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Introduction

Yellowface

Marking the Oriental

In March 1997, the cover of *National Review* featured President William Jefferson Clinton, first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Vice President Al Gore, all in yellowface. The president, portrayed as a Chinese houseboy—buck-toothed, squinty-eyed and pigtailed, wearing a straw “coolie” hat—selves coffee. The first lady, similarly buck-toothed and squinty-eyed, outfitted as a Maoist Red Guard, brandishes a “Little Red Book,” while the vice president, robed as Buddhist priest, beatifically proffers a begging bowl already stuffed with money.

In using the yellowface cartoon to illustrate a story about alleged political corruption, the editors of *National Review* simultaneously emphasized their racial point and revived a tradition of racial grotesques that had illustrated broadsides, editorials, and diatribes against Asians in America since the mid-nineteenth century. The cover story summarized allegations that the Clinton administration had solicited campaign donations from Asian contributors in exchange for policy favors. These allegations virtually ignored the much larger illegal campaign contributions of non-Asians and focused almost exclusively on Asian and Asian American contributors. Like most of the mainstream media, *National Review* was silent on the broader questions: the impact of multinational corporations on American politics and the baleful influence of big money on big politics. *National Review* instead played the race

card. Focusing only on the Asian and Asian American campaign contributions, *National Review* made it clear that it was not corporate money, or even foreign money generally, but specifically Asian money that polluted the American political process. In the eyes of the *National Review* editors, the nation's first family (with Al Gore as potential heir) had been so polluted by Asian money that they had literally turned yellow.

Yellowface marks the Asian body as unmistakably Oriental; it sharply defines the Oriental in a racial opposition to whiteness. Yellowface exaggerates "racial" features that have been designated "Oriental," such as "slanted" eyes, overbite, and mustard-yellow skin color. Only the racialized Oriental is yellow; Asians are not. Asia is not a biological fact but a geographic designation. Asians come in the broadest range of skin color and hue.

Because the organizing principle behind the idea of race is "common ancestry," it is concerned with the physical, the biological, and the reproductive. But race is not a category of nature; it is an ideology through which unequal distributions of wealth and power are naturalized—justified in the language of biology and genealogy. Physiognomy is relevant to race only insofar as certain physical characteristics, such as skin color or hue, eye color or shape, shape of the nose, color or texture of the hair, over- or underbite, etc., are *socially defined* as markers of racial difference.

The designation of yellow as the racial color of the Oriental is a prime example of this social constructedness of race. In 1922, the U.S. Supreme Court denied Takao Ozawa, an immigrant from Japan, the right to become a naturalized citizen. In its ruling, the court recognized the fact that some Asians, including Ozawa, were of a paler hue than many European immigrants already accepted into the nation as "white." Race, the court concluded, was not a matter of actual color but of "blood" or ancestry, and Ozawa, being of Japanese "blood," could not claim to be white, no matter how white his skin.²

What does Yellowface signify? Race is a mode of placing cultural meaning on the body. Yellowface marks the Oriental as indelibly alien. Constructed as a race of aliens, Orientals represent a present danger of pollution. An analysis of the Oriental as a racial category must begin with the concept of the alien as a polluting body.

The cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that fears of pollution arise when things are out of place. Soil, she observes, is fertile earth when on the ground with tomatoes growing in it; it is polluting dirt when on the kitchen table. Pollutants are objects, or persons, perceived to be out of place. They create a sense of disorder and anomaly in the symbolic structure of society. Douglas observes that pollution is not a conscious

act. Mere presence in the wrong place, the inadvertent crossing of a boundary, may constitute pollution.’ Aliens, outsiders who are inside, disrupt the internal structure of a cultural formation as it defines itself vis-a-vis the Other; their presence constitutes a boundary crisis. Aliens are always a source of pollution.

Not all foreign objects, however, are aliens—only objects or persons whose presence disrupts the narrative structure of the community. It is useful here to distinguish between the alien and the merely foreign. Although the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they carry different connotations. “Foreign” refers to that which is outside or distant, while “alien” describes things that are immediate and present yet have a foreign nature or allegiance. The difference is political. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as early as the sixteenth century “alien” referred to things whose allegiance lay outside the realm in which they resided, as in “alien priories”—monasteries in England whose loyalty was to Rome. This early definition of “alien” emphasized the unalterable nature of the foreign object and its threatening presence.

Only when the foreign is present does it become alien. The alien is always out of place, therefore disturbing and dangerous. The difference between the alien and the merely foreign is exemplified by the difference between the immigrant and the tourist. Outsiders who declare their intention of leaving may be accorded the status of guest, visitor, tourist, traveler, or foreign student. Such foreigners, whose presence is defined as temporary, are seen as innocuous and even desirable. On the other hand, if the arriving outsiders declare no intention to leave (or if such a declared intention is suspect), they are accorded the status of alien, with considerably different and sometimes dire consequences. Only when aliens exit or are “naturalized” (cleansed of their foreignness and re-made) can they shed their status as pollutants.

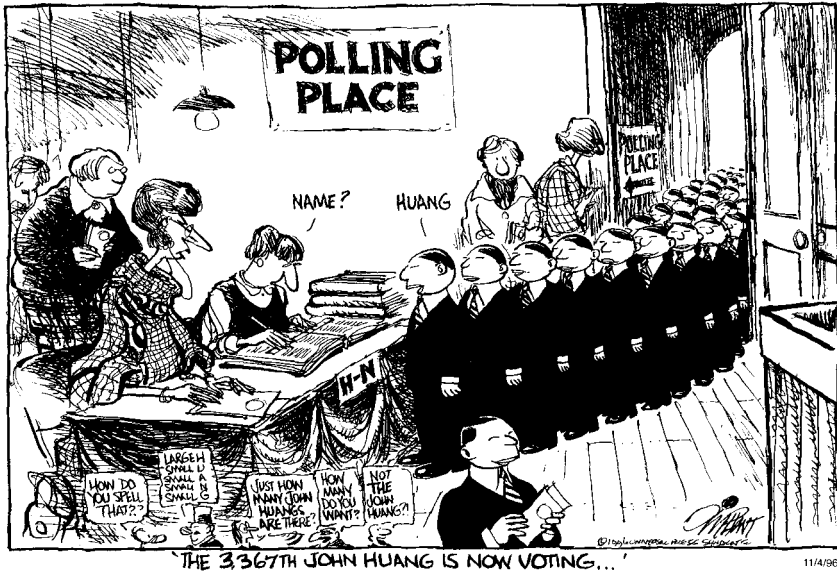
Alienness is both a formal political or legal status and an informal, but by no means less powerful, cultural status. The two states are hardly synonymous or congruent. Alien legal status and the procedures by which it can be shed often depend on the cultural definitions of difference. In 1923, a year after it denied Takao Ozawa the right to naturalize, the Supreme Court stripped Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant who was already an American through naturalization, of his U.S. citizenship.⁴ In *Ozawa v. United States*, the court had ruled that no matter what the actual color of his skin, nor how much he could prove himself culturally assimilated, Ozawa’s Japanese “blood” made him “unamalgamable” by marriage into the American national family. In *United States v. Thind*, despite the ethnological evidence presented by Thind that he, a high-caste Hindu, was a descendent of Aryans and hence white by “blood,” the

court ruled that he was not, holding that race was not a scientific category but a social one, and upheld the revocation of *Thind*'s citizenship.

In both *Ozawa* and *Thind*, the Supreme Court tacitly recognized race to be a product of popular ideology. In both cases, Chief Justice Sutherland, writing for the court, cited the existence of a "common understanding" of racial difference which color, culture, and science could not surmount. The important thing about race, the Supreme Court held, was not what social or physical scientists at the time may have had to say about it, but rather how it was "popularly" defined.

Not until 1952, after more than a century of settlement in the United States, were Asian immigrants finally granted the right to become naturalized citizens. Even so, long after the legal status of "alien" has been shed, the "common understanding" that Asians are an alien presence in America, no matter how long they may have resided in the United States nor how assimilated they are, is still prevalent in American culture. In 1996, the immediate response of the Democratic National Committee to allegations that it had accepted illegal campaign donations from foreigners was to call Asian American contributors to the party's coffers and demand that they verify their status as citizens or permanent residents. One such donor, Suzanne Ahn, a prominent Houston physician and civic leader, reported to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that DNC auditors threatened to turn her name over to the news media as "uncooperative" if she did not release personal financial information to them. Ahn concluded that she had been investigated by the DNC, the FBI, and the news media simply because she had contributed to the DNC and was Asian American. Even public figures do not escape the assumption that Asian Americans are really foreigners in disguise. When Matthew Fong, a fourth-generation Californian, ran as a Republican candidate for Secretary of State in California—a position his mother March Fong Yu had held for the better part of two decades—he was asked by news reporters whether his loyalties were divided between the U.S. and China.'

In the run-up to the 1996 presidential elections, a cartoon by syndicated cartoonist Pat Oliphant played on the persistent "common understanding" of Asian Americans as permanent aliens in America. It showed a befuddled poll watcher confronted with a long line of identically short Oriental men with identical black hair, slit eyes behind glasses, and buck teeth, all wearing identical suits and waving ballots. Referring to the Asian American DNC official who was made the poster boy of the fundraising scandal, the caption reads, "The 3,367th John Huang is now voting." Echoing the public comment of presidential candidate Ross Perot that none of the Asian names brought out in the campaign finance scandal thus far sounded like they belonged to "real" Americans, one of



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Oliphant's signature nebbishes asks from the margin, "Just how many John Huangs are there? How many you want?"⁶ The cartoon plays on the "common understanding" that Orientals are indistinguishable as individuals and thus ultimately fail as "real" Americans. How could Oliphant's poll watcher, the yeoman guardian of the American political process and embodiment of "common understanding," possibly hope to distinguish among all the Orientals flooding into the nation's body politic?

Popular Culture and Race

The Oriental as a racial category is never isolated from struggles over race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and national identity. The Supreme Court's "common understanding" is a legal fiction. It gives popular convention, the common sense of "real" Americans, the power to define race. The "common understanding" of the Oriental as racialized alien therefore originates in the realm of popular culture, where struggles over who is or who can become a "real American" take place and where the categories, representations, distinctions, and markers of race are defined. Some studies attribute hostility toward Asian immigrants directly to economic competition and the creation of an ethnically defined segmented labor market. They provide us with an economic framework for

understanding the dynamics of class and race and a map of the economic terrain on which anti-Asian hostility has been built. By themselves, however, those studies do not account for the development or functioning of specific racial images of Asians in American culture.⁷

This book takes up popular culture as a process, a set of cultural practices that define American nationality — who “real Americans” are in any given historical moment. American citizenship and American nationality are not synonymous; citizenship carries with it an implicit assumption or promise of equality, at least in political and legal terms, while nationality contains and manages the contradictions of the hierarchies and inequalities of a social formation. Nationality is a constantly shifting and contested terrain that organizes the ideological struggle over hierarchies and inequalities.

The nature of popular culture is the subject of much debate.⁸ Popular culture is most often identified as having its roots in the organic culture of the common folk or peasant life, in opposition to court or bourgeois culture. Popular culture, then, is often characterized by politically resistant, if often nostalgic, qualities. Ever since the rise of industrial capitalism in the early nineteenth century, popular culture has been in reality complex, increasingly shaped by the capitalist processes of its production and circulation. Nevertheless, popular culture, albeit sometimes reconstituted as co-opted or deracinated mass culture, continues to be identified with subordinated groups, as opposed to the dominant ruling class.

The mobilization of national identity under the sign “American” has never been a simple matter of imposing elite interests and values on the social formation, but is always a matter of negotiation between the dominant and the dominated. Subordinated groups offer resistance to the hegemony of elite culture; they create subaltern popular cultures and contest for a voice in the dominant public sphere.⁹ The saloon vies with the salon, the boardwalk with the cafe, and the minstrel theater with the opera house as an arena for public debate and political ideas.”

Although it mobilizes legitimacy, the cultural hegemony of dominant groups is never complete; it can render fundamental social contradictions invisible, explain them away, or ameliorate them, but it cannot resolve them.” However deracinated, whether co-opted, utopian, nostalgic, or nihilist, popular culture is always contested terrain. The practices that make up popular culture are negotiations, in the public sphere, between and among dominant and subaltern groups around the questions of national identity: What constitutes America? Who gets to participate and on what grounds? Who are “real Americans?”

Since popular culture is a significant arena in which the struggle over defining American nationality occurs, it also plays a critical role in defining race. Race is a principal signifier of social differences in America. It

is deployed in assigning differential political rights and capital and social privilege, in distinguishing between citizens presumed to have equal rights and privileges and inherently unequal, subordinated subjects. “Although race is often camouflaged or rendered invisible, once produced as a category of social difference it is present everywhere in the social formation and deeply imbedded in the popular culture. The Oriental as a racial category is produced, not only in popular discourse about race *per se* but also in discourses having to do with class, gender and sexuality, family, and nation. Once produced in those discourses, the Oriental becomes a participant in the production and reproduction of those social identities.”¹³

The Stereotype and the Family

The racist humor of portraying Bill and Hillary Clinton and Al Gore in yellowface works only because the first family is always presumptively white—an enduring, if anachronistic, symbol of America as a white nation in the popular imagination. Yellowface transforms the first family, historically and symbolically white, into the Oriental family: Bill, Hillary and Al have, through the pollution of Asian money, become alien, yellow, and Oriental.

The family is the primary metaphor of the nation. The idea of Americans as a family is the discursive basis for an imagined nationhood. The family as a symbol of nationhood structures nationality as fictive kinship, a common ancestry. One need only recall that the most common terms in which the nation is invoked (“brotherhood,” “mother tongue,” “fatherland”) all reference terms of kinship. These are terms also shared by race. The fiction of common ancestry (both biological and cultural) has been made central to the construction of both race and nation. Indeed, historically, the two categories have been interchangeable. For example, it was common in the early decades of this century to speak of national groups—the American, French, or Japanese—as “races.”

The family is also the primary ideological apparatus, the central system of symbols, through which the state contains and manages contradictions in the social structure. It is the principal social unit through which the individual can become a national subject, a member of the community through birth, adoption, marriage. The family is a primary site in which labor power and class relations, gender and sexual relations, ethnic and racial identities are produced and reproduced. It is also the symbolic system that gives meaning to and organizes the closest psychological, economic, and sexual relationships among people and within a community.¹⁴

Although the family has often been considered a private sphere, even

a haven from the marketplace and from public life, in fact the family unit has been a key entry point for state intervention in every area of daily life.¹⁵ In the realm of economics, the state enters the family via taxes and estate laws. The state regulates gender relations in the family via marriage and divorce laws. It regulates sexual relations through family laws regarding age of consent, sanctioned and prohibited sexual behaviors, pornography and marriage. It regulates the familial relationship between parents and children via custodial, child welfare, and adoption law. It regulates race relations through laws prohibiting interracial marriage and addressing housing, education and public accommodations.

In the “crisis of the family” and the struggle to “restore family values” that has been trumpeted for the past **two** decades, the Asian American family, portrayed as “intact,” “disciplined,” and patriarchal, has been presented as the model for economic success in a period of economic decline.””This representation is quite recent; Asians have been cast as an economic, social, and sexual threat to the American national family throughout their history in the United States.

The pollution of the nation’s first family did not only come about through a suspected exchange of money for policy. The Clinton administration’s hands-off policies toward human rights violations by the Indonesian government in East Timor, or the superexploitation of workers by Nike in Vietnam in the interest of free trade, to name only two instances, has barely scandalized the American press or public. What the press seems to have been most interested in is the number of times Asian contributors and fundraisers came for coffee at the White House. Although the White House logs of overnight guests show no Asian or Asian American guests save the governor of Hawaii, press reports that big contributors to the Clinton re-election campaign might be invited for overnight stays at the White House were usually printed next to, and often illustrated with, pictures of Asian American fundraisers. The idea that the Lincoln bedroom might now be slept in by (wealthy) Orientals seems to most offend the “common understanding.” The alien body present in the national bedroom can now be imagined as the deeper source of pollution.

The Six Faces of the Oriental

Six images—the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook—portray the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family. From each of these racial paradigms emerges a wide array of specific images. Each of these representations was constructed in a specific historical moment, marked by

a shift in class relations accompanied by cultural crisis. At such times American nationality—who the “real Americans” are—is redefined in terms of class, gender, race, and sexuality.

The representation of the Asian as pollutant originated in mid-nineteenth-century California. For white settlers from the East, Chinese settlers from the West disrupted the mythic narrative of westward expansion. The Chinese constituted an alien presence and a threat of pollution which earlier fantasies of exotic but distant Asia could not contain. In the popular imagination, California was a free-soil Eden, a place where small producers, artisans, farmers, and craftsmen might have a second chance to build a white republic, unstained by chattel slavery or proletarian labor.¹⁷ In this prelapsarian imagery, the Chinese were both identified with the moral chaos of the Gold Rush and portrayed as the harbingers of industrial wage slavery. As the national debate over slavery, abolition, and statehood came to a boiling point in the late 1860s, the ideal of establishing California as both free and racially pure demanded the removal, or at least the exclusion, of both Chinese and African Americans.

The representation of the Chinese immigrant worker as a coolie came about as the U.S. working class was formed in the 1870s and 1880s. Although they had come to America as free (albeit highly proletarianized) workers, Chinese immigrants found themselves segregated into a racially defined state of subordination as “coolie labor.” The Chinese “coolie” was portrayed as unfree and servile, a threat to the white working man’s family, which in turn was the principal symbol of an emergent working-class identity that fused class consciousness with gendered national and racial identity. The coolie representation not only allowed the nascent labor movement, dominated by its skilled trades, to exclude Chinese from the working class; it also enabled the skilled trades to ignore the needs of common labor, which it racialized as “coolie labor” or “nigger work.”¹⁸ Irish immigrants who were in the process of consolidating their own claim to Americanness and a white racial identity led the popular anti-Chinese movement.

The Oriental as deviant, in the person of the Chinese household servant, is a figure of forbidden desire. The deviant represents the possibility of alternative desire in a period during which middle-class gender roles and sexual behavior were being codified and naturalized into a rigid heterosexual cult of domesticity. In the West, the Chinese immigrant played a central role in the transition from a male-dominated, frontier culture shaped by the rituals of male bonding to a rigidly codified heterosexual Victorian culture. In the 1860s and early 1870s, hundreds of Chinese women were brought to San Francisco and forced into

prostitution. By the end of the decade, thousands of Chinese immigrant men were driven out of the mines and off farms and ranches and were hired into middle-class households as domestic servants. Both of these situations opened up possibilities of interracial sex and intimacy. Middle-class whites regarded the Chinese with ambivalence. On the one hand, the Chinese were indispensable as domestic labor; on the other, they represented a threat of racial pollution within the household. A representation of the Oriental as both seductively childlike and threateningly sexual allowed for both sympathy and repulsion. The representation of the Oriental as deviant justified a taboo against intimacy through which racial and class stability could be preserved.

By the turn of the century, Asian immigrants were represented as the yellow peril, a threat to nation, race, and family. The acquisition of territories and colonies brought with it a renewed threat of “Asiatic” immigration, an invasion of “yellow men” and “little brown brothers.” At the moment when the United States prepared to pick up “the white man’s burden” in the Caribbean and the Pacific, “Asiatic immigration” was said to pose “the greatest threat to Western civilization and the White Race.”¹⁹ Domestically, the triumph of corporatism, the homogenization or de-skilling of industrial labor, urbanization, and immigration had all contributed to massive changes in both middle- and working-class families. These changes contributed to the construction of a culture of consumption, reflected in new gender roles as well as new sexual attitudes and behavior among men and women of both classes. In the aftermath of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, these domestic social and cultural transformations were accompanied by deep anxieties about racial suicide and class struggle.²⁰ Through its supposed subversion of the family, the yellow peril threatened to undermine what Lothrop Stoddard, a popular advocate of eugenics and racial geopolitics, called the “inner dikes” of the white race.

The representation of Asian Americans as a model minority, although popularly identified with the late 1960s and 1970s, originated in the racial logic of Cold War liberalism of the 1950s. The image of Asian Americans as a successful case of “ethnic” assimilation helped to contain three spectres that haunted Cold War America: the red menace of communism, the black menace of racial integration, and the white menace of homosexuality. In place of a radical critique calling for structural changes in American political economy, the model minority mythology substituted a narrative of national modernization and ethnic assimilation through heterosexuality, familialism, and consumption. By the late 1960s, an image of “successful” Asian American assimilation could be held up to African Americans and Latinos as a model for nonmilitant, nonpolitical upward mobility.

Since the 1970s, the model minority image has coexisted with and reinforced a representation of the Asian American as the gook. The shift in the U.S. economy from large-scale industrial production to flexible accumulation and the global realignment of capital and labor have brought about new crises of class, race, and national identity. In the context of these contemporary crises, the “intact” and “traditional” Asian American family is promoted as a model of productivity, savings, and mobility, not just for African America or Latino families but now for all American families, including those of the white middle class. Simultaneously, however, in post-Vietnam and post-liberal American popular culture, the Asian American is represented as the invisible enemy and the embodiment of inauthentic racial and national identities — the gook. The Vietnam War is replayed in popular culture as the narrative of American decline in the post-industrial era. The received wisdom of the Vietnam War narrative is that America’s defeat in Southeast Asia was brought about by a faceless and invisible Asian enemy, aided and abetted by an American counterculture. The rapid growth of the Asian American population and its apparent success render the model minority, like the now-mythic Viet Cong, everywhere invisible and powerful. In the narrative of American decline, Asian Americans are represented as the agents of foreign or multinational capital. In this narrative of national decline, Asian American success is seen as camouflage for subversion. The model minority is revealed to be a simulacrum, a copy for which no original exists, and thus a false model of the American family. In the dystopic narrative of American national decline, the model minority resembles the replicants in the science fiction book and film *Blade Runner*—a cyborg, perfectly efficient but inauthentically human, the perfect gook.

The cultural crises in American society that give rise to these representations of the Oriental come in the wake of economic change, particularly in what economic historians Gordon and Reich call transformations of the structure of accumulation.²¹ The transformation of the social relations of production and the organization of work and segmentation of the labor market have profound effects on the structures, relations, and meaning of families, gender, and race. At each stage of capitalist development, new “emergent” public spheres are constituted and new demands arise for participation in the dominant public sphere.” The popular discourse of race in which these constructions of the Oriental were produced and deployed is not a transparent or unmediated reflection of the economy, but rather an expression of social contradictions drawing on images of the present, visions of the future, and memories of the past.

As a historical analysis of the construction of representations of the Oriental and a study of racial ideology, this book asks how these

representations were constructed and what ideological tasks they performed. Racial images and stereotypes are ideologically active, and thus contradictory and unstable. The Oriental appears in various guises throughout American popular culture, in pictures, songs, paraphernalia, books, and movies, and no single image represents the totality of the representation. Therefore, rather than focus on any single genre or medium, or the technology of a genre, or its reception, this book looks at popular songs of the nineteenth century, magazine fiction and illustrations, silent movies and pulp fiction, and Hollywood musicals and dramas. The principle criterion for selecting these “texts” has been the extent to which each helps to illuminate the social contradictions of its production, the internal complexities of the Oriental representation, and the way in which the Oriental is imbedded in the discourses of race, gender, class, and sexuality in America.

Yellowface: Stereotype and Discourse

The reappearance of the yellowface grotesque on the front pages of a national magazine was deeply unsettling, particularly to those Asian Americans who had bought into the myth of the model minority. Since the mid-1960s, the national media had popularized an image of Asian Americans as the perfectly assimilated and presumptively accepted ethnic minority in the United States. Among many Asian Americans, the emergence of the model minority image led to a popular preoccupation with “good” stereotypes vs. “bad” stereotypes.

This preoccupation with “positive” and “negative” stereotypes reifies and inadvertently legitimates the racial discourse of the Oriental that produces both the coolie and the minority. It shifts attention from a critical analysis of race toward a narrow utilitarian calculus in which specific images are measured in terms of their usefulness to strategies of upward mobility.²³ Discussions of “good” and “bad” stereotypes have, more often than not, focused on the distance between image and reality. However, stereotypes of Asian Americans are not simply distorted versions of Asian lives in America. The Yellowface coolie and model minority, despite their apparent contradiction, not only coexist but, in fact, can become mutually reinforcing at critical junctures because neither is created by the actual lives of Asians in America. What produces these stereotypes is not just individual acts of representation, but a historical discourse of race that is embedded in the history of American social crises.

On the other hand, a concern with these images as the product of and agent in a complex racial ideology can lead us to an understanding of

racial representation as a social practice. The Oriental is a complex racial representation, made up of contradictory images and stereotypes. This complexity and ambiguity gives the Oriental its ideological power, its connection with the broadest web of social concerns. In turn, this connectedness reinforces the representation and gives the racial stereotype its power to survive, mutate, and reproduce.

Resisting the Oriental

Asian Americans have not been passive in the face of the production and reproduction of the Oriental stereotype which has barred them from immigration, citizenship, and participation in American society and culture. A century before John Huang became a celebrity in the annals of American political scandal, Asian Americans challenged their exclusion from America both through the legal system and in the realm of culture.

The historical struggle of Asian Americans to achieve full citizenship in the United States has challenged and revived every aspect of citizenship in a liberal democracy, including the right of entry and naturalization, equal protection and economic rights, and the right to participate fully in the public culture.²⁴ Asian names dot the landscape of constitutional jurisprudence: Yick Wo (equal protection), Fong Yue-Ting (immigration), Wong Ark Kim (citizenship through birth), Toyota (land ownership), and Fred Korematsu (internment) are only a few of the most widely cited. Historian Sucheng Chan has identified almost 200 cases that Asian Americans have brought before the U.S. Supreme Court and more than a thousand cases that have come before lower federal courts and whose written decisions have warranted inclusion in the *Federal Reporters*.²⁵ Chan estimates that this number represents only about 10 percent of the cases actually brought before Federal courts.

One need only recall such books as Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, or John Okada's *No-No Boy* to be reminded that culture has also been an arena where Asian Americans have contested their exclusion as Orientals, critiqued the unfulfilled promises of democracy, and mapped alternative visions of American identity. Cultural critic Lisa Lowe observes,

Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation: It is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state."²⁶

The film *Mississippi Masala* is a contemporary example of Asian Americans' resistance to their racial subordination as Orientals in popular culture. Directed by Mira Nair, the film is ostensibly about an interracial love affair between an Indian American woman and an African American man, but maps a critique of the contemporary racial landscape in America shaped by class, gender and immigration. *Mississippi Masala* simultaneously calls our attention to the transnational character of contemporary Asian American immigration and to the multiple statuses of Asian Americans, as both bourgeoisie and working class and as a "middleman minority" within local racial and class hierarchies. The film rejects both the evasion of liberal multiculturalism and the essentialism of ethnonationalism in favor of a political consciousness shaped by an understanding of contradictory histories and the complexity of power. Only the full consciousness of these global histories and local positions make possible class alliances and trans-racial coalitions. In its utopian vision of a racial democracy, *Mississippi Masala* stands with Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* in the Asian American tradition of resisting the Oriental.



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