider purchasing a Hyundai Sonata in the future. They paused for a moment and then rejected the idea. In the end, "Daddy's discount" is just too good to pass up for them.

#### Notes

- Deborah Wong, Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music (New York: Routledge, 2004); Susan Asai, "Cultural Politics: The African American Connection in Asian American Jazz-Based Music," Asian Music 36:1 (2005): 87-108; Grace Wang, Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race through Musical Performance (Durham, NC: Duke, 2015).
- Canton township in Wayne County, Michigan is on Anishinabewaki, Meškwahki-aša-hina (Fox), Myaamia, Peoria, Bodwéwadmi (Potawatomi) and Mississauga ancestral land.
- 3. Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña, directors, Who Killed Vincent Chin? Filmakers Library, 1990.

- 4. This popular commercial featuring Detroit-based rapper Eminem, which aired during the 2011 Super Bowl, shows Chrysler's "Imported from Detroit" campaign and the reclaiming of Detroit's identity as the Motor City: https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=mYsFUFgOEmM, accessed August 3, 2022.
- Michael Moore, director, Roger & Me. Dog Eat Dog Films, 1989; King Rose Archives, "Bashing a Toyota in Detroit," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNvWoMrS-m8, accessed August 3, 2022.
- 6. Robert Lindsey, "Resentment of Japanese is Growing," *The New York Times*, April 6, 1982; Masako Iino, "Asian Americans Under the Influence of 'Japan Bashing," *American Studies International* 32:1 (1994): 17-30; PBS Learning Media, "Scapegoating Asian Americans during the 1980s." PBS, https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/d9349e1c-138f-43ba-a0e9-80bea4f04b83/scapegoating-asian-americans-1980s-anti-asian-racism-connections-in-history/, accessed August 5, 2022.
- 7. The Vincent Chin 40th Remembrance and Rededication Website has resources for more information on the life and legacy of Chin. It also includes a section that informs readers about the inaccuracies that were reported in the media about the Vincent Chin case. The website clarifies that Ebens and Nitz knew that Chin was Chinese, not Japanese, before their murderous attack on Chin: https://www.vincentchin.org, accessed August 22, 2022.
- 8. The outrage over the verdict ended up becoming the catalyst for the formation of an Asian American consciousness and political movement. Many scholarly publications, essays, and news articles exist. A recently published legacy guide is useful for those new to the topic: Helen Zia and the Vincent and Lily Chen Estate, *The Vincent Chin Legacy Guide: Asian Americans Building the Movement*, 2022: https://www.vincentchin.org/legacy-guide/english, accessed August 22, 2022.
- 9. This catchphrase was the source of a jingle that appeared in commercials for Ford in the Detroit area: https://www.you-tube.com/watch?v=gT2nHteILes, accessed August 24, 2022.
- 10. I was born in Incheon, South Korea in 1976. I lived in Korea for less than two months before traveling back to Virginia with my mother.
- 11. In 2015, the St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church of Detroit celebrated its 40th anniversary since its founding in 1975. The church released a video in conjunction with this anniversary: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOb-fK7Au37M, accessed August 24, 2022.
- 12. At the time of writing this article, it was announced that the state of California would be banning the future sale of new gasoline powered vehicles. The new policy—set to take effect in 2035—would likely hasten the transition to the mass production of electric vehicles.
- The video was featured on the web version of *Detroit Free Press* on September 27, 2018: https://www.freep.com/videos/ money/cars/ford/2018/09/27/53-seconds-f-150-built/1446060002/, accessed August 25, 2022.
- Susan Tompor, "What Ford Salaried Workers Who Lost Jobs Saw as a Payout in Recent Layoffs," *Detroit Free Press*, August 26, 2022, https://www.freep.com/story/money/cars/ford/2022/08/26/ford-salaried-workers-who-lost-jobs-nowreview-severance-offers/65458898007/, accessed August 26, 2022.
- Margaret M. Chin and Helen Zia, "Keynote: A Lens on Anti-Asian Bias and Systemic Oppression," CUNY FORUM 9:1 (Fall/Winter 2021-2022): 15-25; Helen Zia, "Targeting Asians and Asian Americans Will Make it Harder to Stop Covid-19," The Washington Post, April 2, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/02/targetingasians-asian-americans-will-make-it-harder-stop-covid-19/, accessed August 24, 2022.

#### Author

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Lee's research on the role of music at scenes of protest during South Korea's democratization movement was awarded the Charles Seeger Prize by the Society for Ethnomusicology. Her current research project on the World Vision Korean Orphan Choir considers the sonic legacies of American evangelicalism through a Korean children's choir that was linked with World Vision International—a humanitarian aid organization founded by Reverend Bob Pierce in 1950. During the pandemic, she curated a project for her undergraduate students at UCLA where they conducted oral history interviews with Asian American musicians on Zoom: (https://archive. org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive?query=ethnomusicology+20c+oral+history).