

INTRODUCTION

The Minority Which Is Not One

SOON AFTER I STARTED TEACHING at Berkeley, I was invited to speak in a large student-organized undergraduate English lecture course called “Other Voices,” a course that exists primarily to introduce lower-division students to minority faculty on the campus. It was suggested by the course facilitators that I talk about my research interests, but that in preparing my remarks I bear in mind that I would be the only Asian American guest that semester. For the students’ reading assignment I chose a short poem by Mitsuye Yamada, “Looking Out”:

It must be odd
to be a minority
he was saying.
I looked around
and I didn’t see any.
So I said
Yeah
it must be.¹

I framed my presentation around a reading of the poem, calling attention to the disjuncture between seeing and being seen, to the ambiguity in the speaker’s response (registered in the gap between sight and speech) that could indicate either a reluctant acquiescence to social construction or an ironization of the other’s perception. I wanted the students to wrestle with the misunderstanding that arises in the poem: is Yamada playing on the gap between external and internal perception or between different kinds of social perception held by the two people in the poem. I wanted the students to reflect on the kind of sociological and psychic construction signified by the term “minority” and its relation to questions of visibility, representation, identification, and subjectification. Yamada’s poem helped me to kick off an introductory lecture on a central problematic of Asian American identity: the invention of “Asian American” as a pan-ethnic construction by the yellow power movement of the 1960s, the coalitional character of its structuration, and its limitless tendency toward fragmentation.

Addressing undergraduates on the topic of ethnic identity is always tricky because it involves a double move—one of raising basic historical

2 • Introduction

awareness and, at the same time, of demonstrating the constructedness of that history. In the case of the term “Asian American,” this double move (empirical and critical) is particularly complicated by a persistent heterogeneity effect, which generates continual confusion about who Asian American describes or leads to repeated angry notices of “forgotten” Asian Americans.² Either the category will not hold or it demands constant supplementation. At the end of my forty-five-minute presentation, an African American student raised his hand and asked the following question: Does the lecturer in fact consider Asian Americans to be a minority group? In his view, Asian Americans are white. At the University of California, where the abolition of affirmative action by state Proposition 209 was just then raising the specter of the resegregation of state higher education for African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans—but not Asian Americans—there are no politically comfortable responses to this perception, which arises from a sense that the group has somehow been exempt from the historical laws of systemic racial subordination. Even when the existence of historical discrimination is acknowledged, there is a sense that the minority status of Asian Americans is likely to be somehow temporary and that in a world of unfettered competition Asian Americans are likely to rise to the top of the socioeconomic order. Both opponents and critics of Proposition 209 at the time predicted that the law would primarily benefit Asian Americans, whose relative share of the admitted pool of students was bound to increase. Yet to some extent, this pitting of black and brown against yellow was a replay of an admissions scandal in the 1980s in which the university administration had resorted to the (illegal) application of differential criteria for whites and Asian Americans, in the belief that without them Asian Americans were likely to displace whites.

This book explores the history of such perceptions and beliefs. The eccentricity of “Asian American” to the minority discourse of liberal multiculturalism has an origin in the historical identification of an Asian presence in the United States with the social costs of unbridled capitalism. The prominent post-1960s representation of Asian Americans as nonminorities, or as “minorities, yes; but oppressed, no,”³ forms the kernel of what has come to be called the “model minority” myth—the representation of Asian Americans as capable of upward mobility without the aid of state-engineered correctives. For reasons having to do with the necessarily international context of Asian American racialization, as this book will show, the domestic signification of Asian Americans has its counterpart in the global signification of Asia. While the new visibility of an Asian-American middle class was being used to support a neoconservative-led “retreat from race” in domestic public policy, the expanding economies of the newly industrialized countries of East Asia—the “Asian

Tigers”—were being heralded by free market critics of import-substitution as evidence of the conceptual and political “end of the Third World.”⁴

In contrast to the nineteenth-century European object of Edward Said’s influential study,⁵ the Orient of the American century—at least where it has predominantly tended to mean East Asia rather than the Middle East—has signified an exceptional, rather than paradigmatic, Other. This exceptionalism of America’s Asia, resting upon a putatively unusual capacity for economic modernity, extends to moments when the affect of the racial discourse has been hostile (“yellow peril”) as well as admiring (“model minority”). Scholars have lately begun to observe the definitional continuities between the “negative” and “positive” stereotypes of Asia and Asian Americans and to question a strictly evolutionary view of the relationship between them.⁶ Nevertheless, much work remains to be done in pursuing the historical, theoretical, and rhetorical specificity of American Orientalism.⁷ If, as Said has argued, the primitivist relegation of the Other was a crucial aid to European colonial rule, how are we to understand the ambivalent presentation of the economic modernity of America’s Asia? When did this discourse arise? Where in American culture is it to be found? What was its social meaning? What can the form taken by America’s Asia tell us about the distinctions of American empire from other historical examples of empire? What strategic lessons do the aesthetic properties of the racial form impart for Asian American cultural politics?⁸ These are some of the questions this book sets out to answer.

As indicated by the title of a 1993 anthology of recent Asian American writing, *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, the quest for Asian American literary self-expression in the 1990s continued to be premised upon the negation of Oriental stereotypes, even as a new generation of writers and critics sought to break with a confining cultural nationalism.⁹ In their introduction to the inaugural anthology of Asian American literature, published in 1974, writers Frank Chin, Shawn Wong, Jeffrey Paul Chan, and Lawson Fusao Inada declared a war on stereotype that engendered a fractious quarrel among Asian American writers themselves about the ubiquitous reach of an internalized Orientalism.¹⁰ Parallels between intra-ethnic attacks on Asian American and black women writers have also exposed the gendered dimensions of the rhetoric of cultural authenticity, though admittedly it has been easier to criticize masculinism than to resist appealing to authenticity, whose legitimating power continues to be felt in our era of post-identity politics through the sanction of a strategically invoked essentialism. Perhaps one way to address our acute anxieties about our inability to represent ourselves without somehow being represented would be to pay more attention to the workings of representation, from which there is no easy escape.

Just as self-representation has not brought freedom from stereotype,

empirical rebuttals to media distortions have not succeeded in making the “model minority” go away. The disappointments of trying to dispel myth with reality afford more than a reminder of the general operation of language.¹¹ They return us to the material conditions of an ideological construct, even as they require us to be cognizant of the fact that there can be no return to historical origins that is not mediated by our present standpoint. A historical approach to racial representation has the advantage of being able to account for the specificities of different marginalized groups, whose stereotypical attributes are located in the shifting dynamics of social relations and social conflicts. A historical approach also helps us to maintain a healthy skepticism toward the “evidence of experience”¹² and toward the temptation to think that the articulation of minority subjectivity can be separated from the history of racialization or can express an independent rejoinder to it. At the risk of ignoring new social history’s call to document subaltern experience and agency,¹³ this book returns to the study of racism and the power of racialization’s effects.

The book’s title pays respect to the 1971 collection of essays edited by Edward Friedman and Mark Selden and dedicated to the critical spirit of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, whose call for scholars to “investigate the relationship between knowledge and power, between intellectual creation in America and political destruction in Asia” was occasioned by the crisis of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.¹⁴ “Asia is America’s,” Friedman and Selden write,

. . . in the sense that we impose American categories to describe, evaluate and direct Asian experience. Our cultural chauvinism might mainly provide material for humorous self-analysis were it not for the overwhelming explosion of American economic and military might throughout Asia. For Asia is America’s in this second tragic sense that American power has channeled, distorted, and suppressed much that is Asia.

This book explores the dynamic and destructive interaction between American perceptions and American power in the making and unmaking of contemporary Asia. Our focus is at once Asia and America. For the investment of immense intellectual and material resources in American military adventures in Asia does more than deprive us of resources vitally needed at home. It simultaneously strengthens the very repressive tendencies in our society most prone to crush aspirations for freedom, autonomy and equality in America. (vii)

In directing our attention to the relationship between knowledge and power, and the impact of U.S. discourses about Asia on U.S. society, my book shares with its titular predecessor a common political purpose. De-

parting from the critical strategy of the original, however, this book does not seek to replace racism's projections with the "truth" of Asian or Asian American reality. Instead, taking seriously the difficulties of unthinking Eurocentrism,¹⁵ it attempts a critical intervention through an attentive observation of racism's object, generating a contextualized description that incorporates a strong interpretation of race's social meaning. As such, this book does not aim at a comprehensive account of Asian American representation. It is a genealogy of the surfacing in American history of a particular, paradoxical racial form, with a view toward explaining its predominant ideological usages and mythic persistence into the present.

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Traditionally, "yellow peril" and "model minority" images have been identified with turn-of-the-century anti-Asian agitation and the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, respectively, and are thought to mark the evolutionary journey of the Asian immigrant from rejection to domesticated acceptance. But yellow peril and model minority are best understood as two aspects of the same, long-running racial form, a form whose most salient feature, whether it has been made the basis for exclusion or assimilation, is the trope of economic efficiency. Long before the stereotype of the hardworking and self-sufficient Asian American came to be the bane of post-1960s activists seeking federal aid for their communities, this figure already manifested itself in the late-nineteenth-century rhetoric of both those who opposed and supported Chinese "cheap labor" immigration.¹⁶ Focusing on American culture in the first half of the twentieth century, during which Asian immigrants were officially classified as "aliens ineligible to citizenship," the book traces present-day attributes of stereotypical Asian American character to the earlier characteristics of Asiatic racial form and examines the historical conditions of their making, the social terrain of their emergence, and the representational material of their composition.

If one goal of the book is to discover a structural pattern to the perplexing shifts in United States–Asian relations over the course of the twentieth century, another is to convey the historicity of the life of social forms. The quest to identify the enduring features of race needs to be qualified by an appreciation of the vast difference between the limitations of post-1960s multiculturalism and the radical informality of Asian immigrant existence in the prewar period. Over the course of the twentieth century, many significant rights have been gained—not least the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship. Responding to the neglect of Asian American subjects by mainstream U.S. historiography, Asian American

studies initially tended to reverse the omission by essentializing U.S. history as the story of racism.¹⁷ In the late 1980s and 1990s, under the influence of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's critique of the concept of totality and an Americanized British cultural studies, the prevailing tendency was to conceive of racial formation as a supplement to class analysis and to make the need to account for race a prime motivation for inaugurating a post-Marxism.¹⁸ Ironically, despite Asian American studies' preoccupation with the category of race, its analytic emergence as a means of explaining—or explaining away—historical causation has in some ways exacerbated its dematerialization and mystification.¹⁹ A strictly culturalist emphasis on the persistent symbolization of the permanent alien obscures the significance of the differences between varying modes of legislated racism. On the other side, our perception of a shift from an era of official Asian exclusion to one of Asian assimilation has been heavily reliant on legal history to supply our sense of racialization's periodization. This may be seen in our inability to decide on a dividing point: 1943 (when the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed), 1952 (when the McCarran-Walter Act removed the prohibition on naturalization for other Asian nationalities), or 1965 (when immigration quotas for Asian countries were placed on an equal basis with those of others).²⁰ We still do not sufficiently understand the conditions of possibility for the legal formalization of the Asian American, (which was not a single event), and the social relations that mediate the cultural persistence of the notion of Asian unassimilability.

What preparations existed for the categorical emergence of the assimilable Asian immigrant in the latter half of the twentieth century? The first part of the book examines the objectifying scenes of the alien's sighting at the turn of the century; the second part of the book turns to the processes of naturalization in the 1930s that helped pave the way for the postwar personification of the alien. In both historical endeavors, developments in American literary naturalism and companion movements of social reform played a major role. Why naturalism? Why social reformism? Historians have demonstrated the extent to which Progressive reform, Populist, and trade union movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century helped to effect Asian exclusionism as a national immigration policy.²¹ Equally, the decision of Franklin Roosevelt's administration to intern more than 110,000 Americans of Japanese descent is a well-known irony of liberal history, though it is undertheorized as such. From Progressivism to the New Deal, this book traces the logical continuities between liberal reform and U.S. policies on Asia and Asian Americans. By focusing on American literature of the early twentieth century to forge these links, it also stakes a claim for how cultural study enriches historical understanding.

Two unresolved areas within the historiography of Asian exclusion in particular are engaged by this book. The first is the limited ability of a scapegoat theory of racism to explain why it was specifically Asian immigrants who served as the “indispensable enemy” for the organizing of the white, predominantly Irish, working class on the West Coast. Why was it that in calling for the immigration exclusion of Asiatic labor, unionists and reformers imagined that they were striking at monopolists? Here literary reading aims to generate a textured sense of the strength and routes of ideological persuasion. The second has to do with ongoing debates about the causes of Japanese American internment and the relative paucity of material explanations for such a costly and unprecedented order. By attending to internment’s discourse of assimilation rather than exclusion, my study invites us to consider the productivity of what we have grown accustomed to seeing as the teleological expression of an earlier era’s prejudices. An integration of internment into the context of the social redresses of the New Deal as a whole prevents us from homogenizing different kinds of historical racisms and helps to underscore the darker, disciplinary work involved in Americanization. Here, readings of 1930s cultural texts fill in for what are often considered the lost years of Asian American history.

Film, television, and drama have provided more obvious venues for the study of Asian stereotype in American culture than has literature, where the problem at first appears to be one of absence rather than hyperbole, exclusion rather than caricature.²² We easily recognize the presence of race in visual media because of its identification with a set of phenotypical traits and a relative absence of interiority. Yet the visuality of Asiatic racial form has a distinctive character insofar as the sense of its deceitfulness or mystery always points to the presence of something not shown. To put it another way, we recognize the Asiatic as a figure for the unrepresentable. Yet how is the unrepresentable to be visualized? Does it have a human body? If not, what shape, as a whole or in part, does it take? These are the kinds of questions that are bypassed if our study of racial figuration begins by supposing the anthropomorphism of Asiatic form. They also happen to be questions that centrally preoccupy American literary naturalism, whose well-known subordination of individual agency to the determinations of force reflects its interest in the effects of commodification at a time of heightened public discussion about the growth of monopoly power. Naturalism provides examples of American literature’s most relentless effort at figuring the unseen power of social abstraction. As a cultural discourse, naturalism presents a rich site for the exploration of the representation of class relations.

The literary history of the naturalist novel includes among its essential historical conditions of emergence in the late nineteenth century the rise

of mass-circulation dailies, professional muckraking, and various urban reform movements, in particular, Progressivism. American naturalism has been understood to share with the Progressive gaze a documentary interest in exposing the misery of capitalist life while implying its inevitability. My approach to American naturalism follows Georg Lukács's critique of French naturalism as a reflection of the reification of bourgeois existence, exemplified by what Lukács considered to be its inhumanity of subject matter and presentation.²³ I also argue that American naturalism represents a failed critique of capitalism, but that the evidence of this lies in its tendency toward racialization, or the reification of social relations into physiological forms, or types. Readings of racial representation in American naturalism, therefore, do not here serve the purpose of remarking textual attitudes of superiority or exclusion. They provide a way of recovering the trace of the social relations that race marks. Through observations of shifts in naturalism's representation of Asiatic figures to exemplify the promise and peril of free market expansion, my study seeks to reveal one systematic way in which the critical potential for revealing the injustices wrought by globalization in the American context has been short-circuited.

As a nonpsychological brand of realism and for reasons related to its general treatment of character, naturalism provides a significant venue for Asiatic racial form. On the one hand, the literature of naturalism is attracted to representing the socially unrepresented. On the other, naturalism's indifference toward character distinctions reflects a preoccupation with difference at the level of the typical rather than the individual.²⁴ While an interest in sociological marginality certainly lends naturalism to the representation of race more readily than other modern realisms, its way of engaging difference is particularly pertinent to Asiatic form. A kind of difference that is marked by the lack of difference between individuals, the Asiatic names a paradigmatic social figure in naturalism's taxonomy. Moreover, the deconstruction that naturalism's indistinctions enact—what Walter Benn Michaels has shown to be naturalism's penchant for demonstrating the identity of opposites—describes a logic that distinguishes America's Asia from other sets of race relations.

To the extent that American universality depends upon the possibility of assimilation, there is always also the danger of discovering aliens in our midst, or the wholesale possibility of American takeover by aliens. The undecidable relationship between linked opposites in naturalism—whether human and animal or animal and machine—mirrors the oscillations in the logic of America's Asia between the radically split alternatives of total identity and total conflict. The possibility of a yellow peril takeover is a variant of naturalism's degenerationist imagination, in which hierarchies are always reversible.

It is well recognized that the period associated with naturalist developments in American realism was also the period of the “incorporation of America.”²⁵ What are the implications of this for the literary study of racial representation in that period? In general we tend to think of race as an antebellum legacy—as the evidentiary trace of how class and caste were once equivalent in a slave-owning society. The mode of incorporation of Asian migrant labor into the United States forces us to grapple with the fully industrial modernity of race. Similarly, the rise of U.S. imperialism in the late nineteenth century did not merely entail the extension overseas of an earlier logic of territorial expansion; it was part of a new stage of world capitalism, in which the domination of monopoly finance coincided with the imperial scramble for international markets. The “Asiatic” discloses the ways in which U.S. colonial and race relations are marked by power’s more totalizing reach and increasing abstraction in the twentieth century. As Martin Sklar writes of the oft neglected links between U.S. foreign policy in Asia and the “corporate reconstruction of America”: “‘Missionary’ diplomacy was the very essence of rationalism in the strict sense of modernization theory. It was the other side of the same coin occupied by ‘dollar diplomacy’ and struck in the name of the Open Door and the new capitalist imperialism.”²⁶ The making of Asiatic racial form, therefore, is necessarily a story about the international context in which American race relations take shape.

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Starting from the era when U.S. industrialization began to depend upon the importation of transnational Asian labor and capital expansion into the Asia-Pacific, America’s Asia reflected an antinomian character. Its accelerated process of industrial development and labor efficiency at times promised to extend the American frontier—the premier symbol of the putative freedom from class society afforded by the United States—indefinitely into the twentieth century. Alternately, it threatened U.S. social stability with forecasts of declining wages, mass unemployment, and political authoritarianism. The remedy and exacerbation posed by America’s Asia to the crisis of the closing of the frontier entwined the emergence of Asiatic racial form with the intensification of commodity relations and capital’s global expansion. The legal designation of Asian immigrants as “aliens ineligible to citizenship” reflected the freighting of Asiatic racial form with an abiding tension between U.S. national interests and capital’s transnational movement, between the exceptionalist dream of the identity of nation and capital logic and the nightmare of their nonidentity.²⁷

The American identification of the Asiatic as the sign of globalization

was not arbitrary; it was rooted in the material history of U.S. relations with East Asia.²⁸ The antinomies of Asiatic racial form reflect the pattern of a modernizing China and Japan changing places as U.S. friend and enemy. At any given point in this history, their opposite status was necessary to the maintenance of U.S. security. Indeed, as my examination of writings from Jack London to Pearl S. Buck will show, the incipient “yellow peril” refers to a particular combinatory kind of anticolonial nationalism, in which the union of Japanese technological advance and Chinese numerical mass confronts Western civilization with a potentially unbeatable force—regardless of whether this specter is meant to encourage a U.S. policy of aggression or accommodation. Before being idiosyncratically generalized to other ethnic Asian groups, the hegemonic construction of Asians—as civilizational threat or as testimony to the universal arrival of American democracy—paradigmatically derived from interlinked Chinese and Japanese examples. China’s and Japan’s modes of late modernization dually involved trans-Pacific labor migrations and an anomalous inscription into the game of “great power” diplomacy that sought to pit one against the other to neutralize their combined potential. As such, “China” and “Japan” provided examples of a high-civilizational discourse whose intersection with the problematics of late modernization uniquely marked off East Asia from other regions of the non-Western world.

A U.S. “empire without colonies,” or what in the post-World War II period came to be generalized as the neocolonial paradigm, was arguably pioneered through U.S. Open Door policies in East Asia, which sought the benefits of “free trade” without the burden of political governance.²⁹ In the twentieth century, U.S. power was not grounded in the control of limitless territory but primarily around integrated territories of production.³⁰ Where a European Orientalism had disclosed the discursivity of nineteenth-century, territorial-based colonialism, America’s Asia thus reflected the discursivity of a neocolonialism that installed the East as a Western proxy rather than antipode.³¹ At the end of the nineteenth century, the ascension of the United States to world power through the expansion of its Asian frontier presented split alternatives between the whole world becoming American and an apocalyptic clash of civilizations. The staging of a Japanese economic miracle formed a crucial element in the extension of U.S. influence, even as its success threatened to exceed U.S. dominance.³² By the middle of the twentieth century, the cultural production of the Asian American enabled by U.S. political investments in Chinese national independence still indicated the ongoing intimacy between Asiatic racial form and the contradictions of U.S. globalism, if of a different kind. Where the unassimilable alien had emerged as an effect of misdirected resistances to U.S. economic dependency on

transnational migrant labor and foreign markets, the cultural production of the Asian American became a feature of U.S. geostrategic necessity: postwar multiculturalism and the hegemony of a Pax Americana went hand in hand.

The story begins at the turn of the century with Jack London's and Frank Norris's exclusionist critiques of monopoly capitalism and ends, at mid-century, with Pearl S. Buck's and John Steinbeck's universalizing remedies to the agricultural crisis of the Great Depression. In a fifty-year period, a vision of California as a post-frontier about to be engulfed by coolie hordes and Oriental despotism is succeeded by premonitions of a Pacific Rim utopia, where the local and the global could be made happily coextensive. Until the literary birth of Buck's and Steinbeck's model economic characters, the Asiatic figures of early-twentieth-century American literature (despot, coolie, mask) referred not to persons but to a host of modernity's dehumanizing effects (laboring conditions, group entities, corporations). Yet these figures were the also ancestors of today's stereotypical Asian American. The initial textual presence of Asiatic racial form as an economic trope helps to explain the primarily economic themes of Asian American racial representation. That a genealogy of Asian American stereotype is discernable in the historical failures of class critique, in the end, I hope, helps shed some light on the painful historical divorce between the homely longings of Asian immigrants and the utopian aspirations of actually existing American liberal reform movements, from Progressivism to affirmative action.