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On Ascriptive and Acquisitional Americanness:  
*The Accidental Asian* and the Illogic  
of Assimilation

**P**ublished in 1998, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* concludes a century of Asian American autobiography riddled with the anxiety of national belonging.<sup>1</sup> Intuiting a powerful Orientalism that renders being Asian and American conceptually and experientially incompatible, Eric Liu dismisses his biological inheritance as “accidental” while deliberately affirming his “nativity” both to the English language and the geopolitical sphere of the United States.<sup>2</sup> His poignant reflection on the chance elements of one’s being and the transformative processes of one’s becoming has led an enthusiastic Henry Louis Gates Jr. to proclaim the book, after Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, “a major contribution to the literature that defines what it means to be an American” (dust jacket).

I want to thank Julia Lesage and Brook Thomas for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. This autobiographical tradition might conceivably include Sui Sin Far’s “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (1909), Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West* (1937), Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1943), Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), Daniel Okimoto’s *American in Disguise* (1971), and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Admittedly, the intertextual and ideological resonance between Okimoto and Liu is the most striking, since the former marks the tail end of the civil rights era and the latter signals a full-scale revision of that legacy, while both exhibit a tortured sense of national allegiance. David Palumbo-Liu’s interpretation of Okimoto enhances a historical understanding of Liu (312–13).

2. The subtitle of the memoir alludes to its immediate predecessor, Chang-rae Lee’s 1995 novel *Native Speaker*, and conceivably to Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*, and Alfred Kazin’s *On Native Grounds*.

Crucial to Liu's American definition is the resolution of a series of contradictions between the ascriptive—the biological and social givens that one inherits—and the acquisitional—the individual acts of both overcoming the conditions of one's birth and marshaling the resources for self-invention. Though he is fully aware of their dialectic tension, for Liu, the ascription of one's racial descent is finally circumstantial, while the democratic consent codified in the founding documents of the nation is fundamental to the making of the American. Between the opening chapter, "Song for My Father," and the concluding one, "Blood Vows," Liu employs a host of vignettes—from the contingency and compulsion of identity evident in the memoir's title, through the claustrophobic "The Chinatown Idea" and "Fear of a Yellow Planet," to the designation of Asian Americans as "New Jews"—to argue that "[t]he end product of American life is neither monoculturalism nor multiculturalism; it is *omniculturalism*" (201). Cultural hybridity, in its all-encompassing capacity of democratic assimilation, comes to stand, for Liu, as a unique American dynamic that will eventually dissolve the contradiction of racial inheritance and national competence.

*The Accidental Asian* is an important contemporary cultural text that deserves critical attention. It engages, first of all, the categorical emergence of "Asian America(n)," revealing its original identification with working-class people of color in the 1960s and its shifting identification with middle-class white ethnicity in the 1990s. It marks a similar departure from an earlier structural critique—sensitive to the ascriptive conditions of identity, or "racial formations," in the history of American national consolidation and citizenship practice (Omi and Winant)—to a present preoccupation with the creative and definitive potential of "culture matters" in identitarian choices (Harrison and Huntington). With its somewhat desultory discursive span, *The Accidental Asian* appears to resonate not only with the recent school of "postethnicity" in American criticism (Hollinger), but also, in its own complicated and confused ways, with the variant tenets of "neoracism" (Balibar and Wallerstein). Liu seems to have quite consciously placed himself among such colored contemporaries as Shelby Steele and Richard Rodriguez, while positioning himself, though without explicit declaration, as a specific specimen of Asian American "neoconservatism" that valorizes

individual autonomy and accomplishment to the exclusion of historical contingencies and considerations.<sup>3</sup> It is small wonder that the book's American endorsement by Gates is matched by its publication in Taiwan, where Liu's parliamentary uncle hails the memoir, in the preface to the Chinese edition, as exemplary of both ancestral aspiration and American assimilation (Z. Liu).

By approaching the text along the general axis of ascription and acquisition, of being and doing, of the physical body and social, historical, and cultural embodiment, I shall demonstrate Eric Liu's painstaking effort to disentangle the imaginary integrity of descent and consent in American citizenship. In his antiracist urge to resist biological essentialism, I contend, Liu has succumbed to a version of bloodless universalism and cultural determinism that denies the persistence of race in the U.S. only to betray its omnipresence at the levels of individual experience and consciousness. "The Accidental Asian" is a patriotic American, but his "vows" to the nation seem ultimately unable to be divorced from his allegiance to "blood." An Asian American text at its most emblematic, *The Accidental Asian* finally exemplifies the inherent democratic contradiction of a United States caught between the normative disciplines of ascriptive and acquisitional Americanness and the illogic of assimilation.

Such an illogic seems to have gained increasing global significance as a "post-9/11" United States government is bent on remaking the world in its own image, assimilating other nation-states and economies as it has its immigrants. Given the resurgence of American nationalism, and its manifestation in both imperialist ventures abroad and repressive "patriot acts" stateside, Liu's text seems not only to anticipate our current predicament but to occasion our thinking out of it. If the kind of American democratic incarnation that *The Accidental Asian* favors in the U.S. context were to

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3. Liu's thinking on ethnicity seems indebted to the "postethnic" reasoning of David Hollinger and the consent model of Werner Sollors. See David Leiwei Li's genealogy of neoconservatism since the 1970s (*Imagining* 5–15), Glenn Omatsu's impassioned critique of its Asian American variety, and the recent work of Susan Koshy, Viet Nguyen (143–71), and Rey Chow (*Protestant Ethnic*) on the changing meaning of race in the multiracial contexts of the U.S.

become a global project, would ours necessarily become a more liberating and egalitarian world order?

Liu begins the narrative investigation of his American self with a tribute to his deceased Chinese father, inaugurating a thematic unraveling of racial and cultural puzzles. Unable to decipher the Chinese chapbook compiled by his father's childhood Taiwanese friends in his remembrance, he senses "how opaque an inheritance one's identity is" (6):

When Chao-hua Liu came to the United States in 1955 . . . he was Chinese. When he died thirty-six years later, he was, I'd say, something other than Chinese. And he helped raise a son who was Chinese in perhaps only a nominal sense. But what, ultimately, does all this mean?

(6-7)<sup>4</sup>

On his arrival, Chao-hua Liu's Chineseness has at least three dimensions of meaning—national, cultural, and racial. Upon his death, however, the aspect that remains stable is the racial one. Because of naturalization and longtime residency, his father's Chineseness has suffered from a reduction of meaning in terms of both national allegiance and cultural practice. The nominal Chineseness of the son, on the other hand, is merely racial. The father-son split over the meaning of "Chineseness" leads Eric Liu to ask further: "Where does this Chineseness reside? In the word? In the deed? In what is learned—or what is already known? And how is it passed from one generation to the next?" (7).

While disputing the equation between biological lineage and cultural heritage, Liu seems to confirm the importance of language

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4. Given Taiwan's Dutch and Japanese colonization, it is debatable that his father could be simply Chinese, as Liu claims. Similarly, one may refer to historical migrations and imperial encounters to debate the purity of Chinese culture (Chow, *Woman* xi-xvii). Although "Chineseness" is dealt with primarily in a U.S. context here, it has become an academic cottage industry in its own right because of the intensification of global cultural flows that begin to render problematic if not obsolete territorially bounded notions of culture. For a sample of recent scholarship on contemporary "Chineseness," see Yeh, Wang, and Ang.

("word") and action ("deed") in the continuity of familial identity and its transmission. For him, the missing link of the Chinese language constitutes particular problems of cultural mediation, since to question the residence of Chineseness also means to question how Chineseness is reproduced. Instead of resorting to the mystic and genetic inheritance of the kind for which Amy Tan is famous, Liu finds his way out by making an apparent apology for Chineseness and an unapologetic appeal to assimilation. "Chineseness," he wonders aloud, is "ultimately nothing," for it neither explains his father's courage nor his mother's determination (31). With this judgment, Liu at once disconnects the presumed linkage between Chinese language and Chinese behavior and declines to recognize Chineseness as either culturally exclusive or culturally determinant in the anatomy of his identity. Instead of mistaking this move as a simple rejection of his parentage, Liu actually reroutes his identitarian lineage. It is his father's "possession of English," he emphatically states, that has enabled his own "forfeiture of Chinese" (20). If Chineseness is an empty jar that does not give, the carrier of culture is for Eric Liu a new language that father and son share.

Echoing Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, Liu considers English a symbol of "unimpeded access to every avenue of American life" (20). Unlike Rodriguez, whose celebration of English is qualified by a lament over the disappearance of a familial intimacy enabled by Spanish, Liu sees no generational conflict arising from his loss of Chinese. While disidentifying with the linguistic and cultural dimensions of "Chineseness," Liu identifies the emergence of his American self with the facility with English that his father initiated. Regardless of one's ancestry, he seems to say, the acquisition of English and its accompanying assimilation of U.S. culture marks the origin of one's American becoming. "Song for My Father," in its purposeful Whitmanesque evocation, seems thus an aria on the English language that binds not only the immigrant and native generations but also the different American peoples in a common national genealogy. Liu both enthusiastically extols the democratic vista that assimilation promises and strategically revises his familial heritage and national belonging. As the "second leg of a relay race" (37), given the head start of his father, he claims

to have “moved away from the periphery and toward the center of American life,” becoming, as he puts it, “white inside” (34).

The facile conflation of “whiteness” and “Americanness” is jolting, despite its intended irony.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is consistent with Liu’s emphasis on the neutrality of the English language as it confers on its users a transparent national legitimacy. As with his previous dismissal of “Chineseness,” Liu appears to argue here that “Americanness,” albeit prominently signified in “whiteness,” is perhaps also abstract and attainable. In a tantalizing catalogue illustrating why he is “white” that ranges from political positions (“wary of minority militants”), entertainment options (“listen[ing] to National Public Radio,” “vacation[ing] in charming bed-and-breakfasts), to consumption preferences (“Crate & Barrel”), Liu demythologizes “whiteness” as nothing but a dominant cluster of class-specific and race-transcendent cultural habits (33–34). Contrary to his view of “Chineseness” as mystic mirage, however, “whiteness” is for Liu material and documentable, simultaneously particular and universal. Whiteness as Americanness, he wishes to convince the reader, is evident in what one does, and not in whom one is.

This perception of whiteness as cultural fiction and function without a biological foundation is, however, immediately followed by Liu’s self-doubt: “*Some are born white, others achieve whiteness, still others have whiteness thrust upon them.*” This, supposedly, is what it means to assimilate” (34–35). This riff on Malvolio in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*—“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em” (2.5)—is uncanny, to say the least.<sup>6</sup> Not only is the earlier equation of Americanness with whiteness supplemented here with an allusion to greatness, but Liu’s rhetorical masquerade in the figure of Malvolio, the steward who fancies his mistress, betrays a desire for social transgression as well as a gesture of self-deprecation. In his cryptic translation of the

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5. Readers may find it beneficial to read this essay’s discussion of “Americanness” along with the special issue of *PMLA* coordinated by Djelal Kadir, *America: The Idea, the Literature*.

6. I am indebted to Mary Mekemson for reminding me of the Shakespearean reference.

Shakespearean category of class into that of race, Liu seems to hint with fertile ambiguity that such greatness/whiteness is perhaps after all beyond the servant's reach. Here, one comes closest to an intimation of an Asian American, model minority's nightmare that his ultimate salvation lies nowhere else but in his condition of servility within the master's house.

Curiously, the author of *The Accidental Asian* does not elucidate whether those who are born white are the same as those who have whiteness thrust upon them. Neither does he elaborate whether the process of assimilation is equally compulsory for all the racial groups in the United States. What he does remark upon is a historical and existing distinction between those who have whiteness as a birthright and those who have it as an accomplishment. With this, we are able to distinguish at least between whiteness as a morphological state and whiteness as social status, whiteness that signifies race and whiteness that stands for national competence and greatness. Since whiteness is for whites a physical condition of descent, one wonders if it really makes logical sense for those who are in perfect possession of it to assimilate further, to incorporate a symbolic significance that is inherent and manifestly embodied.<sup>7</sup> Those who are born colored, in contrast, are not only encouraged to go beyond the natural state of their epidermal deprivation, but condemned as well to nonproprietary apprenticeship to a symbolic whiteness that they can never truly own.<sup>8</sup> Liu's quizzical take on ascriptive and acquired whiteness thus brings to the surface an arbitrary national order of social gradation that is not based on any substantive criteria of cultural measurement but on racial inheritance, on the perceived affinity of particular groups to a supposed Americanness. The fact that Asian Americans are the most formally

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7. This is the assumption behind the *American Heritage Dictionary's* definition of "assimilation" as "the process whereby a minority group gradually adopts the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture." Though class is a significant dimension in the construction of whiteness, it is crucial to take into account "white looks" and national entitlements, as discussed in Newitz and Wray, and Roediger.

8. Despite their shared immigrant origin in the mid nineteenth century, the contrast between the Irish, who have become "white" (see Ignatiev), and the Chinese, who have remained "foreign," is less a dissimilarity in their American cultural competence than a historical differentiation of their national belonging.



educated group in the United States does not alter the popular perception of them as the group most culturally alien to the American way of life. The racialization of treason in the case of Dr. Wen-Ho Lee is a recent but historically recurrent example. That a native-born, Yale-educated Asian American such as Liu should feel obligated to justify his claims to American culture, while his peers of European descent can take it for granted, simply sharpens the discursive contradiction of assimilation.

What Liu has inadvertently exposed is a deeply embedded entanglement of race and national competence in American culture, the material history of which is meticulously documented and defined by George Lipsitz as the “possessive investment in whiteness” (1–23). The discourse of assimilation, in view of this analysis, is at best a universalistic rationalization of particular undemocratic social practices that favor and profit whites. Rather than contesting its illogic and revealing the process whereby inheritance of genetic properties transfers political and cultural privileges, Liu attempts to recast the meaning of assimilation:

When I identify with white people who wield economic and political power, it is not for their whiteness but for their power. When I imagine myself among white people who influence the currents of our culture, it is not for their whiteness but for their influence. When I emulate white people who are at ease with the world, it is not for their whiteness but for their ease.

(55)

Liu’s exhortations are remarkable for their blindness. The vehement disassociation of race and social assets marks his astute apprehension of the arbitrary integrity of whiteness and authority. But to argue that “power,” “influence,” and “ease” should be detached from their racial moorings, on the one hand, and the very compulsory correspondence of this chain with “whiteness,” on the other, demonstrates the virtual impossibility of revising the “White Way of Being” without reinstating it (55). What the autobiographical “I” does, it appears, cannot ultimately be separated from who he is. For this very reason, perhaps, Liu is willing to sacrifice analytical acumen for passionate faith, as he vows to uphold assimilation as

“more than a series of losses,” and the “dilution” of ethnicity as an act of “creation” (55–56).<sup>9</sup>

When construed in the vocabulary of loss and dilution, “ethnicity” or “Chineseness” is no longer the “ultimate nothing(ness)” that Liu once considered it to be (31). It has become, rather, a concrete cultural substance that is deemed initially antithetical to but consequently amalgamable by whiteness/Americanness. Seduced and subdued by his own zeal for assimilation, Liu has by this point abandoned historical reason in locating identity in the particular nexus of social practice, the terrain of doing, so to speak. Inadvertently, perhaps, he has come to restore the binary of ethnicity and nationality, East and West, as a natural state of opposition that apparently demands resolution by an evolutionary teleology of cultural nationalism. Only when ethnicity is conceived within the context of the U.S., as a cultural difference inferior to a transcendent Americanness that Asian Americans do not possess, would they be in urgent need of assimilating in order to attain the “power,” “influence,” and “ease” now permanently detached from their being. Abandoning critical differentiation between ascriptive and achieved whiteness, giving up on a definition of identity contingent on action rather than inheritance, Liu has come to affirm that culture is but the extension of one’s nature. This lapse to culture, as I will explore later, is symptomatic of contemporary “neoracism.” Suffice it to say here that neoracism promulgates the naturalness of tribal affiliations and the inevitability of ancestral beckoning at the expense of actual history. The consequence of this logic is dire both for the American national formation with which Liu is preoccupied and for the imperialist reordering of the global community that the U.S. is presently engaged in.

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9. Liu reiterates the “postethnic” preference for “voluntary affiliations” (Hollinger 3) and its linear temporality of gradual social progress. The contradictions of his own narrative, as will become increasingly clear, testify not to the pertinence of a “postethnic America” but to the omnipresence of ethnicity yet to emerge from the stranglehold of the past. The voluntary, performative, and inventive aspects of ethnicity cannot simply claim transcendence over ascriptive materialities upon which acts of identity take place. For a related discussion, see Appiah and Gutmann (92–96).

A reader may at this point wonder what is “Chinese” in the context of Liu’s usage that is not “American.” The best way to approach this query is to turn to Liu’s probing of what “Americanness” is in relation to “race”:

America matters in both a civic sense and a cultural one. As a state, it is a guarantor of unmatched freedoms. As a place, it is an unrivaled incubator of ambition. . . .

Race matters, too, of course. The difference is, race matters mainly because race matters. It’s undeniable . . . that society is still ordered by the random bundle of traits we call “race”—and that benefits and penalties are often assigned accordingly. But it is this persistent social fact, more than any *intrinsic* worth, that makes racial identity deserving of our moral attention.

(64–65)

Liu is right in noting that “traits” of race do not have any “*intrinsic* worth.” He is equally perceptive about the face value of race in assigning “benefits and penalties.” What he has refused to do is to treat the “persistent social fact” of coupling racial traits with merits or deficits as a contradiction within American democracy. Race matters, because it has been the historic divider in the distribution of political rights and economic benefits. It is essential to the production of a “duality” that Benjamin Ringer aptly terms “‘we the people’ and others,” a national duality graphically illustrated in the white and colored lineage of the Thomas Jefferson family. Race matters, because it continues to qualify the achievement of “freedom” and “ambition,” concepts, as Liu sees them, of fundamental American significance. If America is indeed a guarantor of “unmatched freedoms,” the distinctive physical constitution of the individual, the specificities of language, and the preferences of diet ought not to matter in the social sphere, for ideally speaking such circumstance and choice are protected precisely by the abstraction of individual liberty, rights, and justice, an abstraction that has come to represent what we take as “Americanness.” Race, as biological inheritance, and culture, as group or individual performance, should not matter, as long as they do not contradict democratic practice. The sad fact remains, however, that these

particularities have so determined the attribution of national competencies that they end up either enabling or impeding the actual practice of an ideal American democracy.<sup>10</sup>

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In many respects, the embrace of an American universal without adequately attending to its historicity informs much of Eric Liu's analytical ambivalence about Asia, America, and the catalyst of such ambivalence, Asian America. "The Asian American identity was born," he states, "as I was, roughly thirty years ago" (57):

In those three decades it has struggled to find relevance and a coherent voice. As I have. . . . The Asian American identity, like me, renounces whiteness. It draws strength from the possibility of transcending the fear and blindness of the past. So do I. It is the so very American product of a rejection of history's limitations, rooted in little more than its own creation a generation ago. As I am.

Liu's identification with Asian America is soon modified by his metaphor for it, "a storm, a beautiful, swirling weather pattern" that simultaneously "draws" him in and "repulses" him, for he fears that "in the middle of this swirl, this great human churn, lies emptiness" (58). In his sustained differentiation and individuation of Asian American identity, Liu succinctly delineates the ancestral animosity among the various Asian ethnicities and points to the generational gap between immigrants and native-borns (58–60). He warns against an "enclave mentality" in an era in which "the levels of discrimination and hatred" no longer "*demand*" it and advocates the treatment of "a pan-Asian identity" as "a choice, not an imperative" (78).

These convictions in the voluntaristic making of ethnicity accompany Liu's recollection of an intriguing interlude, which at once

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10. Liu's initial attempt to detach race from culture and his final fall into culture as determined by race belongs appropriately to the general genre of progressive pluralism that Walter Benn Michaels critiques with intelligence (123–42). While concurring with Michaels that the only logical way out of the contradiction in American democracy between consent and descent is to make race extraneous, I strongly urge that such a proposal of pure logic and ideal coherence will have to be implemented with an understanding of race's material and historical relevance before its identitarian implications can be phased out.

reveals the undeniable impact of hereditary markings and contradicts his faith in the freedom of identitarian choice. Regardless of one's cultural inheritance, inhabiting a particular body and being of a particular shape will condition the performative efficacy of identity in the concrete arena of day to day social interaction. It was when the Clintons and Gore were yellow-faced on the cover of the *National Review* in 1996 for their roles in the "Asian money" scandal that the one-time Clinton speechwriter and MSNBC commentator Liu was called to the TV studio. By his own admission, Liu was not initially "offended" by the stereotypical image, merely amused by how "juvenile" and "sophomoric" it was (60–61). But as one pundit dismissed the caricature by claiming, "[n]ormal people aren't offended by it," Liu became visibly "outraged":

I am sending a searing look into my own reflection in the camera as I argue. And I am shouting now: I have raised my voice to defend *my people*. . . .

. . . even before I've removed my mike, I realize something unusual has happened. When the debate began I was playing a part, because I felt I should. Eight minutes later I had merged completely with my role. Almost by chance, it seemed, I'd become a righteous, vocal Asian American. All it had taken was a stage and a villain.

(61–62)

Having "stumbled onto a sense of race," "an accidental Asian" was born. In this epiphany, Liu "began to comprehend the most basic rationale for pan-Asian solidarity: self-defense" (63, 64).

Liu does not let the reader know if this accidental discovery constitutes an assertion of will or betrays an act of compulsion. What Liu does show us ever so vividly is the process of recognizing race, a re-cognition that began with "a searing look into [his] own reflection in the camera" and led to the raising of his "voice to defend [his] people," who are discursively absent from the "norm" of "we, the people." The movement from the recognition of his own image in the camera to the defense of his people's image on camera does not make much sense, especially in view of Liu's ideology of autonomous self and abstract Americanism. The only way to comprehend this leap of faith, it appears, is to explore what Liu actually sees in the camera in response to how the camera positions him, a kind of seeing and seen relation indicative of social perceptions and

self-perceptions. At the onset of his adolescence, there was a similar specular crisis. One day Liu experienced as a rude awakening that his rebellious “Chinese hair” was shattering his conscientious “conformity” to “the essence of [adolescent] cool.” Blaming the “predicament squarely on [his] Chinese genes,” he felt himself standing out like a “pigtailed Manchu,” an image that sharply evokes the *National Review* rendition. In order not to have his hair “difference”—that “physical impossibility”—“defeat [him],” he decided to have his head shaved, ridding himself of his “greatest social burden” and subsequently earning the reputation of being a “bold (if bald) iconoclast” (39–42).

If the adolescent Liu reacts to the discriminating gaze of the dominant culture with somatic self-erasure, a passive and acquiescent removal of his ubiquitous racial signifier, the adult Liu now responds to it with willful identification. In that brief moment when he registers his own reflection, he must have expanded his field of vision to include those who share his look. His searing look back at the camera becomes both a collective affirmation of his Asian visage on American national TV and a valiant defiance of the stereotypical gaze that simultaneously undermines group autonomy and his individuality. Not surprisingly, Liu achieves the integration of the individual and the collective at the moment of an imagistic and identitarian montage. Only when forcibly reminded of the emblem of his epidermal embodiment does he finally find his Asian American racial identity, transforming himself from tentatively “playing a part” to “merg[ing] completely with [his] role” (62). Unlike class and culture, race appears not to be something you can leave home without, and it is not exactly your American Express card.

Liu’s televisual encounter with race comes to qualify his own ideological convictions about race’s irrelevance and, by the same token, a critical argument about “postracial humanism” in Paul Gilroy’s recent *Against Race* (37). Gilroy builds his concept of the “postracial” on the foundation of the “nonracial” “similarity” of sensory feelings and spiritual needs in all human beings (17). The humanist appeal of common feelings and needs is irresistibly persuasive. However, to premise a utopian racelessness, as Gilroy does, on developments in digital imaging and molecular science

seems to egregiously skip over the social and the morphological, where race is predominantly experienced (43).<sup>11</sup> In this context, Liu's head-on collision with race and consequently his vehement defenses are multiply illuminating. The affective and the psychological, while universal in the human spectrum, are shown to be socially specific. Not only is Asian American identity a social performance, both determined and enacted through the visible signs of race; such an identity is also revealed to be highly contingent upon the ways in which the somatic and the social are signified.

This understanding of Asian American identity comes logically to dispel a hyperbolic reaction that Liu initially typifies. His pronounced distance is motivated by the twin suspicions of Asian American identity's centripetal power to eliminate individual difference and to oppress its members.<sup>12</sup> For such power to exist, we would have to presume that Asian American identity were indeed an entity in and by itself and could indeed self-generate and socially reproduce at will. The presumption of an omniscient Asian American identity is clearly as much a phantom of the imagination, as Liu recognizes, as it is a dominant cultural projection intended to forever preclude a potential materialization of group power. Asian American identity, in other words, does not have the power to compel; even less can it command compliance from its heterogeneous members, because it still lacks the requisite institutions, both political and cultural, to constitute itself materially as a collectivity. Even so, the historical process of legislative exclusion and the contemporary practice of psychosocial and geocultural alienation of the kind that Liu experienced on camera does call for its constitution.<sup>13</sup> As Liu's accidental discovery testifies, Asian American identity need not be monolithic; it can be strategic and contingent. Asian American identity is recognition of race's limitation and reduction

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11. Gilroy's brief for "postracial humanism" (37, echoing Hollinger's "postethnicity") shares with Michaels's argument a sense of race's past tense, but much more effort is in order to get us through the historical present of race before we reach the "beyond" and the "post." Both Gilroy and Michaels are susceptible to appropriation by the discourses of neoracism to which Liu seems to have succumbed, a point I will take up later.

12. The challenge to the ethnic nationalist impulse of American identity to which Liu implicitly refers comes first in the form of feminist and poststructuralist critique (Lowe).

13. For a sound argument for this constitution, see Espiritu.

of the group. As Liu comes to understand so well, it is nothing other than “an affirming counterstatement to the narrative in which yellow people are either foreigners or footnotes” (63). As such, it is not exactly a choice; yet as a mode of resistance, and a force of mobilization, its articulation is perhaps by necessity simultaneously individual and communal, institutional and improvisational.

By recounting the TV episode, Liu has introduced the specular, the somatic, and the strategic formations of Asian American identity. But his strong inclination toward cultural causalities overrides an understanding of identity as contingent social contestations. “What’s missing from Asian American culture,” he laments, “is culture” (79):

Unlike blacks, Asians do not have a cultural idiom that arose from centuries of thinking of themselves as a race; unlike Jews, Asians haven’t a unifying spiritual and historical legacy; unlike Latinos, another recently invented community, Asians don’t have a linguistic basis for their continued apartness. While the Asian American identity shares with these other identities the bones of collective victimization, it does not have their flesh of cultural content.

(80)

Not only is a differentiation of the “collective victimization” among the ethnic groups in question and their respective relationship to the social imaginary of the American nation absent from this account, but Liu also presumes an internal unity of ethnic identities by racial consciousness, religion, or language. It is as though these elements of culture alone substantiate and sustain the groups.<sup>14</sup> His conviction in culture, however, significantly coincides with other troubling contemporary turns.

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14. While African Americans and Native Americans continue to experience the worst form of economic deprivation and blatant racism, their integrity within American history and mythology seems secure at this juncture. Latino/Latina Americans in general and Chicanos/Chicanas specifically can claim the history of internal colonialism and what Gloria Anzaldúa names “borderlands,” while Asian Americans are caught in the inescapable dialectic of “alienation and abjection” (Li, *Imagining* 1998). Liu hardly realizes that Asian American culture, unlike its companion white immigrant culture, is refused access to a symbolic European American continuity and nativity essential to the U.S. national imaginary.



One thinks of the neo-Confucian revision of old Protestant capitalism in the Weberian vein, which has formidably influenced the revision of Asian studies and the formation of Pacific Rim studies, as well as leading to an uncanny Asian American paradigm shift by the *Aiiieeeee!* group.<sup>15</sup> The central question undergirding *The Big Aiiieeeee!* Is, “What do we Asian Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Indo-Chinese, and Korean Americans have to hold us together”(2)? The key to it is a Confucian civilizational consciousness. The tradition Frank Chin vehemently rejected as Orientalist in the past is at present vengefully reclaimed, with all the latent Sinocentric overtones intact. Unlike Chin, who appropriates an ancestral Asian symbolic to affirm an apparent Asian American cultural continuity and uniformity, Liu disavows the existence and relevance of such a symbolic and the pan-Asian identity it implies. But to read this stance as Liu’s rejection of the fundamental cultural constitution of identity is to miss his point. By citing the ethnic-specific languages and folkways of Korea and Vietnam (79), Liu instead advocates a more nationality-circumscribed tradition “with an identifiable cultural core,” thus gesturing toward such formations as “Vietnamese American” and “Korean American” (80).

Liu’s maneuver is intriguing. While one agrees with his critique of the self-Orientalizing promotion of border-crossing racial consciousness, one is troubled by his disregard here—despite his recognition of it elsewhere—of the important Asian American historical, literary, and popular cultural archive as “a source of belonging” (154). Calling it a “*retroactive* collective memory” and an “anachronism,” yet lamenting the absence of Asian American cultural commonalities, Liu seems to have cornered himself, on the one hand, with the proposal of a discrete ethnic tribal formation, and, on the other, with the blanket embrace of dominant cultural assimilation (79–80). He refuses to distinguish ethnically specific practices—rituals and religions, for example—that properly belong to the private realm from ethnic historical participation in the American (re)public. This

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15. For a look at the transnational turn in Asian American Studies and a critique of it, see Dirlík and Lee, respectively. Also important is the special issue of *Amerasia Journal* guest-edited by Michael Omi and Dana Takagi. For recent scholarship on the subject, see Wilson, and Li, “State.”

confusion about culture's personal, political, and performative dimension in multiple social arenas explains his simultaneous subscription to the prevalent modes of both "neoracism" and "assimilationism."

The newness of the apparently antiracist "neoracism," according to Etienne Balibar, lies in its condemnation of the biological justifications of racial segregation with a concomitant insistence on the necessary maintenance of cultural thresholds (Balibar and Wallerstein 17–27). By expressing his preference for a nationality-bounded identity with an ostensible "cultural core," Liu appears to have coincided with neoracism's abandonment of the biological concept of race in favor of the foundational role of culture in group identification. But the similarity seems to stop here, for his voluntaristic making of identity is at odds with neoracism's true agenda to perpetuate the separation of peoples by demanding the preservation of absolute cultural difference. Dismissing Chin's version of an unbroken Asian cultural pipeline into contemporary America and the now available library of Asian America, Liu willfully conjures up the ethnic collectivity to which he involuntarily belongs as a *tabula rasa*. Asian America is for him a cultural blank slate that cannot constitute its own identity but is forever ready to assimilate and acquire the imprint of an all-inclusive American one (79–80). "Should I stop with Asian American stories? Should I even begin there?" he asks (154). By posing these questions, Liu forces us to ponder the relation of particular and universal histories as well as the nature of individual and collective (re)membering in identity formation.

The answers are found in his experience of speechwriting for President Clinton, the most memorable being the fiftieth-anniversary tribute to the heroes of D-day. "On the day of that address" he writes, "in the presence of the old veterans who still lived, my memory-envy eased a bit. Welling in my eyes, catching in my throat, was a *nation's* memory, a public history: something that I, too, could claim" (154). In this affective identification with a retroactively enacted national memory, Liu claims to have come home. The semblance of a seamless suture with public history is offered as an alternative to the recovery of Asian American identity, as ethnicity is sacrificed for the integrity of national memory. Fittingly patriotic and conveniently clean, this passage of self-claim leaves many questions unanswered.

First, just as he previously conceives of English as a faceless and value-free language, Liu presumes an American national memory with which an individual can identify at will. Second, national memory as such is for Liu a straight story of heroes and a singular narrative of triumph. While he does not pontificate, the reference to D-day unmistakably symbolizes the universal victory of democracy and liberty over totalitarianism. But is this indeed the only lesson that history has provided? The tribulations of Japanese Americans in that era, the trampled freedom they represented within the borders of the United States, not to mention the Nisei soldiers who fought in the European theater of the Second World War, hardly appear in Liu's public production and private performance of national memory. Admittedly, no Asian Americans were present at the Normandy landing, and Liu has no obligation to mention either the 442nd Regiment or the Internment. But the failure to register that chapter in an act of personal remembrance and national self-inclusion seems a blatant instance of historical amnesia that prompts both his own "memory-envy" and the reduction of Asian Americans, as he puts it, to "foreigners or footnotes" (63). Liu's manufactured memory envy and unwitting oblivion are both the consequence of and a cautionary to a national cultural disembodiment in which Asian Americans are exorcised of their material presence, the "flesh" and "content" of their being (80). Like new technologies of racism that do not refer to race, Liu's conviction in culture without body and history finally echoes, perhaps despite himself, the illogic of assimilation that sustains the equation of whiteness and Americanness.

The categorical articulation of "Asian America," in this context, is not an affirmation of biological race but the "semioticization of the body" and the "somatization" of the national mythology (Brooks xii). "Asian America" as "retroactive collective memory" is far from "anachronistic" (80), for it serves both to recuperate a missing "reference public" and to evoke particular historical exceptions to the universal claim of American democracy (Baker 7). It is thus at once consistent with "the politics of recognition" and corrective of Liu's version of ahistorical triumphalism (Taylor). A judicious (re)remembering of Asian America does not just recall juridical and discursive exclusions but restores the multiplicity, materiality, and integrity of the ethnic body in the American body politic. While sympathetic

with his apprehension of an “enclave mentality” (78), because the hazards of multicultural identity politics are real, especially when demands for representation lapse into reification of pure traditions, I think Liu is terribly amiss about the liberating potentials of the Asian American recovery project (154). The histories have to be written, but not for the contemporary subjects to presume the status of victimhood, hence, moral innocence and rectitude. The stories have to be told, but not to parade racial pride or to invent “[r]oots without costs” (132). Rather, these narratives have to be (re)membered because they function as a critique of the prevalent Americanism that has abstracted its Asian citizens out of their national heritage. The articulation of Asian America thus embodies the history of a people and cultivates a culture of democracy that cherishes difference in identity.

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There is something to be said about whether Asian American identity is a constitutive form of cultural difference. I agree with Eric Liu’s assertion that such a culture of difference is not there, but not for the reasons he cites. Despite its intra-ethnic varieties, and its class, gender, and generational heterogeneities, Asian American culture cannot constitute its difference simply because of its imbrication, however unacknowledged, in America’s late capitalistic mode of production. Evidence abounds that world-views, ways of life, and forms of desire representative of the premodern mode of economic and cultural production are not only seriously endangered in the United States but also vanishing from the corners of Asia and Africa with astonishing speed and irresistible violence. The eager embrace of modernity and the postmodern ethic of consumption on a global scale have problematized the viability of cultural diversity both as a philosophical principle and as a material practice.<sup>16</sup> One wonders if there is any vestige of residual culture in Asian America that can enact meaningful resistance. Asian Americans have indeed assimilated—just as European Americans

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16. Although the Taliban is never a desirable alternative, its demise after the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan is telling of the state of cultural diversity on the planetary stage. For related issues, see Li, *Globalization*.

and other ethnic Americans have—the value of possessive individualism and a market economy based on the consumption of goods and services, the hallmarks of contemporary Americanness, and the beacon of universal humanity to come.<sup>17</sup>

But the supreme irony of it all is that actual cultural assimilation has neither served to integrate Asian Americans into the social and political imaginary of the United States nor enabled the emergence of a new epistemology of race and culture. As evidence to the contrary, Liu has tremendous difficulty discerning the shared culture of Americans beyond racial delineation:

If whiteness was once the thesis of American life, and colored cults of origin the antithesis, what remains to be written is the synthesis. From the perspective of my children and their children, from the perspective, that is, of those who will *be* the synthesis, it may seem that “Asian American” was but a cocoon: something useful, something to outgrow.

(83)

Regardless of their participation in the economic, political, and cultural life of the United States, Asian Americans are on Liu’s scale of synthetic Americanness semi-assimilated and half-metamorphosed, still in need of outgrowing their cocoon.

Its aphoristic appeal aside, Liu’s synthetic claims are little more than obfuscating truisms. What whiteness that constituted the thesis of American life is, what the colored cults of origin are, remain unexplained in his proclamations. If American life is unified by the political system of representative democracy and the market economy of late capitalist modernity, one wonders whether the whites and the coloreds are fundamentally at odds with each other on this American thesis. The historical and cultural revision of national origin as it has been enacted in the U.S. in recent decades hardly advocates the repatriation of the coloreds to the darker continents. It argues instead for the denied nativity of their American belonging in aesthetic and political strategies that Maxine Hong Kingston

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17. Irony is intended for the neoliberal discourse of globalization or Americanization. Interestingly enough, it has been argued that in the “flexible” accumulation of contemporary capital, it is the “nomadic” “elite Chinese subject” across the Pacific Rim that would in fact revise “our understanding of the late modern subject” (Ong 3).

adroitly calls “claiming America.” In “The Chinatown Idea” and “Fear of the Yellow Planet,” Liu has similarly berated the “map of our own partitioned soul” and the ghetto of the “insular” mind by locating the source of Asian American ambivalence in the shadow of a segregated national consciousness (85, 96).<sup>18</sup> A discursive revision of this kind, one ought to realize, constitutes no antithesis, because its essential impulse is to gain equal access to the American thesis of democratic representation, political as well as cultural. If there is a common thesis without an observable antithesis, what is the synthesis that Liu wants to write?

It is instructive to recall here that on numerous occasions in the text Liu has asserted his cultural Americanness, the acquired kind that he has mastered with pride to the degree of seamless synthesis, if, that is, he does inherit enough of a Chinese cultural antithesis to begin with. Provided this premise, the cultural synthesis he proposes has to be a Trojan-horse trope for something other than culture. Indeed, it is not any substantive cultural difference in the domain of doing but the epidermal signs of race in the domicile of being that have armed Liu with his false opposition, the antithesis of “whiteness” and “coloredness” upon which their synthesis into “Americanness” he wishes to achieve (83). Although Liu exerts himself to eschew race in favor of a generic Americanness, the American synthesis he opines has to be accomplished genealogically. For it is from the perspective of his “children and their children, from the perspective, that is, of those who will *be* the synthesis,” Liu assures his audience, that “the future of the race” will be “beyond recognition” (83).

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18. “The problem,” he concludes, “is not that the Asians who come here feel divided about America; it is that America feels divided about the Asians who come here” (127). While Liu implicitly touches on the transnationalist turn in Asian American studies, his assimilationist stance precludes his embrace of a borderless and rimful (as in the Pacific Rim) Asian solidarity that emerges with variant discourses of globalization. I cannot take up this topic here except briefly. While Asian Americans may be physically mobile across the Pacific, the transnationalist has yet to fully reckon that race as epidermal embodiment signifies national boundaries and belongings. If the transnationalist seeks a transcendence of the U.S. nation-state by proposals of border crossing, an assimilationist like Liu deals with it by race mixing, as we shall soon witness. Consequently, interracialism and transnationalism both function as (in)voluntaristic discursive responses to the cryptic biological determinism of American democracy.

Acquisitional Americanness is revealed as inauthentic, while ascriptive Americanness is seen as capable of transformation. "I am of a transitional generation, one that is still stuck," he resumes, regretting his forever arrested morphological metamorphosis into a recognizable American. "I am of a generation that can say the words but not fully grasp their meaning: Race is falling apart" (190). The freedom from race's moorings, Liu implies, belongs ultimately to America's future generations, because they will overwhelmingly mix and marry. As a result, they will be able not only to change the predetermined look of the races, pass its rigid material and social limitations, but also to live a national cultural synthesis in ways that his own assertive assimilation cannot accomplish. Aside from his fervent advocacy for assimilation as a vehicle of cultural compensation and racial transcendence, Liu appears to have finally conceded that Americanness is after all a matter of "being" rather than "becoming," a matter of descent rather than consent. With this concession, he has—inadvertently and in spite of himself—both uncovered the racist and hierarchical undertone of assimilationism and illuminated the historical contradiction of American democracy that Asian Americans centrally embody.

The projection into the future of a dissolution of racial difference has its roots in the past, however. Liu's hopes for his progeny are in fact foreshadowed by his responses to his progenitor, not his parents but Po-Po, his maternal grandmother in New York's Chinatown. Recalling his adolescent impression of a shopping trip there, Liu comments how "these Chinatown Chinese" seem "so familiar and so different." Then a familiar face emerges out of the blur of Chinese faces, the one of his Po-Po, who seems both surprised and hurt by this chance meeting. Liu's mother explains their whimsical visit, their unwillingness to barge in unannounced, and soon the three generations "went [their] separate ways" (103). The drive out of the Lower East Side is fast and silent, their entrance into the Merrywood suburban home a "comforting sensation" (104). Even though it is exceptionally late and he is extremely tired, "before I went to bed," Liu tells us, "I made myself take a shower."

We are struck by the adult autobiographer's disarming candor and share his ironic distance from his adolescent alter ego, whose compulsion to wash off the taint of his ancestry is as stirring as his

compulsion to shave his head. While Liu employs this episode as an apparent emblem of class difference that wedges a continuous familial identity, it is difficult for one not to ask if the adolescent Eric is also desperately shedding the stigma of race, the birthmark that his assiduous assimilation cannot remove. More disturbing is the suggestiveness of this interpretation: one might suspect that Liu the author has not yet outgrown a disaffection for his race, his autobiographical arbitrage on the future generations without racial recognition merely betraying a consciously suppressed yearning to detach his offspring from genealogical Chineseness. In the same manner that his forfeiture of the Chinese language is enabled by his father's command of English, his children's American authenticity will be enabled by his miscegenation, for assimilation in culture without assimilation in blood is apparently an incomplete Americanization.

The author of *The Accidental Asian* is clearly too complex and intelligent a writer to make this his central contention, but it is not accidental that he actually does. On the narrative level, Liu is compelled to push his story of upward mobility to a climactic end, proffering his audience the comfort of closure. On the analytical level, he is equally compelled to resolve the seeming polarity of the self caught between his Chinese descent and his American birth. It is appropriate, therefore, that the paeon to assimilation figuring his father as the fountainhead of his own progressive Americanization should wind up with "Blood Vows," a rumination on his marriage to a Jewish American woman that turns into a rhapsody on "omni-cultural" America (201). "Blood Vows" at once commemorates Eric Liu's marital union with Carroll Haymon and commits to "the making of Americans," to borrow from Gertrude Stein. The concluding chapter carefully returns to where the autobiography began—the site of the family—while its analogical significance to the other solidarity, the nation at large, is everywhere resonant.

Family is the home of individual identity, and Liu distinguishes between the family one is accidentally born into and the family one purposefully makes. In a symbolic nod to the former family, and echoing the memoir's opening, Liu cites a canonical Chinese poem by Li Bai (AD 701–762): "Raising my head to the shine of the moon;/ Lowering my head to the thoughts of home" (176). "I know these



words," he claims; "[l]ong ago, as a child, I must have spoken them" (178). The gesture of nostalgic tribute assigns his ancestral family to history, while the Chinese characters so courteously reproduced by hand are erroneously written, making a mockery of Liu's sentimental homesickness.<sup>19</sup> The making of his own family is, however, far more assured: "I chose. I chose to enter a relationship with Carroll. Not with 'a white woman,' not with some nameless paragon of 'white beauty,' but with Carroll Haymon, who has always had an uncanny knack for finishing my sentences. . . ." (183). Liu deploys the language of choice and contract, describing his marriage with the trope of volitional allegiance with which James Kettner characterizes American citizenship (10). The manner in which he phases out his biological family and embraces his nuclear family exemplifies more precisely Werner Sollors's famous formulation that "American identity is often imagined as volitional consent, as love and marriage" (151). This is also underscored by Liu's mother, who regards the marriage as a true token that her son has "merged into American society" (182). Love for the woman and love for the country consequently couple to provide the accidental Asian the ease of American homecoming with which the autobiography has been struggling. Liu seems to have finally reached the promised land—the family of "blood vows" that simultaneously secures the legitimacy of consensual miscegenation and pledges anew a native speaker's allegiance to the nation. Moving from personal exemplar to demographic trend, Liu now speaks euphorically of interracial romance and the mingling of blood, the instability of identity and the inevitable yet opportune doom of Asian America (187–90). "The end product of American life is neither monoculturalism nor multiculturalism," he exclaims; "it is *omniculturalism*" (201).

This omnicultural end of American life is merely a euphemism for omniracialism, for it posits a biological solution for the persistent contradictions of racial, cultural, and national identities that the autobiography is at pains to resolve. To overcome the perceived deficiency of Asian descent in the American grain, Liu advocates

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19. Liu's memoir includes Li's verse in both Chinese characters and their phonetic romanization, but two out of the total of twenty Chinese characters are "misspelled." The English translation of the two lines in the text is mine.

assimilation as a measure of cultural consent. But aggressive assimilation cannot resolve his dilemma of having an American cultural character without acknowledgment and an Asian cultural attribution without actual cultural content. Despite his appeal to the juridical definitions of the nation and the political ideals of democracy, and despite his apparent class privilege, Liu shares with his fellow Asian Americans an acute lack of national intelligibility and legitimacy. For they are notably absent from “the anatomy of national fantasy,” the affective regulation of political life, as Lauren Berlant has it, through “images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness” (5). Given that Asian Americans remain inadequately imagined and imaged in the national symbolic, it is small wonder that Liu should feel helplessly “stuck” between the citizen as abstraction and the citizen as embodied (190).

Rather than tracing this entrapment of the Asian American to the fundamental contradiction of American citizenship, to the ways in which the white body has been postulated as the American universal in and by itself, Liu seems more than willing to sacrifice ethnic morphological visibility.<sup>20</sup> To achieve national legitimacy in the absence of the particular body, Liu is thus compelled to make corporal the American consent that Sollors takes metaphorically. As a result, two conditions seem to have become implicitly requisite. White spousal accommodation turns out to be an effective and desirable vehicle of affective and social compensation for the insufficient legal guarantee of Asian American citizenship.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the reproduction of future generations without racial recognition serves as a vicarious incorporation of the Asian body into the American body politic: “a hairless, skinless, bloodless universalism” has finally come to “unstick” the accidental Asian, justifying the natural extinction of racial difference in apparent national synthesis (153). Although Liu invokes cultural hybridity as an

20. See Laclau and Mouffe respectively for their brilliant discussions of the relationship between universality and particularity regarding citizenship.

21. In the bio-pic *Dragon*, Bruce Lee’s white mother-in-law comments, “You’re an American citizen, but you are not an American,” explicitly denying Lee’s national cultural authenticity.

all-purpose ointment, racial mixing is implied as truly capable of dissolving the national contradiction between one's political and cultural consent and one's biological and racial descent. Identitarian determinism of the most primordial kind, the cult of blood, readily overcomes democracy's and modernity's impulse for individual choice, save that such choice is reduced to transforming the practice of intraracial mating. Nature eventually proves omnipotent to do what culture cannot.

The narrative proposal of a "miscege-nation" remains a meaningful challenge to the tyranny of an "Aryan nation" of singular descent, but it cannot be a serious ideal of democratic dissent. For one thing, Eurasian Americans, Afro-Asian Americans, and intra-Asian Americans, say of Indian and Indonesian ancestry, will occupy different symbolic spaces in the nation based on their divergent morphological manifestations. For another, the disappearance of distinctive racial signifiers does not necessarily guarantee the emergence of an antiracist national culture.<sup>22</sup> While one proposal

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22. Liu's projection of omnicultural, or rather omniracial, Americans has historical antecedents. Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far records in her autobiographical piece "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" a childhood fight with other schoolchildren, who start calling her and her brother "Chinks" upon learning of their mixed ancestry: "I'd rather be Chinese than anything else in the world," I scream. They pull my hair, they tear my clothes, they scratch my face, and all but lame my brother; but the *white blood* in our veins fights valiantly for the *Chinese half* of us. When it is all over . . . [we] report to our mother that we have 'won the battle' " (qtd. in Chin et al., *The Big Aiiieeeee!* 113; emphases added). While Sui Sin Far prides herself on being Chinese, she cannot but concede unconsciously to the valiancy of her "white blood" and the cowardice of her "yellow blood" (pun intended). Not only does the color red become a moot physical description, but blood as such has been metaphysically racialized. It is sad to observe that after nine decades of "progress," Liu has submitted himself to the same despotic dictate from which his autobiographic forerunner suffered. Mixed blood, contrary to his convictions, does not automatically collapse the cultural gradation of racial attributes based on epidermal signs. More imagination is clearly in order to achieve American democratic consent than a facile and feel-good reliance on blood's mystic and magical power. For a helpful study of the complex social implications of various forms of mixed marriages, see Spickard. For a rhapsodic echo of Liu's omniculturalism turned omniracialism, see Rodriguez, *Brown*. Of great interest also is Randall Kennedy's qualified endorsement of a historical version of omniracialism (as proposed by Frederick Douglass), "where the white and colored people of this country [can] be blended into a common nationality, and enjoy together . . . the inestimable blessings of life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (qtd. in Lind 18).

celebrates mixture and the other insists on purity, both conceptualizations concur on the blood base of race for human solidarity and view the political entity of the nation as nature's extension. Democracy as the modern alternative to aristocracy, the political overcoming of ascriptive givens and privileges, seems, after all, feeble in comparison to the call of the wild. Perhaps one commentator in the *New Yorker* had it right when he remarked sarcastically on the Bush presidential campaign, "Our alleged republic has never had a problem with the hereditary principle, except in principle" (Hertzberg).

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