

## Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness

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The meaning of Caucasian as at one time prevalent has been now practically exploded.

—District Judge Smith, *Ex parte Dow*, 1914

The American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro.

—James Baldwin, quoted in David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*

Whiteness studies has focused primarily on the historical emergence of liminal European groups (the Irish and southern and eastern Europeans)

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as whites over the last century and a half and on the mutually constitutive nature of whiteness and blackness in the construction of American national identity. Central to the project of whiteness studies in both areas has been the effort to reveal the status of whiteness as an unmarked marker and to expose its historical contingency as a racial category.<sup>1</sup> Other minority groups have figured only tangentially in the historiography and sociology of whiteness, thereby entrenching the black-white binary as the defining paradigm of racial formation in the United States. This essay focuses on how Asian Americans produced, and were in turn produced by, whiteness frameworks of the U.S. legal system. In doing so, it opens up a new area of investigation in whiteness studies and critiques the reliance on a black-white model of race relations, which has obscured the complex reconfigurations of racial politics over the last century. Furthermore, the theoretical simplifications of the black-white binary have impeded the articulation of strategies adequate to confronting the significant racial and class-based realignments of the post-civil rights era. These recent shifts have enabled the reconstitution of white privilege as color-blind meritocracy through the consent of new immigrant groups and model minorities, and have legitimized the retrenchment of civil rights gains in the name of the new global economy. The rearticulation of whiteness in the era of global capitalism highlights another important paradigmatic constraint within whiteness studies, namely, the reliance on the analytic framework of the nation-state for understanding the shifting meanings of whiteness. But the erosion of civil rights gains cannot be fully understood apart from the emergence of a global economy under U.S. geopolitical supremacy in the 1970s, a connection that seems to have been largely overlooked so far. Studies of whiteness that are limited to a nation-state model are unable to address the ways in which global capital has used, modified, and infiltrated racial meanings in the contemporary context. No materialist analysis of racial formation can afford to ignore the implications of the transatlantic and transpacific integration of capital circuits

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1. Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Ante-Bellum America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Press, 1991); and Richard Williams, *Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

during what Marxist critics have identified as the fourth epochal stage of capitalism, in the progression from mercantile to industrial to monopoly to global capitalism. Asian Americans (of whom approximately 65 percent are foreign-born) have been a crucial conduit for and a site of the reconfiguration of racial identities. By offering a Foucauldian analysis of the productivity of whiteness in shaping the meanings of Asian American identities and in creating stratifications within the Asian American grouping and across minority groups, I hope to foreground the need for developing conceptions of agency that account for complicity *and* resistance within this intermediary racial group.

The legacy of the civil rights and antiracist coalitions of the 1960s, which were founded on the convergence of working-class and nonwhite identities, developed models of minoritization that foregrounded racial oppression, resistance, and oppositional consciousness. Based on an implicit construct of *parallel minoritization* rather than *stratified minoritization*, the racial politics of the sixties challenged white supremacy by positing the opposition between white and nonwhite positionality and strategically deferred theorizing the relationship between racial minorities outside this framework. However, our continued dependence on this once powerful and transformative model of the minority has hampered our ability to recognize and engage the breakdown of the *coalitional rationality* that grounded the strategic alliances of people of color in the 1960s: This breakdown is dramatically evident in some of the most politically charged and definitive contemporary issues, such as immigration, affirmative action, welfare reform, and the recent Elián González case. As the immediate beneficiaries of the disbanding of affirmative action programs, whites and a segment of Asian Americans were unified in opposition to Hispanics and blacks on this issue; anti-immigration legislation brought together Asian Americans and Hispanics on one side and whites and blacks on the other; and the Elián González case joined whites, blacks, and non-Cuban Hispanics against Cuban Americans. The divergent interests among minorities around such issues have been eagerly seized by conservatives, whose lexicon has furnished the terms for interpreting and containing the meanings and direction of these realignments. Changed demographics, class stratifications, new immigration, and a global economy have produced the rearticulation of whiteness as color blindness, thereby enabling opportunistic alliances between whites and *different* minority groups as circumstances warrant. This new discourse of race projects a simulacrum of inclusiveness even as it advances a politi-

cal culture of market individualism that has legitimized the gutting of social services to disadvantaged minorities in the name of the necessities of the global economy.

This essay examines critical transformations of whiteness in response to the presence of Americans of Asian origin at certain crucial conjunctures over the last century as a way of foregrounding the dialectical relationship between the meanings of whiteness, blackness, and Asian Americanness. Such an analysis calls for a complex theorization of agency that can register the complicity of various Asian American groups in associating themselves with the forms and claims of whiteness, while stressing that these affiliations were produced by a dominant group with the power to frame life conditions and chances in terms of racial choices. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that such pressures to affiliate upward and disaffiliate downward were generated within a social structure in which the increased mobility of one racial group came at the expense of another: in James Baldwin's succinct formulation, "the American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro." At the same time, I will argue that while whiteness has been a dynamic constitutive category of national belonging, white privilege has been under attack, forcing a renegotiation of its forms in order to buttress its hegemony. I contend that a crucial effect of this renegotiation was the morphing of race into ethnicity in public discourses about national belonging, social difference, economic inequality, and global competitiveness. The recent shift from racial to ethnic senses of U.S. belonging, reinforced by the culturalist bias of institutionalized multiculturalism, the accommodation of new immigrants, and the resurgence of white ethnicity, shows how the new discourse of ethnicity in a transnational context obscures the operations of race and class. A dialectical analysis of the role of Asian Americans in the new political economy of race is crucial to comprehending the transformed field of political struggles in the post-civil rights era and to formulating strategies to contest the continuing power of whiteness.

This essay undertakes an analysis of the development of the discourse of whiteness in relation to the Asian American presence by focusing on three historical moments. During each, an active negotiation took place to reconfigure racial demarcations, determining at once how whiteness was to be defined, and how various Asian American and black identities were to be positioned in relation to each other.

I begin by focusing on the state institution that most actively delineated and codified the racial identity of Asian Americans and situated its meanings within the framework of the existing national binary of black and

white—the law. In particular, I analyze how the naturalization claims of early Asian immigrants at the turn of the century, which were articulated as *bids for citizenship as whites*, were a function of the racial provisions of naturalization law rather than, as sometimes construed, a voluntarist act of self-identification. Nevertheless, the terms of the naturalization law created the field within which and the direction in which the desire for national belonging would be impelled. The focus of this section is on the productivity of the discourse of white citizenship in engendering Asian immigrants as cultural aliens, establishing a taxonomy of various Asian identities in terms of their relative distance from whiteness, prompting competitive self-differentiation among Asian groups, and adumbrating hierarchical distinctions between Asians and blacks in terms of their fitness for citizenship.

The second section focuses on the way in which the Chinese community in Mississippi, initially categorized with blacks at the base of the racial hierarchy and connected to them through working and sexual relationships, maneuvered their way to the privileges of whiteness by severing and reconstructing their relationships with blacks at the bidding of the white elite of the region. These transformations took place as the Chinese community in Mississippi was itself transformed from a sojourner to a family-oriented settler community, thus raising the stakes for access to white privileges of good schooling, housing, and social mobility.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the mobility of the Chinese Mississippians was achieved despite their legal classification as “colored” and during a time when Jim Crow laws were strictly enforced against blacks in the South. I examine this community because the demarcations between black and white were most entrenched in the South and the prospects of racial mobility seemingly most limited. Therefore, the negotiations with blackness and whiteness were most unambiguous. Furthermore, I wish to highlight that despite their status as noncitizens, their small numbers and growing economic strength allowed for their gradual positioning as middlemen minorities in the racial hierarchy and their eventual entry into symbolic whiteness.

The first and second sections highlight the dynamic nature of whiteness, the continuous contestation of its boundaries, and the consequences of the renegotiation of Asian American and white boundaries on the status

2. For a detailed discussion of these changes, see Robert Seto Quan in collaboration with Julian B. Roebuck, *Lotus among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982); and James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*, 2d ed. (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1988). Hereafter, Loewen's book is cited parenthetically as *TMC*.

and mobility of blacks. As Michael Omi explains, "Any change in the system of racial meanings will affect all groups. Challenging the dominant racial ideology inherently involves not only reconceptualizing one's own racial identity, but a reformulation of the meaning of race in general."<sup>3</sup> While the civil rights and antiracist discourses of the 1960s reconceived the meanings of whiteness and blackness in such a way as to enable the categorization of other racial minorities as "people of color," sharing a common history of oppression and marginalization, by contrast, a decade earlier, the racial mobility of Chinese Mississippians was predicated on the continued subjection of blacks at the base of the racial hierarchy.

Finally, in the third section, I examine the active efforts of one particular Asian American group, South Asian Americans, to renegotiate their classification by a federal agency, the Census Bureau. In 1970, for the first and only time in the history of their appearance on the census, South Asians were counted as whites by the state.<sup>4</sup> This change was made in the aftermath of civil rights legislation extending protections and benefits to underrepresented racial minorities. The effort to seek official classification as Asian Americans in the 1980 census was led by Asian Indian organizations, but it generated deep divisions among the new immigrants in this group about the costs and benefits of seeking minority status as nonwhites and abandoning categorization as whites. I analyze this instance to identify the shifting meanings of whiteness institutionalized by the state apparatus and to foreground the ad hoc nature of the construction of a rationale for classification as white.

All three historical instances show the dynamic nature of whiteness and the dialectic between assignation and assertion that shapes the content of racial categories. The construction of the legal definition of whiteness in the early naturalization cases, the legal classification of the Chinese as "colored," and the sudden change in the categorization of South Asian Americans on the census reveal the power of the state to encode and enforce racial meanings. On the other hand, the naturalization claims of the

3. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 86.

4. Even in the 1970 census, the applicable category for South Asian Americans was the residual category Other, which included all the groups not separately identified on the census and covered groups such as Vietnamese, Samoans, Thais, and so forth. However, the South Asian entries were moved from the Other category and reclassified as whites during the editing process used for compiling census data. Hence, although South Asians self-identified as Other for this census, they were counted as whites.

early immigrants, the community strategies of the Chinese Mississippians, and the lobbying efforts of the Asian Indian organizations demonstrate the continuous contestation of racial meanings through the institutions of civil society by groups and by individuals.<sup>5</sup>

The analysis of these three cases, each of which deals with a challenge to the meanings of whiteness posed by Asian Americans, is presented in chronological order to demonstrate the progressive increase in maneuvering room for Asian Americans in negotiating the meanings of their racial classification. In addition, the range of political strategies adopted in different contexts highlights the liminality of this intermediary racial category and the complex patterns of resistance and complicity that have shaped its historical emergence. In every case, the challenge to whiteness has had implications on the meanings of blackness.

While one of the most crucial challenges to white privilege and the corresponding construction of a collective subjectivity as "Asian Americans" was launched by the Asian American movement in the wake of the postwar black movement and in conjunction with the antiwar movement, my essay focuses on these less examined transformations of whiteness by Asian Americans, which were initiated by various Asian American groups and constitute acts of self-representation formulated as an address to the state or a white elite. Unlike the Asian American movement, these moments of racial reconstruction were initiated by various Asian Americans groups themselves and did not emerge in a political space opened up by another racial minority. Nor did they seek to engender multiracial coalitions. My purpose in examining these instances is precisely to highlight the dangers of a racial politics that leaves untheorized the relationship between an intermediary racial group and other marginalized groups in the racial hierarchy. The political transformations and identities produced by the Asian American movement in the 1970s represent a critical historical transition that informs this analysis, but focusing on these other specific pre- and postmovement articulations of racial meanings by Asian Americans illuminates the dynamics of racial realignment in the post-civil rights era, which has witnessed the breakdown of the coalitional rationality that drove the Asian American and

5. Omi and Winant emphasize the continuous process of contestation that shapes racial meanings: "The racial order is equilibrated by the state—encoded in law, organized through policy-making, and enforced by a repressive apparatus. But the equilibrium thus achieved is unstable, for the great variety of conflicting interests encapsulated in racial meanings and identities can be no more than pacified—at best—by the state" (*Racial Formation*, 55).

antiracist struggles of the earlier era. The analysis of these cases leads into the final section of the essay, which examines the relationship between the discursive reconstruction of whiteness in the post-civil rights era and the changing meanings of Asian American and black identities in an era of globalization marked by the dramatic growth of Asian economies and the reconstitution of the Asian American constituency through new immigration.

The difficulty of articulating the dialectics of Asian American racial formation in the contemporary context is evident in the lack of scholarship on the subject; in what Omi and Dana Takagi characterize as the political embarrassment among left and progressive critics, in identifying the position of Asian Americans on such issues as affirmative action; and in the lacunae in even such a major, dialectical analysis as Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* in theorizing class stratifications among Asian Americans and formulating interminority relations.<sup>6</sup> Since dialectical analysis requires that "however limited the immediate object of interest, investigating its potential requires that we project the evolution of the complex and integrated whole to which it belongs,"<sup>7</sup> an account such as Lowe's, which analyzes Asian American emergence without incorporating the mutually constitutive relations of blacks and Asian Americans, is impeded in its attempt to historicize and systematize the complex conditions of their emergence as a group. A theorization of the racial structure, rather than a selective focus on white-Asian American relations, is an analytic precondition for projecting the group's potential for further development, even as the projection of this potential forms the crux of the "anticipative-indicative" mode of dialectical critique.<sup>8</sup>

*Immigrant Acts* is considered an important and comprehensive study of the role of Asian Americans in constituting American national identity and warrants more detailed discussion because of the academic currency of the resistant Asian American subject it constructs. Certainly, Lowe's work has opened up valuable new perspectives on how American national identity has been constituted by Asian American immigration, particularly in her analysis of the pre-1965 period of immigration. However, her interest in re-

6. Michael Omi and Dana Y. Takagi, "Situating Asian Americans in the Political Discourse on Affirmative Action," *Representations* 55 (summer 1996): 157. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).

7. Bertell Ollman, "Why Dialectics? Why Now?" *Science and Society* 62, no. 3 (1998): 344.

8. Maximilien Rubel, "Non-Market Socialism in the 20th Century," in *Non-Market Socialism in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. M. Rubel and J. Crump (London: Macmillan, 1987), 25, quoted in Ollman, "Why Dialectics?" 343.



covering a subversive Asian American political subject constricts and simplifies the understanding of agency that grounds her study of Asian American racialization. The organizing metaphor of Lowe's genealogical study is the spatial one of Asian Americans' contradictory position inside/outside the nation: "'Immigrant acts,' then, attempts to name the *contradictions* of Asian immigration, which at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians 'within' the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as 'foreign' and 'outside' the national polity."<sup>9</sup> By examining minoritization and racialization primarily through their conflicted relationship to citizenship, this approach is limited by its framework from engaging the implications or salience of racial hierarchies in which Asian Americans came to assume an intermediary position, despite their "outsideness" to the nation. This conceptual constraint generates readings that, in the end, undermine Lowe's political project of establishing the materialist basis for projecting the potential for cross-racial coalitions. For instance, Lowe reads Monique Thuy-Dung Truong's "Kelly"<sup>10</sup> as an allegory of cross-racial coalition building. Truong's autobiographical piece struggles to locate its Vietnamese American narrator in the black-white divide of her first American home in Boiling Spring, North Carolina, in 1975. "Kelly" deals with the "solidarity of misfits" created through the short-lived friendship of a fat white girl and the Vietnamese American narrator, and through the narrator's separate friendship with Michelle, a girl with a "brown face" (who is possibly either "white trash" or of mixed race).<sup>11</sup> The narrator is acutely aware of her position in the racial hierarchy above Michelle and the black girls, despite her own marginalization within the white community: "You said only black

9. Lowe, *Immigrant Act*, 8.

10. Monique Thuy-Dung Truong, "Kelly," *Amerasia Journal* 17, no. 2 (1991): 41-48. In the notes to "Kelly," Truong describes the challenge she faces in the following terms: "How to write about the Southern United States when you are not White or Black?" (47). She then makes a crucial clarification: "I hope it is clear that the society in Boiling Spring *did not simply consist of an inside and an outside*. The layers were built on top of one another based on differences of race, class, beauty and other components of power or powerlessness" (47-48; my emphasis). The divergence between the way Lowe and Truong conceptualize racialization is clearly apparent here.

11. Truong, "Kelly," 48. Truong's reference in the notes to her affinity for Faulkner's fictional world strengthens the impression that Michelle might be of mixed race, as does the virulence of the community's response to her and the narrator's reference to what the black girls knew about Michelle's situation, but Truong's description is ambiguous enough to keep open the possibility that Michelle is a poor white.

people lived in trailer homes. I said I wasn't black as if your mamma and poppa would have let me into their house if they thought I was."<sup>12</sup> The narrative stresses the tenuousness of her former friendship with Kelly, the impossibility of its continuation in the present, and her childhood friend's oblivion to the narrator's unspoken fears and longings. But Lowe's interpretation of this piece underplays the tensions and conflicts of this fraught racial stratification and constructs from it a celebratory account of cross-racial coalitions between a Vietnamese American girl and two white girls. Lowe extrapolates from a narrative about the stifling social constraints on some racial crossings and the unsustainability of others the following political allegory of exclusion and resistance: "The story ultimately allegorizes a network of alliance across lines of race, class, and gender, a network that is . . . the basis of contesting the historically differentiated but intersecting determinations of racist colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism."<sup>13</sup> The narrator makes it clear that the black girls inhabit a social world completely removed from hers and that she herself never manages to cross this racial boundary. But what, one wants to ask, happened to the black girls within Lowe's celebratory political allegory? Do they have to disappear in order to bring it into existence? Does a narrative of resistant Asian American subjectivity in relation to whiteness that elides or obscures its ineluctable relationship to blackness allow us to adequately theorize either the impediments to the emergence of cross-racial coalitions or the prospects for it? My interest is not in producing a different reading from Lowe's but in locating the weaknesses of theoretical paradigms grounded in an inside/outside binary and of dialectical analyses of Asian American racialization that erase, absorb, or subsume black racialization in a framework of parallel minoritization.

A corollary of Lowe's construction of Asian Americans as outsiders to the nation is the argument that their position as outsiders produces resistant, subversive subjects: "By insisting on 'immigrant acts' as contradictions and therefore as dialectical and critical, I also mean to emphasize that while immigration has been the *locus* of legal and political restriction of Asians as the 'other' in America, immigration has simultaneously been the site for the emergence of critical negations of the nation-state for which those legislations are the expression."<sup>14</sup> Lowe's conceptualization of Asian American racialization accounts for the emergence of a resistant Asian American

12. Truong, "Kelly," 44.

13. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 57.

14. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 8.

political subject, but it does not adequately distinguish between this specific trajectory and the racial formation of the entire group at different historical moments, across diverse class positions, and despite generational and national differences. Although her analysis seems occasionally to register a recognition of a more complex range of positions assumed by Asian American subjects, this insight is acknowledged in passing and not developed in a systematic way.<sup>15</sup>

A materialist analysis that occludes class stratification within racial formation not only leaves unchallenged the power of class-inflected invocations of ethnic and racial solidarity but impedes the development of strategies that can address the cross-hatching of class, race, and ethnicity in the post-civil rights era.<sup>16</sup> In her discussion of the contemporary context, Lowe focuses primarily on the exploitation of immigrant Asian women laborers in the United States, while leaving untheorized the ways in which the dramatic growth of some Asian economies, the increase and mobility of Asian capital across national boundaries, and the entry of Asians into the technical-managerial class has created a situation where Asian America is a site of both resistance and exploitation. This is particularly problematic because the exploitation of Asian sweatshop workers, restaurant workers, and migrant workers by small and large Asian capital often deploys the discourse of ethnic and family loyalty to enforce discipline and extract compliance. In addition, the postindustrial forms of historic abuses such as slavery have assumed gigantic dimensions in the transnational era and flourish within closed national and diasporic networks that are difficult to penetrate. Pino Arlacchi, the director of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, pointed to human trafficking (sexual slavery, forced labor, human smuggling) as the largest criminal market in the world, involving approximately two hundred million people worldwide, of whom some thirty million women and children have been trafficked within and from Southeast Asia alone for sex and sweatshop labor. According to Arlacchi, Chinese

15. For instance, Lowe indicates in the preface that "alternative cultural forms and practices do not offer havens of resolution but are often eloquent descriptions of the ways in which the law, labor exploitation, racialization, and gendering work to prohibit alternatives"; however, this idea is not developed any further in the book (*Immigrant Acts*, x).

16. This is particularly problematic in the post-1965 period, when the entry of substantial numbers of professionals, skilled workers, and investors, and the attainment of middle-class status by a portion of the American-born population required a more complex model to account for the political diversity, racial liminality, and transnational mobility and affiliations of Asian Americans.

migrants destined for Britain and North America "disappear into neighborhoods and businesses run by other Asians," and the Chinese networks, in particular, are nearly impenetrable because "the Chinese work very much inside closed communities."<sup>17</sup> The scale of the new forms of human exploitation and the movement of peoples within networks like these require models of ethnic and racial identity formation that can extend beyond the equation of minoritization with resistance. Aihwa Ong characterizes as "flexible citizenship" the practices of some overseas Chinese who have been adroit at acquiring citizenship in England and North America as investors in order to avoid political instability and optimize capital accumulation, and she points out that these strategies have, in turn, reconfigured the forms of patriarchal power within ethnic formations.<sup>18</sup> Thus the "outsideness" of some minorities to the nation has come to acquire very different connotations from the earlier era of exclusion and labor exploitation, and the challenge of post-civil rights politics is to produce models of minoritization and agency that do not obscure the operations of race and class in the new global economy.

#### **Whiteness as Racial Geography: The Law and Early Asian American Naturalization Claims**

We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted . . . make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world.

—Paul Rabinow, "Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Postmodernity in Anthropology"

The vexed rearticulation of the meanings of whiteness contained in the legislative effort to exclude Asians and deny them naturalization reveals the incoherence of whiteness as a racial category and the contradiction between the claims of American democracy and colonial benevolence and the racial doctrine codified into immigration and naturalization law. These cases worked incrementally to reformulate whiteness from a black/white binary to a category with no final, clear rationale but that, nonetheless, had an in-

17. Barbara Crossette, "U.N. Warns That Trafficking in Human Beings Is Growing," *New York Times*, 25 June 2000, 9.

18. Aihwa Ong, "On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora," *Positions* 1, no. 3 (1993): 745–78.

stitutional power to organize diverse bodies into a taxonomy that consolidated the power of whiteness, which came to be historically and legally disarticulated from skin color. At the same time, the legal discourse of white citizenship produced the subjects it excluded by prompting assimilationist aspiration, setting in motion competitive self-differentiation between Asian-origin groups and proffering compensatory fictions of nonblackness that sedimented the meanings of Asian racial identity in the United States. The production of these "subject effects" is critical to locate because, while the discursive reversal of these effects formed the ground for the emergence of the resistant Asian American political subject of the 1960s, these effects have been reinscribed in the contemporary context to ground the fiction of the model minority and the refurbished American dream.

The arrival of Asian immigrants in the United States represents a crucial juncture in the formation of whiteness. The definition of white identity, thought to have been settled by defining precisely through the law who was black and what the place of Native Americans was in the polity, had to be reopened and more narrowly articulated to address the question of whether Asians could become Americans. Thus, the entry of Asians had a strong impact on the shaping of national identity, placing a tremendous strain on the courts for resolving the problem at the legislative level. Immigration and naturalization legislation came to provide a mechanism for excluding most people of Asian origin from the nation, whether by denying them entry or by denying them citizenship status. The process of exclusion served not only to constitute Asians racially but to define the meanings of whiteness. As Cheryl Harris points out, "The right to exclude was the central principle . . . of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized not by any inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be 'not white.' The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness. . . . The courts played an active role in enforcing this right to exclude—determining who was or was not white enough to enjoy the privileges accompanying whiteness."<sup>19</sup>

The presence of Asians also provided a means for "not-yet-white" groups, such as the Irish, to reinforce the equation between Americanness and whiteness by shifting the debate about Americanness from the question of nativity to the question of race.<sup>20</sup> Both blacks and Asians helped make the

19. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1736.

20. John Bukowczyk, quoted in David R. Roediger, "Whiteness and Ethnicity in the History

liminal European groups white, an identity that would have been less tenable in their absence. Pointing to the production of whiteness as law, David Roediger observes, "If the legal and social history of Jim Crow often turned on the question 'Who was Black?' the legal and social history of immigration often turned on the question 'Who was white?'"<sup>21</sup> Immigration laws from 1882 to 1965 systematically restricted Asian immigration while they simultaneously kept open most European immigration. Similarly, naturalization laws from 1790 to 1952 carried a racial prerequisite of whiteness that was interpreted as denying most Asians citizenship. A 1790 congressional statute had restricted naturalization to an alien who was "a free white person."<sup>22</sup> After the Civil War, in 1870, following congressional debate, in which efforts were made to drop the racial prerequisite altogether—but were forestalled by the widespread opposition to extending naturalization to Native Americans and Asians—naturalization was extended only to "persons of African nativity, or African descent."<sup>23</sup> Subsequent passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 rendered the Chinese ineligible for naturalization. For all other groups, the claim to citizenship would have to be made in terms of their ability to meet the racial prerequisites to naturalization. But while Asians petitioned for citizenship *as whites*, they were excluded *as Asians*.

In a comprehensive study of the fifty-two racial prerequisite cases that were argued in state and federal courts from 1878 to 1952, including the two, *Ozawa* and *Thind*, that reached the Supreme Court, Ian Haney López shows how they worked to shape the legal definition of whiteness over this period of time; these cases were so named because of their construal of the racial criteria that were a prerequisite for naturalization.<sup>24</sup> The petitioners for citizenship were a diverse group from Syria, Burma, the Philippines, Hawai'i, India, Mexico, China, and Japan, and several were of mixed race. López notes the striking fact that in the fifty-two prerequisite cases, all but one petitioner sought to claim citizenship by proving his whiteness when, after 1870, naturalization could also be claimed by those who were black.<sup>25</sup>

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of 'White Ethnicities' in the United States," in *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History*, ed. David R. Roediger (London: Verso, 1994), 184, see also 189.

21. Roediger, "Whiteness and Ethnicity," 82.

22. 1 Stat. 103 (March 26, 1790).

23. 16 Stat. 254 (July 14, 1870).

24. Ian F. Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

25. *In re Cruz* was the only reported case where a plaintiff sought naturalization as a per-

Why? Preempting the "obvious" but tautological response that it was because there were few "Black" immigrants at this time, López inserts the crucial reminder that the various citizenship claimants did not fit neatly into either the White or Black category within the classification schema of that time. He adds, "Some immigrant groups, for example the Chinese, were initially characterized as Black, suggesting that for some, attempting to naturalize as a 'white person' was the more difficult route." In explaining the preponderance of white-person cases, he cites the indeterminacy of the legal category of white person (lacking geographical specificity), the clarity of the definition of a black person as one "of African nativity, or African descent," and the social stigma and discrimination faced by black citizens.<sup>26</sup>

Such was the productivity of whiteness as law that all Asians seeking citizenship did so by trying to prove that they were white, frequently endorsing the myth of white civilizational superiority and nonwhite inferiority in their attempts to win citizenship. Ironically, when these same petitioners were rejected, they would stand condemned by their own words, consigned to the lower ranks of a racial hierarchy in which, as they had themselves attested, nonwhiteness represented moral and cultural degradation. To add to the irony, the presiding judge frequently reproved the despondent petitioners for taking the law to imply that only the superior races were eligible for citizenship. After all, Negroes were eligible for citizenship, and how many could say that Asians were inferior to Negroes? What is fascinating about these interchanges is the power of whiteness as law to construct a scene of freely speaking subjects who identified themselves as whites. Furthermore, when rejected, they were offered the compensation of viewing themselves as superior to Negroes. Thus the legal discourse of naturalization not only demarcates the boundaries of whiteness but also inscribes in certain cases the potential terms of relationship between Asians and blacks by offering the psychological compensation of nonblackness.

If, on the one hand, the naturalization cases enunciated differences between blacks and various Asian groups, on the other hand, they generated a taxonomy of the differences among various Asian national groups. Although most Asian petitioners in the racial prerequisite cases were rejected, it would be a mistake to assume that the identity in the outcome

son of African nativity. The petitioner had an African-Native American mother and a Native American father, but the court rejected the petition, stating that a person who was one-quarter African and three-quarters Native American was not eligible for citizenship as a person of "African descent." *In re Cruz*, 23 F. Supp. 774 (E.D.N.Y. 1938).

26. López, *White by Law*, 51-52.

of these cases implied that all the rejected Asian groups were viewed as equally unsuitable. On the contrary, a gradation was established whereby some Asian national groups were seen as being more like whites than others. These cases projected a racialized geography in which modernity and political power provided the coordinates of location within a geopolitical sphere (Asia) that was, during that very time, being reinscribed by American imperial ambitions.

Thus, as the case law on naturalization developed, whiteness became a measure not of an anthropological reality but of a capacity for good government and modernity that was intricately linked to U.S. imperial interests in Asia. Even though most Asian petitioners were rejected, fine discriminations began to emerge between different types of Asians that reflected political relations between the United States and various Asian nations. Consequently, some Asians came to be seen as more like whites than others, and proximity to whiteness symbolized the civilizational quotient of a group. For instance, Chinese and Japanese may have both been classified as Mongolians, but the question of Japanese naturalization was kept open for a long time because of the complicating factors of Japanese political power and modernity.

In the very first prerequisite case (1878), the plaintiff was Ah Yup, a Chinese man. Since it was the first application by a "native Chinaman," the issue was framed in the judge's ruling as turning on the question, "Is a person of the Mongolian race a 'white person' within the meaning of the statute?" Judge Sawyer was forced to concede some validity to Ah Yup's petition: "The words 'white person,' as well argued by petitioner's counsel, taken in a strictly literal sense, constitute a very indefinite description of a class of persons, where none can be said to be literally white, and those called white may be found of every shade from the lightest blonde to the most swarthy brunette."<sup>27</sup> However, he finally ruled that the determining criteria for whiteness should not be its literal meaning but the popular understanding of the term and the weight of scientific evidence that classified Mongolians and Caucasians as separate races. A few years later, the 1882 Exclusion Act closed the issue of Chinese eligibility for naturalization, accounting for the extremely low numbers of Chinese petitioners in the prerequisite cases.<sup>28</sup> Congress acted swiftly and decisively on the matter of

27. *In re Ah Yup*, 1 F. Cas. 223 (C.C.D. Cal. 1878).

28. Even after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, a few judges continued to naturalize Chinese. The 1910 census shows 1,368 naturalized Chinese citizens living



Chinese immigration and naturalization, and it did not mince words in naming the legislation the Chinese Exclusion Act.

In the case of the Japanese, the 1908 legislation calling on the Japanese government to "voluntarily" restrict the entry of its laborers left open the immigration of women and family members, and was euphemistically termed the Gentlemen's Agreement. Moreover, the matter of Japanese naturalization was left to the executive (Bureau of Naturalization) and the judiciary to resolve, since Congress was loath to antagonize the Japanese government by acting directly on the question. For the same reason, the exclusion of the Japanese would be delayed till 1924, when it was coupled with that of southern and eastern Europeans. Clearly, then, although the Japanese were eventually excluded like other Asian groups, they occupied a preeminent position in the hierarchy of Asian groups at that time.

The question of Japanese eligibility for naturalization remained open until the *Ozawa* decision in 1922.<sup>29</sup> Some lower federal courts had issued naturalization papers to a number of Japanese, and the census of 1910 showed that 420 were naturalized.<sup>30</sup> The government was reluctant to jeopardize diplomatic relations with the Japanese by denying naturalization, although strong anti-Japanese sentiment on the West Coast made granting naturalization politically costly. In addition, the growing global power of the Japanese propagated exceptionalist interpretations of their cultural norms, leading some influential Americans, including the renowned jurist John Wigmore, to advocate Japanese naturalization on the grounds that they were more civilized and modern than their Asian counterparts: "Having as good a claim to the color 'white' as the southern European and the Semitic peoples, having to-day greater affinities with us in culture and progress and the facility of social amalgamation than they have with any Asiatic people, isolated as they are to-day from Asia in tendencies and sympathies and isolated as they have been in racial history, it would seem that a liberal interpretation [of the naturalization statute] should easily prevail."<sup>31</sup> For such

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in the United States. See Elizabeth Hull, "Naturalization and Denaturalization," in *Asian Americans and the Supreme Court*, ed. Hyung-Chan Kim (New York: Greenwood, 1992), 404; and Joan Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 248-56.

29. *Ozawa v United States*, 260 U.S. 178 (1922).

30. Yuji Ichioka, "The Early Japanese Immigrant Quest for Citizenship: The Background of the 1922 *Ozawa* Case," *Amerasia Journal* 4, no. 2 (1977): 2.

31. John Wigmore, "American Naturalization and the Japanese," *American Law Review* 28 (1894): 818.

immigrants as the Japanese, who could be ruled as nonwhite on anthropological grounds, skin color and assimilability were central to establishing their fitness for Americanization, as is evident in the claims advanced in the *Ozawa* case. However, none of these arguments succeeded in the end, because Japanese racial identity as Mongolian, progressively established as nonwhite by law, set up an insurmountable barrier to naturalization.

When the petitioners were from Asian countries with colonial or semi-colonial ties to the United States, such as the Philippines and Hawai'i, their exclusion from whiteness had to be reconciled with imperial ideologies of benevolent assimilation and the "incorporation" of these territories.<sup>32</sup> Filipino naturalization was complicated by the existence of special connections between the two countries that was reflected in the separate status accorded to the citizens of the Philippines, who were categorized as American "nationals." In both cases, justifications for exclusion were consequently more tortuous, sometimes involving lengthy and charged rationalizations linked to the unenlightened condition of the petitioner. When Kanaka Nian, a native Hawaiian, petitioned the court, he was denied "on the double ground that he was a Mongolian, and hence not eligible to citizenship, and because he was not sufficiently intelligent as to the principles of the government of the United States."<sup>33</sup> The Utah Supreme Court focused sharply on Nian's mental inferiority, political propensity toward despotism (a failing commonly ascribed to Orientals), and incapacity to comprehend the principles of republican government.<sup>34</sup> The emphasis on his lack of enlightenment posits a developmental gap between being Hawaiian and being American that will later justify annexation even though here it warrants exclusion from citizen-

32. The doctrine of "unincorporated territory" was developed in a series of Supreme Court rulings whereby the governmental power of Congress over the newly annexed territories was subject to only those limitations of the Constitution as the Supreme Court deemed applicable. The annexation of the territories had generated fierce debates over whether annexation necessarily conferred U.S. citizenship upon the inhabitants of these territories. But as the doctrine of unincorporated territory developed, it allowed for differences in political status among the inhabitants of the various territories. Filipinos were designated "non-citizen nationals" of the United States, but Hawaiians were granted citizenship in 1900, and Puerto Ricans in 1917. See José A. Cabranes, *Citizenship and the American Empire* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979).

33. *In re Kanaka Nian*, 6 Utah 259, 21 Pac. 993, 994 (1889).

34. "The admission of the applicant to citizenship was opposed, also, on the ground that he did not appear to be possessed of sufficient intelligence to become a citizen; that his intellect and conscience were not sufficiently enlightened" (*In re Kanaka Nian*, 994).

ship. Nian's case came forward in 1889, before Hawai'i had been annexed, although U.S. dominance over Hawai'i was well-established.

Despite their special status as colonial subjects, or perhaps because of it, none of the cases demonstrates more starkly the extraordinary lengths to which the courts went to exclude Asians from naturalization than the cases involving Filipino applicants. A perverse pattern emerged whereby the courts interpreted naturalization statutes specifically enacted to enable Filipino naturalization (the act of 1906) in such a way as to disqualify these applicants, and the courts admitted of no ambiguity in the matter of Filipino naturalization. The gap between the profession of special ties between the United States and its colonial subjects and the entrenched resistance to implementing such ties in judicial practice was striking.<sup>35</sup>

In 1906, Congress passed the Naturalization Act, extending the privilege of naturalization, hitherto reserved for aliens, to "all persons not citizens who owe permanent allegiance to the United States," with the stipulation that "the applicant shall not be required to renounce allegiance to any foreign sovereignty." This section of the statute was framed specifically to enable the *noncitizen nationals*, such as Filipinos, to apply for naturalization. Since naturalized citizenship could be conferred only on aliens till this point, and the noncitizen national category emerged in the aftermath of American colonization, the 1906 act was formulated to deal with this new contingency. Despite clear and overwhelming evidence of congressional intent to open up naturalization to *all Filipinos*, the courts consistently rejected Filipino applicants, maintaining that the racial prerequisites of the 1870 statute were applicable to the 1906 act. Hence, according to the courts, Congress intended only those Filipinos who were white or of African nativity or descent to be considered eligible for naturalization!<sup>36</sup>

35. Dudley O. McGovney, "Our Non-Citizen Nationals, Who Are They?" *California Law Review* 22, no. 6 (1934): 603.

36. Most Filipinos who applied for naturalization were rejected because they were not white or black. In one of the few cases where the courts recognized the legitimacy of Filipino naturalization, the petitioner, Francisco Mallari, was rejected for having failed to follow the proper procedures in declaring his intention to naturalize. Yet this is one of the few Filipino rulings that interprets the 1906 act broadly. Having disqualified Mallari's petition on technical grounds, it appears that the judge felt at liberty to deliver an impartial opinion on the statute. Arguing against the weight of rulings developed in prior Filipino cases, he held that the 1906 act was undoubtedly intended to provide for the naturalization of all Filipinos, *regardless of race*. He buttressed his interpretation with copious citations from congressional records on the debates preceding the passage of the legislation. The Mallari case

The court's task in determining the whiteness of Asian immigrants was made more complicated by the diversity of the criteria by which different Asian groups sought to establish their whiteness, ranging from anthropological classification as whites, to skin color, to assimilability. López points out that two concurrent developments further complicated the courts' task in drawing the boundaries of whiteness at the turn of the century. First, the inchoate status of their classification as neither definitively black nor white forced the courts to articulate the criteria for determining whiteness. Second, by the early twentieth century, anthropology was also confronting the impossibility of providing empirical support to affirm the existence of popularly recognized racial divisions; hence the early reliance by the courts on scientific evidence gave way to the pronounced tendency to privilege the "common understanding" of racial categories as the overriding criterion in determining admissibility to whiteness.<sup>37</sup> Speaking of the changes produced by the anthropological study of race at the turn of the century, Judge Smith pronounced that "the meaning of Caucasian as at one time prevalent has been now practically exploded."<sup>38</sup> Whereas the racial classification of some Asian groups as "Mongolians"—for example, the Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese—provided an avenue for the courts to reject their citizenship petitions on the basis of scientific evidence and then legal precedent, the appearance of West and South Asian claimants, whose racial classification as Caucasian was established in the anthropological theories of the day, posed a greater taxonomical problem for legal practice and interpretation.

Since the courts had to articulate rationales for their rulings in the prerequisite cases and determine the criteria by which racial categories would be codified in law, they "were responsible for deciding not only who was White, but why someone was White."<sup>39</sup> After a period of vacillation on the racial classification of South Asians, the boundary of whiteness came to be drawn west of the subcontinent, including most West Asians and excluding all other Asians (that division is still in place today, in that West

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reveals the tension between two powerful forces that shaped the case law on Filipino naturalization—the increasing divergence between the judiciary and the legislative branches of the government on the special case of the Filipino nationals. The increasing conservatism in the rulings mirrored the growing anti-Asian sentiment in the public, while congressional actions reflected concern with maintaining the legitimacy of the colonial regime. *In re Mallari*, 239 F. 416 (D. Mass. 1916).

37. López, *White by Law*, 7–8.

38. *Ex parte Dow*, 211 F. 488 (E.D.S.C. 1914).

39. López, *White by Law*, 3.

Asians are officially classified as "white" and not as "Asian American"). South Asians came to be seen as nonwhites by law by shifting the determining criteria from anthropological theory to the "common understanding" of the term *white person*.<sup>40</sup> In a unanimous decision rejecting the petition of the Indian appellant Bhagat Singh Thind, the Supreme Court opined: "It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today."<sup>41</sup> The gradual shift in the courts to a reliance on popular opinion sharply restricted the constituency of those who were legally recognized as "whites" and thereby broadened the exclusionary range of whiteness. The petitions of Asians for citizenship as whites produced a category crisis that was resolved by bringing its meaning to rest on a tautology—whiteness means what white people think it means. In the law, however, this racially inflected truth-claim was inscribed as the "common" understanding of whiteness.

#### **Negotiating the Black-White Binary: The Racial Strategies of the Chinese Mississippians**

Some of my white friends call me a Delta lotus. I'm a Delta Southerner, but still a lotus and not a magnolia. I guess I can never be one because when I look in the mirror I don't have lily-white skin. But it sure ain't black, either. It's a God-awful in-between shade of destiny. Just 'cause I'm not white in the Delta doesn't mean I can't be white somewhere else . . . , or maybe I can even be Chinese in another place, but not in the Delta.

—Chinese Mississippian student, quoted in *Lotus among the Magnolias*

Transformations in the status of most Asian Americans would await incremental changes in immigration and naturalization legislation from the 1940s onward, until all racial prerequisites to naturalization were dropped in 1952 and Asian immigration was placed on an equal footing with European immigration in 1965. But although judicial decree decisively closed off access to citizenship through naturalization, in certain instances, the racial ambiguity of Asian Americans within an entrenched black-white binary was

40. *United States v Thind*, 261 U.S. 204, 210 (1923).

41. *United States v Thind*, 209.

deployed to lay claim to other privileges of whiteness and to circumvent their legal classification as "colored" people. This section examines the challenge posed to the meanings of whiteness by the Chinese community in Mississippi, first through the legal system, in petitioning for access to white public schools, and, when that proved unsuccessful, through the adoption of the cultural norms of the white Southern elite. The analysis focuses on the forms and terms under which the remarkable racial mobility of the Chinese community in Mississippi was negotiated at a time when Jim Crow laws were strictly enforced against blacks in the South. Their attainment of honorary white status highlights the importance of the institutions of civil society (the church, schools, clubs) in modifying the racial meanings written into law and reveals the multiple sites at which racial formation takes place. The lower numbers of Chinese in the South as compared to the West Coast, their relative economic strength, their role in mediating the threat represented by a free black population, and their strategic mimicry of white cultural norms opened up access to symbolic whiteness. But such mobility was based on their endorsement of the black-white racial divide that preceded their arrival in the South. While the Chinese Mississippians earned a social status as honorary whites that was not achieved by other Chinese communities across the country, this historical instance highlights the crucial role of blacks in effecting the boundary demarcations between intermediary groups and whites, and foregrounds the necessity of recognizing the dialectical relationship between blackness, whiteness, and Asianness. The case of the Chinese Mississippians illustrates the power of whiteness to induce identification from nonwhites and the position of blacks as the definitional "other" against whom ideologies of whiteness are produced and sustained.

The structural position of the Chinese in Delta society is vividly reflected in the circumstances surrounding, and the unforeseen legacy of, a legal challenge that reached the Bolivar District Court in Mississippi in 1924. Gong Lum, a Chinese Mississippian merchant, appealed the school district's decision to debar his daughter Martha from attending the white public school in Rosedale. Gong Lum's lawyers initially appealed her case on the grounds that "she is not a member of the colored race nor is she of mixed blood, but that she is pure Chinese" and by arguing that there was no separate school maintained in the district for the education of children of Chinese descent.<sup>42</sup> In this instance, the claim to white privilege is based on a nega-

42. *Gong Lum v Rice*, 275 U.S. 78, 81 (1927).

tive definition: Since she was not colored or of mixed race, she was white. The weakness of this argument is that it is potentially reversible. Indeed, its potential reversibility presaged what was to come. The trial court ruled in her favor, but the school district appealed to the Mississippi Supreme Court, which overturned the decision offering the reverse negative definition: Since the Chinese were not white, they were to be considered with all other non-whites under the heading "colored races."<sup>43</sup> When Gong Lum appealed to the United States Supreme Court, his lawyers abandoned the argument that the Chinese were not "colored." Instead, they adopted another strategy: Affirming the practice of segregation because "such intercourse with African-Americans is objectionable . . . in many instances . . . repulsive and impossible," they invoked the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to argue that it was discriminatory to deny the Chinese the opportunity to practice the same forms of segregation as whites. They argued that whites, as the "law-making race," had created separate schools to protect themselves from mixing with Negroes: "If there is danger in the association, it is a danger from which one person is entitled to protection just the same as another. . . . The white race creates for itself a privilege that it denies to other races; exposes the children of other races to risks and dangers to which it would not expose its own children. This is discrimination."<sup>44</sup> The appeal was rejected by the Supreme Court. However, the trajectory of the case reveals that the further the case moved from the control of the local white elite who had extended to the Chinese many of the privileges of whiteness, the less amenable the courts were to accepting the argument that the Chinese were not "colored."

Indeed, much about the unusually high standing accorded the Chinese Mississippians is evident in the success of the appeal at the district level and the limited effect of the Supreme Court decision in altering their status because of the support extended to Delta Chinese by the local white elite. In fact, such was the status of the Chinese community in Rosedale at the time of the case that Gong Lum himself was a trustee of the school board that was forced to debar his daughters by the state superintendent; the Lums had the support of the vast majority of the township; and the case was taken pro bono by a prestigious law firm.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, although sociologist Robert O'Brien predicted that the effect of the court decision would be

43. *Rice v Gong Lum*, 139 Miss. 760, 104 So. 105 (1925).

44. *Gong Lum v Rice*, 79.

45. Jeannie Rhee, "In Black and White: Chinese in the Mississippi Delta," *Journal of Supreme Court History* (1994): 122.

to position the Chinese Mississippians with the blacks and eventually merge the two groups,<sup>46</sup> the decision only entrenched the white identification of the group and their aggressive dissociation from blacks. As Jeannie Rhee explains, "With the Court's refusal to protect, let alone acknowledge, their rights, the Delta white establishment would determine their status and fate more so than ever before. If the Chinese hoped to secure a bright future for their children, they had to cater aggressively and remorselessly to the ruling class to win their approval. Not only did they have to consent to the social structure, they had to enforce it actively themselves . . . furthering the racial hierarchy and denigration of African-Americans."<sup>47</sup>

Following *Gong Lum*, nearly all Chinese Mississippians refused to send their children to colored public schools, placing them instead in out-of-state and Catholic institutions or hiring white private tutors for them. They also used the religious interest of the Protestant missions in the region to their advantage: "Many Chinese seized upon this and dangled their future baptisms in front of whites, using it as a bargaining tool to gain assistance in acquiring better treatment and greater status in Delta society." They were eminently successful in that the missions began to provide education for Chinese Mississippian schoolchildren and even went so far as to mobilize support and funding to set up separate Chinese public schools in some townships. With World War II, when China became an ally of the United States and the Delta Chinese raised money for the war effort, the last barriers to educational access fell; and the region's white elite responded enthusiastically by opening almost every white public school in the region to them.<sup>48</sup> Thus, within two decades of the Supreme Court's decision, the Delta Chinese had regained and improved their pre-*Gong Lum* social status.

The preconditions to social mobility laid out by the white regional elite had a long history in determining the interactions between the three groups in the region. Arriving around 1870, the Chinese initially worked as sharecroppers like the blacks but soon created a niche for themselves running small grocery stores in black neighborhoods. By the early decades of the twentieth century, by consciously identifying with white cultural norms and dissociating themselves from blacks, they gained access to many white institutions and spaces (schools, hospitals, neighborhoods) until they came

46. Robert W. O'Brien, "Status of the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta," *Social Forces* 19 (1941): 387-88.

47. Rhee, "In Black and White," 125-26.

48. Rhee, "In Black and White," 127, 129.



to be "very nearly, and in some respects entirely, equal in status to Caucasians" (*TMC*, 2).

The early links between Chinese Mississippians and blacks were fairly strong because Chinese Mississippian grocers lived and worked in their stores located in black neighborhoods, and they developed cordial relations with their customers.<sup>49</sup> Antimiscegenation laws and low male-to-female ratios within the Chinese Mississippian community also led to marriages and cohabitation between Chinese Mississippian men and black women, but by 1940 such relationships ceased to form. When whites made it clear explicitly and implicitly that access to white schools and other public institutions was contingent on their severing associations with blacks, the Chinese Mississippian community leaders "set out to eradicate the Chinese-Negro minority, by influencing Chinese males to end Negro relationships and throw out their Chinese-Negro kin, or by forcing the families to leave the community" (*TMC*, 76). The community pressure proved very effective, resulting in a dramatic decline in the number of such relationships. Access to white privilege required a decisive shift in established black-Chinese relations. This shift was facilitated when wives and children joined the grocers, and the benefits of access to white institutions rose proportionately for members of a settlement-oriented community. As Loewen observes, "In effect, then, the Chinese majority profited from the image of fellowship with blacks established by the minority of merchants who did have close ties, including marriage, with members of the Negro community. These ties were, therefore, not discouraged until they hindered the advancement of the group into white institutions" (*TMC*, 64).

Key to their mobility was accruing the cultural capital that allowed them to display their dissociation from blacks: "The Chinese had to use their cash to establish a lifestyle and image different from that of the black majority" (*TMC*, 5). Hitherto regarded as almost black, they sought mobility by positioning themselves as almost white. The change of image was produced through imitation of white cultural modes: "Chinese patterns are being pushed to one side, but there is no patterning from Negro characteristics among the young people. The way they dance, sing, the argot they use, their gestures and mannerisms—all are incredibly free of black influence, when it is remembered that most Chinese children live in Negro neighborhoods" (*TMC*, 81–82). In addition, events and activities such as birth-

49. This summary of the history of the Chinese Mississippian community draws on Loewen's *Mississippi Chinese*, 1–31.

day parties and funerals modeled on white prototypes reinforced the process of acculturation. According to Robert Quan, Chinese respectability was founded on being Christian, speaking English, and being distinct from blacks.<sup>50</sup>

The strategy of the Chinese was based on shifting the focus from their racial difference from whites to their cultural similarity to whites and their racial and cultural difference from blacks. Moreover, by mimicking white cultural patterns, they placed themselves in a tutelary relationship to whites, seeming to reaffirm through this posture of deference the superiority of whites and leaving intact the black-white polarity on which the society was based. Choosing whiteness enabled them to live more comfortably with whites and to live more comfortably as Americans by shedding some of the burden of being perennial foreigners, aliens by race.<sup>51</sup>

While the strategy of assimilating to white cultural norms constituted a choice on the part of most Chinese Mississippians, this choice must be understood within the context of the segregated society in which they lived, under conditions not of their own choosing. To say that the language of voluntarism is inadequate for understanding the situation and options exercised by the Chinese Mississippians is not to deny their agency in repositioning themselves. The tension between agency and environment in effecting such transformations is brilliantly encapsulated in Noel Ignatiev's formulation of who made the Irish white. Incorporation into whiteness was, he writes, "something the Irish did 'on' (though not by) themselves."<sup>52</sup> While the movement toward whiteness pitted Chinese Mississippians against blacks, this opposition was created and framed by a white power structure that determined the terms of racial mobility. Their movement upward resulted in increased conflict between blacks and Chinese, but this conflict is more revealing of the invisible effects of white power in situations from which it appears removed or absent than it is of any entrenched antagonism between the two subordinate groups. Harris's comments on an analogous instance from African American history—the phenomenon of passing—are particularly illuminating, because they remind us of the inadequacy of voluntarism as an explanatory concept:

50. Quan, *Lotus among the Magnolias*, 36.

51. As Toni Morrison astutely observes, "It is no accident and no mistake that immigrant populations . . . understood their Americanness as an opposition to the resident black population" (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992], 46).

52. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 3.

The economic coercion of white supremacy on self-definition nullifies any suggestion that passing is a logical exercise of liberty or self-identity. The decision to pass as white was not a choice, if by that word one means voluntarism or lack of compulsion. The fact of race subordination was coercive and circumscribed the liberty to self-define. Self-determination of identity was not a right for all people, but a privilege accorded on the basis of race. The effect . . . was to devalue those who were not white by coercing them to deny their identity in order to survive.<sup>53</sup>

This is not to mitigate the fact that in the case of Chinese Mississippians, as in the case of South Asian Americans (to be discussed), the aspiration to whiteness, whether cultural or legal, was a product of and produced racist attitudes among some members of the group. Indeed, by undertaking a structural analysis of the productivity of whiteness in relation to Asian Americans, the purpose of this article is to demarcate the effects of white power (one of which is the creation of racist attitudes, even among members of subordinate groups who are themselves subject to racism) on the relationship between Asian Americans and whites, Asian Americans and blacks, and between Asian-origin groups. Central to this project is the understanding derived from Michel Foucault that power is not repressive but productive: "In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future . . . [and] faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up."<sup>54</sup>

By analyzing the whitening of Chinese Mississippians and the naturalization claims of Asian Americans as a product of a white power structure rather than a product of their racist attitudes, I have tried to avoid the danger of substituting an effect for a cause. The danger of analyzing these issues only in terms of the choices of the groups or of their racism is that it erases the power of the social structure to engender these conflicts by linking the distribution of resources and the allocation of rights to racial identities. Furthermore, by insisting that the negotiations between Asian Ameri-

53. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1743-44.

54. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," afterword to *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 220.

cans and whites have effects on the position of blacks, I have tried to highlight that the intermediary position of Asian Americans requires an analytic approach and a politics that can account for the complexity and ambivalence of their position.

### **Asian Americans and the Narrative of South Asian American Exceptionalism**

The 1965 Immigration Act, which dramatically increased the number of incoming Asian immigrants by equalizing Asian quotas with European ones, coincided with another set of historic events that would transform the Asian American constituency—the civil rights and Asian American movements. These historical transformations redrew the boundaries between black, Asian American, and white identities, creating new racial alignments and opening up prospects for economic mobility. Simultaneously, new immigration augmented and fractured the existing Asian American constituency, adding new national groups and creating class stratifications within the grouping. In response to some of these changes, federal agencies such as the Census Bureau and government bodies concerned with implementing civil rights initiatives undertook a review of established racial categories, adding some categories and modifying others. One of the most significant shifts in the Asian American–white boundary produced by this federal overhaul of racial classifications was the Census Bureau's decision to count South Asian Americans as whites in the 1970 census, after six decades of continuously classifying them as nonwhites. This shift is even more remarkable considering that the Census Bureau had persisted in classifying South Asians as "Hindus/Non-White" in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the courts were vacillating on their classification in naturalization cases. This decision, like the rulings on naturalization, highlights the imprecisions and contradictions that have dogged state efforts to fix the boundary between whiteness and Asianness, the incoherence that has marked the emergence of whiteness as a category, and the flexibility of the boundary between the two groups.

This section analyzes the complex politics and the ambivalence that defined the political efforts of the Asian Indian community to challenge their classification as whites and seek minority status as Asian Americans instead. Since this effort was led by the middle-class new immigrants among Asian Indians, who formed and assumed leadership of community organizations, this analysis will help to open up the vexed question of the impli-

cations for civil rights-era coalition politics of the dominance of upwardly mobile fractions within underrepresented minority groups, especially when these fractions may produce and be produced by the shift from race to ethnicity in public discourses in the post-civil rights era. This class fraction projected as the model minority has been crucial to the rearticulation of whiteness as color blindness in the past and the present. The genealogy of the model minority stereotype reveals its imbrication in the political economy of race; the stereotype was generated by conservative commentators in the 1970s as a discursive strategy for pitting Chinese and Japanese American self-made success stories against black demands for state-sponsored initiatives and programs to remedy racial inequality. Produced as a representation of Asian American achievement that attested to the race transcendence of the American Dream, when it was under attack as a manifestation of white supremacy, the model minority stereotype was and continues to be one of the primary discursive mechanisms for articulating the relationship between whiteness, blackness, and Asianness. Thus an examination of the remodeling of the minority by the changes initiated in the 1960s is both a timely and urgent one because the effects of class mobility and new immigration have eroded the cross-racial coalitions of the 1960s. This section will prepare the ground for the concluding section, which examines the role of Asian Americans in effecting critical transformations of whiteness in the last two decades.

I examine this instance of the contested classification of South Asian Americans as whites because it allows us to understand, in part, why the effects of the political diversity and class mobility of Asian Americans have received little scholarly attention despite the crucial political significance of this mobility. I will argue that the production of an exceptionalist historical narrative of the place of South Asian Americans within the Asian American constituency, based on their bid for classification as Asian Americans, has allowed for the ethnicization of this issue, thereby transforming a question pertinent to all Asian Americans into a question pertinent only to South Asian Americans.<sup>55</sup> In deconstructing this narrative of South Asian American exceptionalism, I hope to reopen the question of the permeability of the white-Asian boundary as a question that needs to be addressed in terms of the class mobility of all intermediary racial groups.

55. For a detailed analysis of South Asian American racial formation, see Susan Koshy, "Category Crisis: South Asian Americans and Questions of Race and Ethnicity," *Diaspora* 7, no. 3 (1998): 285-320.

The taxonomic problem posed by South Asians to the definition of whiteness and Asianness (defined as mutually exclusive categories) has haunted the state's effort to fix the boundary between the two, revealing at once the arbitrariness of these judgments and the logical contradiction of imposing race on geography. After the *Thind* decision in 1923, the government defined South Asians as nonwhites but then, in a remarkable volte-face, counted them as whites in the 1970 census. The governing rationale for both decisions was to deny them specific rights and benefits—to citizenship in the former and minority status in the latter. When the Federal Interagency on Culture and Education formed the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions "to develop common racial and ethnic definitions for use by all Federal agencies," the committee report indicates that South Asians posed the major taxonomic problem for the category Caucasian/White: "Where to draw the geographic line . . . east or west of the sub-continent? . . . The question was whether to include them (Indians) in the minority category 'Asian' because they come from Asia . . . or to include them in this category because they are Caucasian, though frequently of darker skin than other Caucasians. The final decision favored the latter. While evidence of discrimination against Asian Indians exists, it appears to be concentrated in specific geographic and occupational areas."<sup>56</sup>

The response of Asian Indians to the lobbying efforts of community organizations seeking minority status was intensely ambivalent and reveals the multiple investments brought by new immigrants to the prospect of their own minoritization and their perception of the meanings of whiteness. While a majority favored minority status, a significant proportion expressed their opposition to it. Opponents expressed views ranging from discomfort with siphoning off benefits that should be directed toward economically disadvantaged minorities, to desire to avoid the stigma of minority status, to confidence that middle-class status offered sufficient protections against discrimination, to fear of a backlash from American-born minorities for appropriating special benefits, to fear of hostility from whites for seeking preferential status. Supporters cited the possibility of making claims on the resources of the state (for special housing, loans, contracts) and the need for a status that made it possible to seek redress from racial discrimination, a claim nullified by their classification as whites.<sup>57</sup> This debate and

56. Federal Interagency on Culture and Education Report, vol. 2, May 1975, 1. Quoted in Maxine P. Fisher, *The Indians of New York City: A Study of Immigrants from India* (New Delhi: Heritage, 1980), 122, 123.

57. See issues of *India Abroad* published in 1976 and 1977 for coverage of these debates

its resolution are revealing because they engage the question of whether middle-class minorities, and new immigrants in particular, can be conceived of as "whites." They also suggest the uncertainty in the wake of civil rights struggles of formulating the relationship between class mobility and race oppression, and how these in turn might frame or modify a political identity as a minority. Of crucial importance here is the assumption of opponents and supporters of minority status that class mobility renders the boundary between whiteness and Asianness more permeable: The difference between the two groups is in their perception of the degree to which it does so. This was also the reasoning that governed the decision of federal agencies to classify South Asians as white, although they limited such questioning to the status of South Asians and did not extend it to other Asian Americans who also had once petitioned the state to be recognized as whites. Although these questions were foreclosed by the move to minority status, the debate surrounding them reveals the discursive opening created by the arrival of middle-class new immigrants for reenvisioning the relationship between race, class, and national belonging, which would be taken up, extended, and organized in the production of the refurbished American Dream, one of the primary narratives for the rearticulation of whiteness over the coming decades.

Ironically, the prevailing historical narrative of the South Asian American bid for classification as Asian Americans has effected a discursive foreclosure of the questions it opened up by generating an exceptionalist narrative of the South Asian American presence in the Asian American constituency. Rather than signifying the contradictions created by the incorporation into *all* racialized minority groups of middle-class and affluent new immigrants, and the influence of these class fractions in shifting the modes and meanings of minoritization, this episode in the historical emergence of the Asian American constituency has become a marker for the difference of South Asian Americans from other Asian Americans, a sign of their exceptional political identity and history, and their inauthenticity as Asian Americans. According to the narrative of South Asian American exceptionalism, South Asians sought citizenship as and identified themselves as white, and then in the 1970s, this predominantly middle-class group rejected state classification as white and actively identified itself as Asian American, solely in order to secure the economic benefits of minority status. Within this narra-

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and for readers' views on the question of minority status; see also Fisher, *The Indians of New York City*, 131-33.

tive, the bid for citizenship as whites that defined the history of all the other Asian American groups (Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, Hawaiians, Burmese) is erased, leaving only the "historical" memory of South Asian white identification in the past and the inauthenticity of their claim to Asian American identity in the present. Simultaneously, the exceptional decision of the state to arbitrarily classify South Asians as white in 1970 is rendered transparent, while their bid for (re)classification as Asian Americans is rendered politically problematic. It was *only once* in the 1970 census that South Asians were counted as white. How, then, did the anomalous instance become representative of South Asian American racial formation? What is the subtext of this narrative of South Asian American exceptionalism? Is there a form of "common understanding"—this time, of Asianness—that is operating here, so much so that the perception of the racial difference of South Asians from other Asian Americans is articulated as a "historical" account of their unique relationship to whiteness and the novelty of their identification as Asians?

This narrative of South Asian American exceptionalism is not only historically inaccurate, it forecloses crucial political questions about race and class that apply to most, if not all, other Asian American groups—questions about the transformation of racial minority constituencies by new immigration and class mobility, and questions about how Asian American groups were historically constituted by the whiteness frameworks of the U.S. legal system through their citizenship claims as whites. By ethnicizing the issue of the salience of class to the processes of minoritization in the contemporary context via the production of a "historical" narrative of South Asian American exceptionalism, scholars have been hindered from constructing the conceptual frameworks that will allow us to engage the complex reconfigurations of race, ethnicity, and class in the post-civil rights era.

#### **The Refurbished American Dream: New Immigrants and the Solicitations of Whiteness**

His [Norm Rice's] response was that when race was brought up directly, even in the context of defeating bigotry, it could backfire, because then people would be asked to vote for a black man instead of a mayor who happened to be black.

"Sue, I won't go there," he told Ms. Tupper [his strategist].

"Why not?" she asked. "You've got a great story."

"Yes," he replied. "I have a great story about how my family came to



America. As good as Gary's [Locke]. We just happened to have different travel agents."

—Timothy Egan, "When to Campaign with Color," *New York Times*

The current structural position of Asian Americans is intricately linked to contemporary rearticulations of whiteness and calls into question the adequacy of the "shared-interests" paradigm typically invoked by progressive critics in addressing the situation of people of color in the contemporary context.<sup>58</sup> Whiteness has been rearticulated to deal with significant social changes since the 1960s, including civil rights initiatives that opened up opportunities for minorities, the influx of immigrants from Asia and Latin America, and a multiculturalism endorsing liberal pluralist conceptions of ethnic identity instead of assimilation. The effect of this rearticulation on the relationship between Asian Americanness and whiteness, and Asian Americanness and blackness has been significant; however, these recent changes have gone largely unexamined.

Historically, whiteness has operated as a dynamic category whose boundaries have been progressively expanding to incorporate groups initially seen as racially distinct (the Irish in the nineteenth century, and southern and eastern Europeans and Jews in the post-World War II period). Jonathan Warren and France Winddance Twine argue that the confident demographic forecast that whites will soon become a minority because of immigration from Asia and Latin America is based on the unexamined premise that whiteness is a fixed racial category. Given the incorporative power of whiteness historically, they ask, "Why should we assume that this process will come to a halt on the European borders?"<sup>59</sup> Corroborating this view, Richard Alba observes that "some non-white and Hispanic groups may be beginning to undergo processes similar to those that have undercut ethnic difference among European whites—one thinks in this connection of Cubans, most Asian American groups, and the many Americans of American Indian ancestry who are integrated in the white population."<sup>60</sup> Warren and Twine conclude that since "blacks are still the key racial referent in the

58. For a fine discussion of the limitations of this paradigm, see Omi and Takagi, "Situating Asian Americans," 159.

59. Jonathan W. Warren and France Winddance Twine, "White Americans, The New Minority? Non-Blacks and the Ever-Expanding Boundaries of Whiteness," *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 2 (1997): 201, 211.

60. Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 9.

construction of Whiteness," the incorporative power of whiteness has different ramifications for blacks and other nonwhites:

For Blacks, it essentially means that they remain the defining other despite how much they conform to "white standards" of dress, speech, behavior, cultural values and so on. As the "anti-Whites," it is much more difficult, if not impossible, for them to reposition themselves as unhyphenated Americans. However, for other non-Whites . . . it has the opposite implication. For them, it means there exists a cultural space in which they can reposition themselves as White by distinguishing themselves from Blacks and adopting the cultural diacritica of Whiteness.<sup>61</sup>

While others like Warren and Twine who have examined the potential incorporation of some nonwhite groups into whiteness have suggested that it would involve adopting the "cultural diacritica of Whiteness," I argue instead that within a pluralist system, identification with whiteness may assume more complex and less visible forms than in the older assimilationist order. Studies of whiteness have analyzed its effects at two levels: whiteness as power and whiteness as culture. While there is considerable disagreement over whether whiteness exists as a distinct culture with a discrete positive content, from the perspective of many minorities and immigrants, whiteness as culture is frequently invoked as a negative definition of their own cultural identity (whites/Americans are decadent, sexually promiscuous, have weak family ties, et cetera, unlike us). Therefore, whether or not it exists, a representation of whiteness/Americanness as culture becomes a means by which immigrants define, maintain, and consolidate ethnic boundaries. But while many middle-class immigrants may disidentify with whiteness as culture and adopt an ethnic particularist position, they may simultaneously identify with whiteness as power through their class aspirations. However, whereas assimilationism has frequently been lambasted for its obvious identification with whiteness, ethnic particularism often escapes scrutiny, since it displaces identification with whiteness from the level of culture to the level of power. Thus what has now emerged is a seemingly more congenial dispensation that allows for *cultural difference* even as it facilitates *political affiliations* between whites and some nonwhites on certain critical issues such as welfare reform, affirmative action, and immigration legislation.

61. Warren and Twine, "White Americans," 214.

Conservative discourses were early to identify the distinctiveness of Asian Americans and solicit their political affiliations on key social issues that threatened white dominance. Neoconservative discourse achieved hegemony in the eighties and nineties, operating through a "bad-faith anti-racism"<sup>62</sup> that sought to maintain white advantages through a denial of racial difference. Within this discourse, the putative economic success of Asian Americans is used to affirm the existence of a color-blind system, which in turn negated the use of race as a category for remedial action. These arguments were given authenticity and voice by minorities themselves, among them Indian-born Dinesh D'Souza (*Illiberal Education, The End of Racism*), who were commissioned to promote these social truths. The redefinition of race has also been extended to legal discourse and public policy with devastating effect. Harris observes:

Thus, at the very historical moment that race is infused with a perspective that reshapes it, through race-conscious remediation, into a potential weapon *against* subordination, official rules articulated in law deny that race matters. Simultaneously, the law upholds race as immutable and biological. . . . To define race reductively as simply color, and therefore meaningless, however, is as subordinating as defining race to be scientifically determinative of inherent deficiency. The old definition creates a false linkage between race and inferiority; the new definition denies the real linkage between race and oppression under systematic white supremacy.<sup>63</sup>

Neoconservative discourse has been particularly effective in recruiting new immigrants and middle-class minorities. In particular, the myth of the model minority,<sup>64</sup> which has been appropriated by this discourse, singles out Asian Americans, interpellating them as whites-to-be: "The neoconservative approach to these groups thus sought to identify them as aspiring whites—much as Italians, Greeks, and Jews had been categorized a century earlier—and simultaneously to exempt them from the logic of affirmative action."<sup>65</sup>

62. Howard Winant, "Behind Blue Eyes: Whiteness and Contemporary U.S. Racial Politics," *New Left Review* 225 (1997): 87.

63. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1768. See also Neil Gotanda, "A Critique of 'Our Constitution Is Color-Blind,'" *Stanford Law Review* 44, no. 1 (1991): 1–68.

64. For a useful analysis of the model minority myth, see Bob H. Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the 'Model Minority' Thesis," *Amerasia* 4, no. 2 (1977): 23–51.

65. Winant, "Behind Blue Eyes," 80.

The abandonment of race as an explanatory category has been accompanied by a renewed emphasis on ethnicity. I will examine the discursive dominance of ethnicity paradigms in articulations of identity and Americanness to locate the position of Asian Americans in the production of this shift and to highlight the dependence of rearticulations of whiteness on Asian Americanness. I will look at two aspects of the emergence of ethnic identity: the resurgence of white ethnicity since the 1950s, and the revitalization of nonwhite ethnic identity with the influx of immigrants after 1965 and the rise of a multiculturalism that affirms ethnic differentiation rather than assimilation.

Before the 1950s, a hierarchy existed among European-ancestry groups, and ethnic differences between Europeans were a major determinant of life chances, opportunities, and rewards and formed the basis of important social distinctions. During the fifties, urban renewal projects destroyed many urban white ethnic neighborhoods, reconstituting them as white suburban communities and, in the process, helping to create a new white identity.<sup>66</sup> Richard Alba explains: "As social distinctions based on European ancestry have receded into the background, a new ethnic group based on ancestry from anywhere on the European continent has formed."<sup>67</sup> This new identity found expression in "white ethnicity" and was also shaped through opposition to the racial integration of neighborhoods in many major cities. White ethnic identity was not an aggregate grouping of specific ethnic identities such as Italian American, Greek American, or Polish American, but a pan-ethnic identity that "did not emphasize cultural distinction but the shared values of an immigrant heritage."<sup>68</sup> The crucial questions here, of course, are, Why did white ethnic identity emerge at this historical moment, and what forces were at work to help sustain it?

According to Alba, the common narrative that unifies European American ethnicity is the individualistic mythography of the American Dream—of people who came with little, faced discrimination, and finally "made it": "There is irony here, for this definition of the group's essence in terms of history amounts to a redefinition of what is quintessentially Ameri-

66. George Lipsitz argues that social democratic reform initiatives, such as urban renewal projects and federal home loans, have only reinforced the "possessive investment in whiteness" (*The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998], 5).

67. Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, xiv.

68. Roediger, "Whiteness and Ethnicity," 182.

can, and perhaps in this impact on *national* identity lies the greatest achievement of the so-called ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s. . . . Identities that once separated the English, Irish, Italians, Jews, and Scots now bring individuals with these ancestries together, based on their putative memories of ancestors who contributed to this common history."<sup>69</sup> It is hardly coincidental that this identity came into prominence during the civil rights movement, providing a rejoinder, as it were, to the questions raised about equality, racial difference, and what it meant to be American.

Since European American ethnicity has achieved dominance as the paradigm of Americanness, it represents a very powerful solicitation to incoming immigrant groups who are caught in the process of recasting their identities and negotiating the terms of their Americanization. It offers a mythology of the American Dream that allows for their ethnicization rather than their racialization and ties the comforting vision of a continuity with the past (through ethnicity) to a promising future (through class mobility). Furthermore, the ethos of liberal pluralism that underwrites U.S. versions of multiculturalism encourages the maintenance of ethnic identity. So do the transnational networks between immigrants and their homelands supported by email, faxes, videophones, electronic capital, and discount airfares. These transnational networks are further strengthened by new waves of incoming immigrants, who revitalize the cultures of existing ethnic groups. Especially among Asians Americans, there has been a powerful resurgence of ethnicity because of continuing immigration: Douglas Massey predicts that since the post-1965 regime of immigration is quite distinct from patterns of early twentieth-century immigration, the assimilation of post-1965 immigrants is unlikely to follow the pattern of the assimilation of white ethnics. He stresses two factors. Firstly, the older European immigration, which peaked between 1901 and 1930, was followed by a hiatus in European immigration, from 1931 to 1970, which allowed the slow social processes that aid assimilation to take effect. Secondly, it was accompanied by a period of economic expansion, which made possible the economic and social mobility that was a necessary prerequisite to the absorption of peripheral white ethnic groups. According to Massey, neither of these conditions now exists to support the assimilation of Asian and Latin American immigrants; rather, the slowness with which assimilatory processes presently take effect contrasts sharply to the rapidity of changes brought about by the continuous

69. Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, 314.

inflow of new immigrants. Thus revitalization of ethnic identity rather than assimilation will become the dominant mode of Americanization.<sup>70</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that Asian Americanness has acquired a very different inflection over the last decade because of the increasing economic strength of Asia and the greater interconnectedness with and dependency of the United States on Asia. While on the one hand, the economic competitiveness of many Asian nations has generated negative stereotypes, on the other hand, it is conceivable that given the corporate interest in Asia, the increase in tourism, and the proliferation of academic and cultural networks, Asian American ethnicity (facility with languages, mores, social networks) will increasingly serve as a form of cultural capital. Small wonder, then, that Disney recently launched its first animated version of a Chinese legend, *Mulan*, or that the ad for the film features the boy band 98° and Stevie Wonder urging a beautiful young Chinese woman to be "True to Your Heart," while she moves through a store fingering various Chinese artifacts.

While the morphing of race into ethnicity is possible for intermediary racial groups and can function to open up an avenue to social mobility and affiliation with whiteness, this transformation is less possible for blacks. Moreover, as a result of the increasing abandonment of race in public discourse and public policy, we may see a discursive shift by which the political concerns of blacks are invalidated or suppressed by being relegated to the domain of race discourse and rendered, by that very move, obsolete. By contrast, the new ethnicities identified with the new needs of the global economy will accrue greater cultural capital, and their achievements will be used as an argument to roll back civil rights initiatives and as evidence that the racial problems of the 1960s have been resolved. In a compelling illustration of this trend, a recent *New York Times* article describes how the Chinese American politician Gary Locke won the race for governor of Washington state by offering his immigrant story of hardship and struggle to the voters, while his black opponent for the Democratic nomination, Norm Rice,

70. Douglas S. Massey, "The New Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States," *Population and Development Review* 21, no. 3 (1995): 631-52. However, Massey's account fails to explain why the conditions that fostered the assimilation of white ethnics did not enable the assimilation of early Asian American immigrants, who were not only present during this period but also represented a fraction of the percentage of European immigrants. While Massey's study makes some excellent observations, it entirely overlooks the importance of the whiteness of early European immigrants in aiding their assimilation.

opted to suppress race in his campaign because it was too risky a strategy for a black politician to adopt. Speaking of Locke's appeal to voters, his wife, Mona Lee Locke, observes, "People come up to Gary all the time and tell him what a role model he is, that they hope he runs for higher office. Even Republicans. And it's because of his race that they look up to him. They see in him the American Dream come true." In a state poised on the Pacific Rim and closely integrated with Asia through proliferating circuits of capital and communications, Locke's ethnicity connotes much of what Washingtonians see as the globalizing future of their state, its adherence to color-blind principles of prosperity and its affirmation of the American Dream. It is no contradiction that Locke won in a state where a ballot measure to remove affirmative action in hiring was successful, since both his and the ballot's success are signs of the reconfiguration of racial politics in the post-civil rights era. However, these reconfigurations have very different implications for a black politician such as Norm Rice and his Asian American opponent. Rice remarks of his run for governor, "I think that if people have a choice between an African-American and an Asian-American, they will probably choose the latter. . . . Whether people want to admit it or not, there is a hierarchy of race." When the reporter poses the question of a racial hierarchy to Locke, his response is puzzlement: "Racial hierarchy? You know, I've never really thought about it."<sup>71</sup>

Virulent political rhetoric and widespread anti-immigrant sentiment has resulted (most of the public is not watching when the hysteria periodically whipped up by media and politicians dies down) not in significant curtailment of immigration but in the prioritizing and expansion of skilled-worker categories that offer quick, low-cost solutions to corporate demands for labor. On 3 October 2000, Congress passed a bill increasing the cap from 115,000 to 195,000 for H1-B visas for specialized workers, such as computer programmers, over the next three years.<sup>72</sup> The change in immigration laws, by expanding skilled-worker categories and establishing new cate-

71. Timothy Egan, "When to Campaign with Color: An Asian-American Told His Story to Whites and Won, for Black Politicians, It's a Riskier Strategy," *New York Times*, 20 June 2000, A1.

72. Most of the skilled foreign workers who enter the country under this special visa program are Asians; India accounted for 44 percent of visa recipients for the year 1998; China, 9 percent; the Philippines, 3 percent; and Japan and Pakistan, 2 percent each (Robert Pear, "Accord Would Increase Cap on Visas for Skilled Workers," *New York Times*, 25 July 1998, A7).

gories of investment-based citizenship, has resulted in a significant number of incoming middle- and upper-class Asian immigrants.<sup>73</sup> Their class status often insulates them from the harshest effects of the experiences from which the antiracist discourses of the civil rights movement derive, and their educational (generally in the sciences) and career paths often bypass the arenas where the politics of race is engaged in a sustained way.

This is not to suggest that middle-class Asian Americans are no longer subject to racism or discrimination, nor is it to ignore the existence of a segment of the Asian American population itself (illegal immigrants, refugee groups, sweatshop workers) that remains trapped in poverty. Significant economic disparities exist across the various Asian American national groups, and underemployment remains a persistent problem. Indeed, without foregrounding the effects of class stratification and differential minoritization, we will be unable to engage the problem of Asian Americans as the agents of exploitation and its victims, especially in instances where invocations of ethnic and national loyalties form the conduits for coercion and control.

Furthermore, scholars of transnationalism and globalization have pointed to the emergence of a transnational capitalist class in the global triad of Europe, North America, and East Asia, which is now rapidly integrating the South within its circuits. As William I. Robinson and Jerry Harris observe, "Transnationalization of the capital circuit implies as well the transnationalization of the agents of capital. As national circuits of capital become transnationally integrated, these new transnational circuits become the sites of class formation worldwide."<sup>74</sup> The rapid growth of East and some Southeast Asian economies, the dramatic increase in foreign direct investment into and from these countries, and the intensified transnationalization and externalization of many Asian economies as a result of the structural adjustments following the 1997 financial crisis require that we move away from an implicit model of *chromatic capitalism*, in which oppressors are white and their victims are nonwhite. Since the 1990s, the value of the transnationality index for the top fifty transnational corporations (TNCs) from developing countries has been increasing steadily, and they have built up their foreign assets almost seven times faster than the

73. William Branigin, "U.S. Issuing More Visas to Investors: Critics Say 1990 Statute Opens Path to Citizenship for Wealthy Foreigners," *Washington Post*, 29 December 1997, A1.

74. William I. Robinson and Jerry Harris, "Towards a Global Ruling Class: Globalization and the Transnationalist Capitalist Class," *Science and Society* 64, no. 1 (2000): 20.



world's top one hundred TNCs between 1993 and 1996.<sup>75</sup> Of the top twenty-five TNCs from developing countries, more than 55 percent are headquartered in East Asian countries (China, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea, Taiwan);<sup>76</sup> Japan is ranked with developing countries and has four out of the top twenty-five TNCs.<sup>77</sup> The transpacific and transatlantic integration of capital circuits in this era requires us to rethink concepts of agency and minoritization, because global capitalism has been characterized by its ability to use and deploy multiculturalism and cultural difference. In the present context, the agency of Asian Americans is imbricated in differentiated relationships to domination in the uneven terrain of transnationalism and requires a theorization of Asian American agency in complicity and in resistance. We cannot assume that "outsideness" to the nation is inherently subversive when it can be defined very differently in the "guerilla transnationalism" of flexible citizenship adopted as a business strategy by an Asian American capitalist<sup>78</sup> and in the working conditions of an undocumented Asian American restaurant worker.

How do these factors reflect and shape the new politics of race in the post-civil rights era? At the turn of the century, conflicts between white labor and capital were temporarily resolved through the disenfranchisement and exclusion of Asian labor.<sup>79</sup> Thus the emergence of class consciousness was preempted by fostering a race-based nationalism.<sup>80</sup> In the present, the emergence of class consciousness is preempted by fostering an ethnicity-based nationalism. In the updated version of the American Dream, underwritten by corporate and popular multiculturalism, ethnically diverse subjects aspire to success in a system that purports to reward the capitalist virtues of hard work, striving, and self-sufficiency in all alike. Whiteness disassembles race privilege as fitness-within-capitalism and recruits highly skilled middle-class and wealthy new immigrants to endorse this narrative

75. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *World Investment Report, 1998: Trends and Developments* (New York: United Nations, 1998), 5.

76. The transnationality index ranks the countries by their foreign assets and is based on figures for 1996, and therefore Hong Kong is listed separately from China.

77. UNCTAD, *World Investment Report*, Table 3, p. 7.

78. Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, "Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity," in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. Ong and Nonini (Routledge: New York, 1997), 19.

79. See Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); and Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*.

80. See Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*; and Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*.

of American color-blind equality. Within the new multiculturalism, "white" serves only as a modifier of ethnicity, and, simultaneously, nonwhite capital-compatible ethnicities are promised incorporation into the American Dream. Populist, anti-immigration discourses of the costs of immigrants notwithstanding, skill-preference and investor immigration categories provide access to a global pool of talent whose training and education are subsidized by other governments but whose success can showcase U.S. multiculturalism and equal opportunity. Asian immigrants serve a pivotal role in this narrative, both as representatives of Pacific Rim economic success and as symbols of Asian political underdevelopment (authoritarianism, ethnic conflict, repression). The continuing demand for American citizenship shows that the United States is still "the happiest place on earth" and that new Asian immigrants can be represented as value-added Americans. Thus global narratives of development have begun to rearticulate racial hierarchies in the United States. Identity politics, once a powerful ground for oppositional formations, will now have to reckon with the ways in which the new discourse of ethnicity in a transnational context obscures the operations of race and class.