

De-Centering Ethnicity: The Situation of Asian Americans in Contemporary Global Capitalism

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In this age of postality (postCold War, postCivil-rights, postmodern, postcolonial), one would expect that the public perception of Asian Americans—I prefer the term “US Asians” to avoid any hint of successful assimilation or unqualified acculturation—would now be past stereotypes, myths, clichés. Not so. One textbook just off the press complacently declares that “The history of Asian Americans combines the immigrant’s quest for the American dream and the racial minority’s confrontation with discriminating laws and attitudes”.¹ In a revealing analysis of Judge Karlin’s sentencing colloquy in the 1992 trial of Du Soon Ja (accused killer of Natasha Harlins), Neil Gotanda found that old stereotypes are alive and well, fruitfully cohabiting with the new “model minority” doxa. Amid the thoroughgoing reconfiguration of the planet’s political/economic map, why this persistence of a racializing syndrome with respect to US Asians?²

By the year 2020, the population labelled “Asian Americans” in this country will number 20.2 million. The Asian Pacific population increased from 1.5 million in 1970 to 7.3 million in 1990, with the Filipinos becoming the largest component (more than 2 million, up from 1,406,770 in the 1990 Census Report followed by the Indochinese group).³ In California, the projection is that Asians will grow from 2.9 million to 8.5 million in 2020. Articulated with manifold inter-ethnic conflicts amid large-scale social crises, this change is bound to complicate and intensify the multiplication of differences enough to confound taxonomists and the high priests of a normative “common culture”.

Given the heterogeneity of the histories, economic stratification, and cultural composition of the post-1965 immigrants and refugees, all talk of Asian pan-ethnicity should now be abandoned as useless speculation. Not so long ago, Professor Roger Daniels stated the obvious: “The conglomerate image of Asian Americans is a chimera”.⁴ This is more true today. No longer sharing the common pre-World War II experience of being victimized by exclusion acts, antimiscegenation laws, and other disciplinary apparatuses of racialization, Vietnamese, Kampuchéans, and Hmong have now diverged from the once dominant pattern of settlement, occupation, education, family structure, and

other modes of ethnic identification. After 1965, one can no longer postulate a homogeneous "Asian American" bloc without reservations. Fragmentation now characterizes this bloc even as new forms of racism totalize the incompatible subject-positions of each nationality. To use current jargon, the bureaucratic category "Asian American" (not even including "Pacific Islander") has been decentered by systemic contingencies. The putatively homogeneous inhabitants of the Asiatic "Barred Zone" (ascribed by the immigration laws of 1917 and 1924) have been deconstructed beyond repair to the point where today, among postality scholars, a cult of multiple and indeterminate subject-positions is flourishing. However, we have yet to meet a cyborg or borderland denizen of confirmed US Asian genealogy.

Despite such reality, versions of the "melting pot" theory are still recycled to homogenize variegated multitudes. A monograph of the Population Reference Bureau on *Asian Americans: America's Fastest Growing Minority Group* by William O'Hare and Judy Felt, while acknowledging disparities, lumps its subjects indiscriminately: "While Asian Americans have slightly higher average family incomes than non-Hispanic whites, they also have much higher poverty rates".⁵ A recent textbook *Asian Americans* (1995) edited by Pyong Gap Min, for example, has no hesitation predicting that Asians will be easily assimilated in time. While admitting the perception that language barriers still exist and the old stereotypes of disloyal or enemy aliens still affect mainstream perception, Min relies on three factors that will promote rapid assimilation: 1) the presence of well-assimilated native-born Asian Americans will eliminate the image of the "stranger", 2) multiculturalism or cultural pluralism will promote the toleration of "subcultural differences", and 3) the economic and political power of Asian nation-states will create a positive image in general.⁶ These reasons can be cancelled by a few arguments whose suasive force has still not been properly registered.

The last reason cited is quickly countered by what I call the Vincent Chin syndrome: political demagoguery in times of economic crisis can shift the target of scapegoating onto the Japanese, the Korean, or any Asian that can reactivate the sedimented persona of the wily, inscrutable, shifty-eyed foreigner in "our" midst. The second reason pertaining to multiculturalism is fallacious since "cultural pluralism" has been around since the attenuation of the Anglo-Saxon supremacy/nativist movement; multiculturalism is now, in fact, the enshrined cooptative formula for peacefully managing differences among the subalterns.⁷ And finally, the process of acculturation of second- or third-generation US Asians has been qualified (by Min himself) as valid only for the cultural, and not the social, dimension. In fact, the sociological data leads to this seemingly paradoxical conclusion: "Although the vast majority of second-generation Asian Americans will lose their native language and cultural tradition, they are likely to maintain a strong ethnic identity and to interact mainly with coethnics".⁸ Acculturation, then, heightens ethnic difference and even fosters racialized separatism.

Given this persistence of the ethnicity paradigm forcefully criticized in the eighties by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formations in the United States*, commentators on the Asian scene still toe the party line of Glazer and Moynihan (1975). As their colleague Werner Sollors put it, ethnicity is not a matter of descent or lineage, but “of the importance that individuals ascribe to it”.⁹ Form determines content. In his pathbreaking book of 1972, *Racial Oppression in America*, Robert Blauner repudiated the fallacy of subsuming the diverse experiences of subjugation of people of color under the ethnic immigrant model that privileges the teleology of Eurocentric assimilation in defining the US nation-state. But obviously the lessons have not been learned.¹⁰ Or else the specter of “American exceptionalism” has a way of being resurrected, especially in periods of economic crisis and neoconservative resurgence. Panethnicity is one specimen of the ideological recuperation of what I would call the Myrdal complex (the presumed schizoid nature of US democracy preaching equality but institutionalizing discrimination) that plagues all pluralist liberal thought, including its radical and pragmatic variants.¹¹

Asian American Panethnicity has been promoted by Yen Le Espiritu and others as a historical product of the unity and solidarity of “internally colonized” Asian minorities during the sixties. The pan-Asian framework supposedly arose from the common experience of oppression of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers, students, and middle strata, underpinned by the ideological conception of “Orientals” in the majoritarian consciousness and institutions.¹² Espiritu explains the origin of the change:

To define their own image and to claim an American identity, college students of Asian ancestry coined the term Asian American to stand for all of us Americans of Asian descent ... While Oriental suggests passivity and acquiescence, Asian American connotes political activism because an Asian American gives a damn about his life, his work his beliefs, and is willing to do almost anything to help Orientals become Asian Americans.¹³

The first pan-Asian political organization founded in Berkeley in 1969, the Asian American Political Alliance, was mainly composed of students, mostly third- and fourth-generation Asian activists. In the seventies, pan-Asian organizations among social workers, media, public health, and other fields, mushroomed, but—as Espiritu herself acknowledges—pan-Asianism “barely touched the Asian ethnic enclaves”.¹⁴ In fact, this version of pan-Asianism concealed the ethnic chauvinisms and class cleavages, hierarchy, and conflicts generated by either the operation of US racializing politics or inherited from imperial divide-and-rule policies. The “cultural entrepreneurs” of pan-Asianism turned out to be agents for opportunist electoral politics, lobbyists for middle-class interests, and brokers for the bureaucratic utilitarian ethos. They served as the progenitors of the post-1980s Asian neoconservatives who glorify the

“model minority” stereotype while opposing Affirmative Action and social programs for the disadvantaged.

The more profound motivation for pan-Asianism is the historically specific racism of white supremacy toward Asians. As Sucheng Chan noted in her interpretive history: “In their relationship to the host society, well-to-do merchants and poor servants, landowning farmers and propertyless farm workers, exploitative labor contractors and exploited laborers alike were considered inferior to all Euro-Americans, regardless of the internal ethnic and socio-economic divisions among the latter”.¹⁵ Instead of valorizing ethnicity or cultural difference per se, we need to concentrate on what Robert Miles calls the “racialization” process, its ideological and institutional articulations.¹⁶ For this, a world-systems analysis is useful and necessary.¹⁷

In a suggestive essay, “The Construction of Peoplehood”, Wallerstein argued that the varying usages of people, race, nation, and ethnicity stem from their function in expressing political claims whose legitimacy depends on the historical structure of the capitalist world-economy. While “race” concerns the axial division of labor in the world economy (the core-periphery antinomy), nation refers to the political superstructure of this historical system (sovereign states in the interstate system).¹⁸ Wallerstein explains that “ethnic group” is the concept designating “household structures that permit the maintenance of large components of non-waged labour in the accumulation of capital”.¹⁹ Given the differential costs of production in the core-periphery system, we have differing internal political structures that serve as the “major sustaining bulwark of the inegalitarian state system that manages and maintains the axial division of labor” today. Race and racism “is the expression, the promoter and the consequence of the geographical concentration associated with the axial division of labour”.²⁰ While race/racism and nation/nationalism function as categories that register competing claims for advantage in the capitalist world economy, it is ethnicization conceived as the distinctive cultural socialization of the work force that enables the complex occupational hierarchy of labor (marked by differential allocation of surplus value, class/status antagonisms, etc.) to be legitimized without contradicting the formal equality of citizens before the law in liberal-democratic polities. Wallerstein points out that capitalism gains flexibility in restructuring itself to preserve its legitimacy: “Ethnicization, or peoplehood, resolves one of the basic contradictions of historical capitalism—its simultaneous thrust for theoretical equality and practical inequality” by exploiting the mentalities of the segmented working populace. In this way, people-based political activity, or the new social movements premised on authentic identities and autonomy of communities, arises because of the contradictions of the system. Ethnicity, then, is not a primordial category that testifies to the virtue of a liberal pluralist market-centered system, but a means utilized to legitimate the contradictions. This is not to imply that we should return to the orthodox Marxist view that dividing workers according to race or ethnicity is a conspiratorial tool by capital to

destroy class unity. What I would stress is precisely the need to analyze the racialization of ethnicization of class/gendered identities. In the United States, “whiteness” mediates individual/group conceptions of self, gender, community, and class interest, so that the traditional cost-benefit calculations of economists cannot be valid unless linked “to the self-understanding of workers creating and consenting to whiteness as a culture and political economy of domination”.²¹

In the context of our inquiry, the term “whiteness” alludes to the sociopolitical constitution of the various European cohorts as a hegemonic collectivity coinciding with the history of the formation of the US nation-state as a “settler society”. To avoid the trap of multiculturalism as a discourse of formalistically reconciling ethnic differences, we need to recall how the founders of the US nation-state “legitimated and perpetuated...the plural society of a racially bifurcated colonist America regulated by the normative code of a racial creed”.²² The “settler society” paradigm (instead of the immigrant model) which sanctioned racially-based subordination of non-white groups and communities (indigenous, enslaved, conquered) entails the corollary notion of “internal colonialism”. The notion of “internal colonialism” involves juridical and state apparatuses that legitimized the exploitation of minorities in segmented labor markets, hierarchical wage scales, residential segregation, and other effects of numerous discriminatory practices by employers and state apparatuses.²³ Implicitly subscribing to the doctrine of “American exceptionalism” and its associated ethos of laissez-faire multiculturalism, postmodernist racial-formation theory fails to grasp the fundamental fact of institutional racism in the US, as well as the reality of North-South contradictions and its replication within the metropolises of North America and Europe—the division between rich white nations versus poor nations comprised of people of color—that exemplifies today the most insidiously dehumanizing form of racism sustaining worldwide capital accumulation.²⁴

Recent scholarship on the ideological construction of “whiteness” in US history should illuminate also the invention of the “Asian American” as a monolithic, standardizing rubric. It is clear that the diverse collectivities classified by official bureaucracy as “Asian American” manifest more discordant features than affinities and commonalities. The argument that they share similar values (e.g., Confucian ethics), ascribed “racial” characteristics, and kindred interests in politics, education, social services, etc. cannot be justified by the historical experiences of the peoples involved, especially those who came after World War II. This does not mean that US Asians did not and do not now engage in coalitions and alliances to support certain causes or cooperate for mutual benefit; examples are numerous. In fact, the insistence on pan-Asianism can only obscure if not obfuscate the patent problems of underemployment and unequal reward (“glass ceiling”), occupational segregation, underrepresentation, and class polarization. One need only cite the high rates of poverty among Asian refugees: 26 percent for Vietnamese, 35 percent for Laotians, 43 percent for Cambodians, and 64 percent for the

Hmong.²⁵ All studies also show that most Filipinos today find themselves condemned to the secondary labor market—low-wage jobs in the private sector—in spite of higher educational attainment.²⁶

At this point, some conscientious readers might already be ruminating about “model minority”, the contemporary version of the “yellow peril” that used to haunt white supremacist America. Lest we be overwhelmed by all the optimistic predictions of impending assimilation/acculturation of US Asians into the larger body politic, I offer as a reminder this concluding observation of the United States Commission on Civil Rights in their 1992 Report:

The root causes of bigotry and violence against Asian Americans are complex. Racial prejudice; misplaced anger caused by wars or economic competition with Asian countries; resentment of the real or perceived success of Asian Americans; and a lack of understanding of the histories, customs, and religions of Asian Americans all play a role in triggering incidents of bigotry and violence. The media have contributed to prejudice by promoting stereotypes of Asian Americans, especially the model minority stereotype; by sometimes highlighting the criminal activities of Asian gangs; and by failing to provide the in-depth and balanced coverage that would help the public to understand the diverse Asian American population. Furthermore, the media give little attention to hate crimes against Asian Americans, thereby hindering the formation of a national sense of outrage about bigotry and violence against Asian Americans, a critical ingredient for social change.²⁷

Faced with the racial politics of the eighties and nineties, all talk about fashioning or searching for an “authentic Asian American identity” and “reclaiming” our history can only sound fatuous. More culpable is the view that in order to transcend the Frank Chin-Maxine Hong Kingston misrecognition of each other, US Asian artists should utilize their “ethnic sensibility to describe aspects of the Asian American experience that appeal to a common humanity”²⁸—a plea for commodifying the exotic into plain American pie. To conceive of the “Asian American Movement” in terms of its place in the hegemonic scheme of things is to submit to the rules of the game contrived and manipulated by the very forces the egalitarian movement is supposed to overthrow.

A study made in 1991 concluded that the economic success story of US Asians is undermined by two facts: their reward is not commensurate with their educational attainment, and that they have higher poverty rates than non-Hispanic whites.²⁹ The myth of the “model minority” persists in obscuring these facts. Because of this, US Asians are collectively perceived as a threat by other minority groups, especially blacks in New York, Washington DC, and Los

Angeles; and whites who fear the competitive power of Pacific Rim countries. Asian Americans are thus caught between two antithetical pressures: “On one hand, Asian Americans are lauded as a ‘model minority’ that is fulfilling the American dream and confirming the image of America as a ‘melting pot’. On the other hand, they seem hampered by invisible barriers—a so-called glass ceiling—that keep them from climbing to the top rungs of power”.³⁰ What is clearly configuring the dilemma is the contradiction between ideology—the imaginary mode of connecting subjects to reality—and the limits of a racialized political economy, the constraints of transnational, late capitalism.

On the face of these developments, postmodernism enters the scene and proclaims the ontological imperatives of hybridity, multiplicity, and fragmentation as a more viable optic for analyzing the situation. Keith Osajima, for example, proposes a synthetic postmodernism that will combine the virtues of panethnic generalizing with “the multiplicitous nature of our constructed identities”.³¹ Ethnic absolutism translates into “identity politics”. In general, postmodernists uphold anti-essentialist, fluctuating or ambiguous subject-positions premised on the rejection of “grand metanarratives”, rationally constituted agency, and the normative discourse of justice and equality. A typical enunciation of this theoretical standpoint may be discerned in Lisa Lowe’s thesis: “A multiplicity of social contradictions with different origins converge at different sites within any social formation—the family, education, religion, communications media, sites of capitalist production—and each is uneven and incommensurable, with certain contradictions taking priority over others in response to the material conditions of a given historical moment”.³² Following the post-structuralist semiotics of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see the critique of Hunter),³³ postmodernists celebrate the alleged dispersal of power into shifting and arbitrary sites of the social field. This move, I submit, effectively disables any long-range collective project of discovering a possible Archimedean point at which the whole system can be dismantled. This is because it does not address the key aspects of the legitimation crisis subtending the production-and-reproduction dynamics of the US formation *inter alia*: the racializing agencies of “whiteness” in a settler society, the political economy of “internal colonialism”, and the continuing injustices and oppression fomented by institutional racism.

Incalculable damage has been inflicted by a postmodernist skepticism that sometimes has claimed to be more revolutionary than the radical guidelines of research into internal colonialism, labor segmentation, national self-determination, and so on. This does not mean we do not have the traditional individualistic, aestheticizing trends represented by writers like Gish Jen, Li-Young Lee, and any number of assimilationist would-be celebrities (see Hongo 1995). The ubiquitous troupe of Lotus Blossoms and Gunga Dins, now of course sporting more fashionable trappings, still dominate the travelling roadshows of “Asian American” cultural production today. Probably the most provocative application of Foucaultian and deconstructive tools in analyzing US

racial politics is Omi and Winant's aforementioned work. But its inadequacy demonstrated itself in being unable to anticipate the 1992 Los Angeles inter-ethnic conflict between blacks and Korean Americans, nor could it foresee the rise of neoconservatives among Asian Americans.³⁴ By devaluing the role of ideological state apparatuses and the political economy of labor in globalized capitalism, postmodernist thinking remains trapped in a metaphysics of textualism and an ontology of pragmatic "language games" that only reinforce the unequal division of labor and the unjust hierarchy of power in US society and in the domain of international relations.³⁵

One example of postmodernist speculation that substitutes for the now obsolete panethnicity a notion of transnational subjectivity may be cited here. It does not require Superman's x-ray vision for us to tell that the paragon of the diasporic subject as a postcolonial "hybrid" often masks the working of a dominant "common culture" premised on differences, not contradictions. Heterogeneity can then be a ruse for recuperative patriotism. The latest version is the theory of "multiple identities" and "fluid" positions of immigrants straddling two nation-states assumed to be of equal status and ranking in the world system; such identities are unique because they allegedly participate in the political economies of both worlds. This is obviously a paradigm based on the dynamics of market exchange-value whereby a third abstract entity emerges and circulates between two incommensurable objects or domains, supposedly partaking of both but identical with neither. The artifactual entity, however, hitherto remains parasitic on the superior nation-state (the United States), belying its claim to autonomy and integrity.

Because of the seductive potential of this new theorizing, I would like to comment on Yen Le Espiritu's recent study, *Filipino American Lives* (1995). In it she applies the new conceptual model of transnationalism. When post-1965 second and third-generation Filipinos (mostly professionals) devise strategies to construct multiple and overlapping identities, thus presumably altering their rank or placing in US society, they succeed (for Espiritu) in resisting the dominant ideology of subordination by race, class, gender, nationality, and so on. While the self-interpretation of Espiritu's informants does contain indices of flux rather than continuity, multilinear lines of narrative rather than one monologic strand, I think this is not due to their overall success in elevating their country and culture of origin to equal status with the United States and its hegemonic norms. This is the fatal mistake of the transnational model despite its gesture of acknowledging it: it assumes the parity of colonized/dominated peoples and the US nation-state in contemporary global capitalism. All kinds of fallacious judgments stem from the error of marginalizing the colonial subjugation of the Filipino people by the United States, directly from 1898 to 1946 and indirectly from 1946 to the present.³⁶

The resourceful cunning and prudence of Filipino immigrants in trying to survive and flourish in a generally inhospitable environment (San Diego, California, is implicitly assumed to be representative of the whole country)

should not be unilaterally construed as a sign of postmodern playfulness and inventiveness. Mindful of the historical relationship between subaltern people and colonizing state, one should interpret Filipino ethnic strategies as symptoms of the colonial trauma and the ordeal of enduring its revival in new forms, this time in the heartland of the imperial power. Because of this, most Filipinos seek assimilation and welcome acculturation; but experiences of racist insult, discrimination, ostracism, and violence disrupt their modes of adaptation and suspend their psyches in a limbo of symbolic ethnicity if not political indeterminacy. This is not a bipolar state oscillating between nostalgic nativism and coercive Europeanization; it is a diasporic predicament born of the division of labor in the world system and the racialization of people of color by capital accumulation.³⁷

Without disavowing other limitations of Espiritu's theoretical apparatus and its neglect of contemporary social problems (poverty, teen pregnancy, gang violence, AIDS, drug abuse, and so on) for most Filipinos, I take issue with the positivistic reading of the narratives of Americanization that ignore the symptoms I have alluded to. Espiritu's informants Ruby, Armando, and Elaine, for example, all invoke a distinctive Filipino history that belies Espiritu's claim that Filipino ethnicity lacks "a practiced culture".³⁸ It is a truism that for colonized, subaltern subjects in the conjuncture of post-1965 United States, the process of survival involves constant renegotiation of cultural spaces, revision of inherited folkways, reappropriation of dominant practices, and invention of new patterns of adjustment. All these embody the cultural practice of a people attempting to transcend subalternity (see Theo Gonzalves' testing of this hypothesis in his analysis of Pilipino Cultural Night in California).³⁹ What is crucial is how and why this set of practices is enabled by the structures of society and the disposition of the agents themselves. When Filipinos therefore construct the meaning of their lives (whether you label this meaning Filipino American, US Filipino, Americanized Pinoys, the content determines the form), they do not—contrary to Espiritu's claim—conform to and resist the hegemonic racializing ideology simultaneously. This implies a reservoir of free choices that does not exist for most colonized subjects. Indeed the construction of a subjugated Filipino identity as a dynamic, complex phenomenon defies both assimilationist and pluralist models when it affirms its anti-racist, counterhegemonic antecedent: the revolutionary opposition of the Filipino people to US imperial domination.⁴⁰

Certain recent developments, particularly the emergence of US Asian neoconservatives (described by Glenn Omatsu)⁴¹ and the tension between Korean Americans and black communities, direct our focus to the fierce class war waged by the US corporate elite against both the US working masses and their international rivals (Japan, Germany). Meanwhile, the value produced by unpaid labor continues to be expropriated from thousands of Asian and Latino women in the sweatshops of the metropolis and "Third World" borderlands

called “free trade zones”. I would like to mention here the presence of six million Filipino “contract workers” engaged in domestic and low-paid or demeaning work in the Middle East, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and many European countries.⁴²

New postCold War realignments compel us to return to a historical materialist analysis of political economy and its overdeterminations in order to grasp the new racial politics of transnationality and multiculturalism (Bruin 1996). Obviously I am not advocating a vulgar Marxist (*aka* economic or mechanical deterministic) approach in understanding race/ethnic relations. What may prove revitalizing for the post-1965 generation is a creative return to the “basics”, perhaps a counter-fundamentalism that Richard Appelbaum reformulates in these terms:

Capitalism has always reinforced class divisions with divisions based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other forms of ascription. In any system based to a large degree on the exploitation of one group of people by another, such distinctions provide a useful basis for justifying inequality. Not only does this foster a “divide-and-conquer” ideology among those who otherwise might find common cause, but it also helps to foster a standard of exploitation based on what is accorded the least common denominator—whichever group finds itself at the bottom of the economic heap.⁴³

Together with Appelbaum’s elucidation of global capitalism’s flexibility instanced by the subcontracting modes of manipulating the commodity chains, we can learn from Edna Bonacich’s analysis⁴⁴ of how the Los Angeles garment industry deploys multiculturalism to cut production costs and increase surplus value.⁴⁵ In the light of these reconfigurations, we do not need an ethnic politics for moderating the private expropriation of the social surplus but a counter-hegemonic strategy that articulates the imperatives of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, place, etc.—the major coordinates of cultural identity—with class-based resistance and other oppositional trends charted within the political economy of racist exploitation and oppression. Such a united-front politics can only be viable within a larger framework of a wide-ranging program targeting the material foundation of iniquitous power and reification in the commodity logic of unequal exchange.

With respect to the Asian/Pacific Rim countries whose destinies now seem more closely tied to the vicissitudes of the US market, the reconfiguring of corporate capital’s strategy in dealing with this area requires more careful analysis of the flow of migrant labor, capital investments, media manipulation, tourism, and so on. There are over a million Filipinos (chiefly women) employed as domestics and low-skilled workers in Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Malaysia. Their exploitation is worsened by the

racializing process of inferiorization imposed by the Asian nation-states, the Asian “tigers”, competing for their share in global capital accumulation. The Western press then reconfigures the Asian as neoSocial Darwinist denizen of booty capitalism in the “New World Order”.

All these recent developments inevitably resonate in the image of the Asian – its foreignness, malleability, affinities with the West, etc. – that in turn determines a complex of contradictory and variable attitudes toward US-domiciled Asians. Such attitudes can be read from the drift of the following questions: Is Japan always going to be portrayed as the scapegoat for the loss of US jobs? Is China obdurately refusing to conform to Western standards in upholding human rights and opening the country to the seductions of market individualism? What’s going to happen to Hong Kong? What about “mail order brides” from the Philippines and Thailand as possible carriers of the AIDS virus? Are the Singaporeans that barbaric? How is the Hawaii sovereignty movement going to affect the majoritarian perception of the “natives”? And despite the end of history in this postCold War milieu, will the North Koreans continue to be the paragons of communist barbarism? Are the North Koreans hopelessly atavistic and irredeemable?

In effect, given the demographic and sociopolitical rearticulation of the US Asian collectivities, we have not even begun to address what Nancy Fraser⁴⁶ calls the redistribution-recognition dilemma, that is, how political-economic justice and cultural justice can be realized together by transformative and deconstructive means instead of refurbishing liberal nostrums so popular among people of color in the mainstream academy. In short, the challenge of transformative critique still needs to be taken up as we confront the disintegration of panAsian metaphysics and discourse amid the postCold War realignments of nation-states and transnational power blocs.

A strategy of pacification is being mounted to contain dissidence and disruption from unruly sectors of the US Asian populace as world recession deepens. One indication is the multiculturalist approach deployed by Stanley Karnow and Nancy Yoshihara in a monograph published by the Asia Society in 1992. I juxtapose two passages, the first from the Introduction where the “model minority myth” and a naive Orientalism find renewed life:

But despite their dissimilarities, Asian Americans share common characteristics. Whether their backgrounds are Confucian, Buddhist, Hindi, Muslim, Christian or animist, they tend to adhere to the concept of filial piety, and see achievement as a way to honor their families. Hence their devotion to classic American virtues – hard work, discipline and a willingness to defer instant fulfillment for the sake of future goals. Above all, they make enormous sacrifices to educate their children – a commitment that reflects their esteem for scholarship, supposedly assures success and also raises their own social status.

By nation standards, the aggregate accomplishments of Asian Americans

are spectacular. [Here follows a listing of statistics whose veracity and implications are at best questionable.] Forever seeking to enshrine the American dream, the news media constantly extol Asian Americans as Horatio Alger heroes. Professor William Petersen, a sociologist at Berkeley, called them the “model minority” – a term, wrote Louis Winnick in *Commentary* recently, that is yesterday’s coinage: “By now, Asian Americans have vaulted to a more exalted station – America’s trophy population”.⁴⁷

Next consider this observation from the section on “Politics”:

Apart from Japanese Americans, most Asian Americans are immigrants. Many though not all come from countries with despotic and corrupt regimes, and are either unacquainted with the democratic process or distrust government. Many are riveted more on news from their homelands than on events in America ...⁴⁸

The fissure between the patronizing endorsement of the “model minority” archetype and the factual errors compounded with a self-righteous paternalism betrayed by the second quotation, is not as wide as it seems. For both are symptomatic of the doctrine that Asian immigrants, like all aliens, should be measured against a white supremacist standard, a measure that precisely guarantees the hegemony of capital’s “civilizing mission” that is now being challenged by its unruly subalterns in core and periphery. I think that US Asian scholarship, despite the pseudoavantgarde triumphalist voice of its postmodernist faction, has not been able to grapple successfully with this old but persistent and even revitalized episteme. This failure vitiates all conversation about revising these invidious immigrant or national paradigms since the ghosts of the past, unless we settle accounts with it, will forever continue to haunt us in our future peregrinations and sabotage all attempts at liberation.

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Notes

1. William Dudley, ed., *Asian Americans: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1997), 14.
2. In a fit of exasperation, Russell Leong, editor of *AmerAsia Journal* sent this e-mail circular to all his colleagues concerning the “current rap about redefining, throwing away, or retheorizing the term Asian American into diasporic this or that”:

Asian American is a tenacious word, born out of struggle, fire, darkness and color. It means that America is not white, particularly, but that Asians, as well as Native Americans, Latinos and African Americans are politically, culturally, and economically of the United States. For even as

we are disenfranchised, separated, and discriminated against, at the same time our bodies, our labor and our intelligence are exploited, as our cultures and communities are appropriated. Thus the strength of the term, 'Asian American', lies in its power to point out the contradictions that characterize America at the end of the 20th century—a society whose popular rhetoric is one of inclusion, but whose primary history has been one of continued exclusion.

We applaud the reiteration of self-evident truths, but the signification of the term "American" and its supererogatory claim to exclude all others in the continent, not just within the US nation-state, is not so easily amenable to arbitrary definition nor periodic negotiation. It drags with it a whole massive history of what we want to reject: exploitation, racist violence, exclusion and oppression.

3. Juan L. Gonzales, Jr., *Racial and Ethnic Groups in America* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1993), 181-195; and Dinker Patel, "Asian Americans: A Growing Force", in *Race and Ethnic Relations 92/93*, ed. John Kromkowski (Guilford, CT: Dushkin Publishing Co, 1992), 108-113.
4. Harry Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 8.
5. William P. O'Hare and Judy Felt, *Asian Americans: America's Fastest Growing Minority Group* (Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau Inc., 1991), 15.
6. Pyong Gap Min, ed., *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995).
7. E. San Juan, "Multiculturalism and the Challenge of World Cultural Studies", in *Hegemony and Strategies of Transgression* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); see also E. San Juan, *Racial Formations/Critical Transformations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992).
8. Min, 279.
9. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
10. See the thesis on "racial minorities" of Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), and the arguments on a racial pattern in US history elaborated by Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), and Ronald Takaki, "Reflections on Racial Patterns in America", in *From Different Shores*, ed. Ronald Takaki (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
11. Enamored by the fashionable Foucaultian view of multiple power/discourse formations, Howard Winant endorses a "radicalized pluralism" (1994: 107) as the antidote to virulent institutional racism of the nineties. Meanwhile, US Filipinos continue to repeat the mistake (see Jacinto and Syquia 1995) of blaming the victim's culture while subscribing to the Glazer/Moynihan thesis that it is the immigrant's normative values, not the freedom and opportunities of market society, that perpetuate marginality and even the "underclass" status.
12. Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
13. Yen Le Espiritu, "Asian American Panethnicity", in *The Meaning of Difference*, eds. Karen Rosenblum and Toni-Michelle Travis (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 1996), 57.
14. Espiritu, 58.

15. Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 187.
16. Robert Miles, "Labour Migration, Racism and Capital Accumulation in Western Europe since 1945: an overview", *Capital and Class* 28 (Spring 1986): 49-86; and also his book *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989).
17. I am thinking of the approach of Immanuel Wallerstein, as in *Historical Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
 In line with the assault against Eurocentrism and following the model of Afrocentrism, its mirror opposite, Paul Wong and colleagues (1995) have suggested "Asiacentrism" as an alternative paradigm in academic studies (see Paul Wong, Meera Manvi, and Takeo Hirota Wong. "Asiacentrism and Asian American Studies?" *Amerasia Journal* 21.1 & 2 (1995): 137-148). The attempt is bold and pathbreaking but open to objections. One objection is that it valorizes selected commonalities and downplays substantive differences, sidetracking historical specificity for a project of reversing the past. This trend is immanent also in the indiscriminate "culturalism" that, for example, reduces the Korean-black conflict to a matter of cultural differences (Karnow and Yoshihara, 1992).
18. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 79.
19. Balibar and Wallerstein, 79.
20. Balibar and Wallerstein, 80.
21. Rhonda M. Williams, "Consenting to Whiteness: Reflections on Race and Marxian Theories of Discrimination", in *Marxism in the Postmodern Age*, eds. Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 307.
22. Quoted in Dolores Janiewski, "Gendering, Racializing and Classifying: Settler Colonization in the United States, 1590-1990", in *Unsettling Settler Societies*, eds. Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis. London: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 132-133.
23. Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds., *Unsettling Settler Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).
24. John Rex, "Racism and the Structure of Colonial Societies", in *Racism and Colonialism: Essays on Ideology and Social Structure*, ed. Robert Ross (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982).
25. Kitano and Daniels, 179.
26. Amado Cabezas and Gary Kawaguchi, "Race, Gender, and Class for Filipino Americans", in *A Look Beyond the Model Minority Image*, ed. Grace Yun (New York: Minority Rights Group Inc., 1989) and also Paul Ong ed., *The State of Asian Pacific America: Economic Diversity, Issues and Policies* (Los Angeles: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1994).
27. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Civil Rights Issues Facing Asian Americans in the 1990s* (Washington, DC: United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1992), 191.
28. William Wei, "Reclaiming the Past and Constructing a Collective Culture", in *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories*, ed. Mary F. Rogers. (New York: The McGraw Hill Companies, Inc., 1996), 357.
29. Deborah Woo, "The Gap Between Striving and Achieving: The Case of Asian American Women", in *Making Waves*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
30. O'Hare and Felt, 15.

31. Keith Osajima, "Postmodern Possibilities: Theoretical and Political Directions for Asian American Studies", *Amerasia Journal* 21 (1995): 83.
32. Lisa Lowe, "On Contemporary Asian American Projects", *Amerasia Journal* 21.1 & 2 (1995): 41-54. See the critique on postmodernism by Carole Stabile, "Postmodernism, Feminism, and Marx: Notes from the Abyss", *Monthly Review* (July/August 1995): 89-107.
33. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso. See the critique on Laclau and Mouffe by Allen Hunter, "Post-Marxism and the New Social Movements", *Theory and Society* 17 (1988): 885-900.
34. See Karin Aguilar-San Juan, ed., *The State of Asian America* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 44-49. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States* (New York: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1986).
35. I think the most positive offshoot of the postmodern trend is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT intends to expose the political and ideological function of law and legal rules. See, for example, Neil Gotanda, "Critical Legal Studies, Critical Race Theory and Asian American Studies", *Amerasia Journal* (1995) 21.1 & 2 (1995): 127-36; and also his essay "Multiculturalism and Racial Stratification", in *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
By applying hermeneutic methodology to specific legal cases, Neil Gotanda (1995), for example, demonstrates the historical contingency of court rulings. He also shows how legal judgments embed racializing narratives that conjoin national-state boundaries, immigration practices, and colonial/imperialist patterns of domination. At best, he discloses the contradiction and instability that are the conditions of possibility for liberal law's efficacy. For his part, Robert Chang believes that CRT will be revitalized by going through its "Asian American Moment" in which the violence and disenfranchisement of Asian Americans (through law, model minority myth, etc.) can become paradigmatic cases for deconstructing the positivistic neutrality of liberal law and evince its irreconcilability with any program of realizing participatory democracy and social justice; see his essay "Toward an Asian American legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-Structuralism, and Narrative Space", in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).
36. E. San Juan, "Configuring the Filipino Diaspora in the United States", in *Race and Ethnic Relations 96/97*, ed. John A. Kromkowski (Guilford, Ct.: Dushkin Publishing Group/Brown and Benchmark Publishers, 1996), 139-145, and also E. San Juan, *The Philippine Temptation: Dialectics of Philippines-United States Literary Relations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).
37. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
38. Yen Le Espiritu, "The Intersection of Race, Ethnicity, and Class: The Multiple Identities of Second-Generation Filipinos" *Identities* (1994): 265. See also her book *Filipino American Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995) in which she elaborates the thesis of transnational migrants.
39. Theo Gonzalves, "'The Show Must Go On': Production Notes on the Filipino Cultural Night", *Critical Mass* 2.2 (Spring 1995): 129-144.
40. Filipino Americans still muse over the vexed topic of US-Philippines relations, a "dark romance" sprung from the problematic results of the Philippine revolution of 1896-1898 and the "insurrection" against US rule. (See for example Jacinto, Jaime

Antonio Jacinto and Luis Malay Syquia, *Lakbay: Journey of the People of the Philippines* (San Francisco: Zellerbach Family Fund, 1995.) I take this as a symptom of the Myrdal disease. A little review of history should cure if not alleviate the symptom. After and before the anti-Filipino riot of Watsonville in January 1930, Filipinos carried weapons with them, even while they told their folks back home: "Everyone treated me good" (see Johnson 1989: 14). Racial and national discrimination of Filipinos as wards or "nationals" (neither citizens nor aliens) is distilled in the anti-miscegenation laws against them (declared unconstitutional in 1948 but not revoked until 1967). In 1926, Filipinos were declared "not Mongolians" but Malays predisposed to running amuck! Still they were "persons of mixed blood" covered by the California Civil Code as subjects prohibited from marrying white persons (Jesse Quinsaat et al, eds., "Anti-Miscegenation Laws and the Filipino", in *Letters in Exile* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1976)).

41. Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s", in *The State of Asian America*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston: South End Press, 1994).
42. About 6 million Filipinos comprise the "Overseas Contract Workers" diaspora consisting chiefly of Filipina women recruited by labor agencies in the Middle East and in Europe, making the Philippines a remittance economy based on the dollars sent by these workers to their families back home. Given the scattering of the Filipino nationality around the world—particles of brain drained but also the flesh of "hospitality" entertainers in Japan and elsewhere—the neo(not post)colonial plight of the people has worsened. This demands a new materialist analysis. The "identity politics" of Commonwealth postcoloniality needs the categories of peoplehood, a historicized concept of nation, class-struggle, sexuality, and gender in order to make sense of the Filipino predicament in the United States. To avoid the postcolonial "blackmail", Filipinos need to redefine their communities and their trajectories in the ongoing social transformation as a force either for preserving the status quo, or for accelerating the movements for popular democracy. For a background analysis to global capitalism, see Janet Bruin, *Root Causes of the Global Crisis* (Manila, Philippines: Institute of Political Economy, 1996).
43. Richard P. Appelbaum, "Multiculturalism and Flexibility: Some New Directions in Global Capitalism", in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
44. Edna Bonacich, "The Class Question in Global Capitalism", in *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996).
45. Alexander Yamato, et al, eds., *Asian Americans in the United States* Vol. 1. (Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1993).
46. Nancy Frazer, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age", *New Left Review* 212 (July-August 1995): 68-93.
47. Stanley Karnow and Nancy Yoshihara, *Asian Americans in Transition* (New York: The Asia Society, 1992), 6-7.
48. Karnow and Yoshihara, 51.