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## "Histories That All of Us Should Know": Asian American Masculinities in Interethnic Perspective

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US ethnic studies, specifically their Asian American section, have been marked by a sustained interest in the questions of the models of Americanization through adopting dominant masculine roles, usually presumed "white". The reading of two recent novels from the Asian American canon, namely, Gus Lee's *China Boy* (1991) and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) suggests, however, that we pay attention to the ways some alternative models of homosocial relations (a term borrowed from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) work to counteract the idea of dominant white masculinity, and draw the male protagonists in the novels closer to an interethnic model of identity building usually involving an important African American figure. In the process this also signifies the changes and redefinitions in American social formations which have to do with ethnicity, race, immigration and citizenship status in different phases of the post-Civil Rights period.

### 1

The documentary *Stolen Ground*, released by Chinese American producer and director Lee Mun Wah, brings together six Asian American men to debate the impact of racism on their lives: "through it all [the testimonies] we knew that we had come back to be witnesses for each other, to stand up and reclaim what had been taken away from us, our honor and respect". Richard Yarborough, in his discussion of the strategies in Frederick Douglass's masculine self-fashioning, singles out as one of the crucial questions for black men in the nineteenth century, "whether or

not black men were, in fact, what was conventionally considered 'manly'" (1990: 168). This same question undoubtedly resonates with meaning for twentieth-century Asian American writers and scholars.<sup>1</sup>

It has been noted that Asian American intellectuals have borrowed from their African American counterparts a set of oppositional cultural and political strategies in the course of the Civil Rights era and afterwards (Chin et al. 1974; Omi and Winant 1986: 89-108; Okihiro 1994; Nguyen 2000: 130; Wu 2002: 1-38). This cross-ethnic borrowing and cross-cultural communication have been especially foregrounded in the literary works by a group of writers and activists led by Frank Chin, and are applied in cultural manifestos from the same period, as testified by their pronouncements accompanying a landmark 1974 anthology of Asian American literature. In a retrospective glance those developments are very often designated as the phase of cultural nationalism. One of its most salient features has been a powerful masculine-imaged oppositional and political strategy, very often modelled on, for instance, matrices of increasingly militant black movements, such as the one spearheaded by Malcolm X (Chin et al. 1974: xxiv-xxviii). Several powerful scenes in Renee Tajima-Peña's semi-autobiographic documentary *My America, or, Honk If You Love Buddha* (1996) register and represent a pregnant complicity between African American political struggle and the rise of political and ethnic consciousness among Asian Americans.

For two young Korean Americans in the film, rap music has become a form of a very confident identity articulation, as one of the brothers sports on his T-shirt an image of Malcolm X underscored by his famous endorsement of "any means necessary". Also, the running links between two parallel projects, the increased civil participation on the part of Asian Americans and African Americans, are revealed in the film through the

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<sup>1</sup> Only during the past several decades with the rise of cultural studies and the intensive work done in recovering histories of various ethnic groups has that query been critically foregrounded and retroactively teased out of many written testimonials. Certainly, African American conjunction of writing and masculinity, of constructing one's manhood through the body of the text, cannot fail to appeal to Asian American authors, as shown by Elaine Kim in the case of early Asian American writers (1982: 40-43).

story of Yuri Kochiyama and her husband, both civil rights activists, who "enrolled in the Harlem Freedom School established by Malcolm X to learn African American history and to engage in the struggle for civil rights" (Okiihiro 60; Wu 330-31). It is necessary to make clear from the start that what might be interesting in this comparative project is not a conflation of the groups with distinct historical records in the United States. What emerges, however, is a sense of these two groups performing, as pointed out by Jennifer Lee, "race, ethnicity, and opportunity" in their mutual interactions (2002: 162).

An increasing number of Asian American scholars has called for "the paradigm shift" (Wu 33) in racial matters even as they acknowledge that the civil rights model (tailored, for obvious historical reasons, predominantly but not exclusively by the needs of African American community) does not lose its appeal and relevance for the contemporary ethnic—also understood as racial—experience.<sup>2</sup>

Even though one should heed the Asian Americanists' repeated warnings against welding together disparate strains into a composite Asian American identity that comes alive most conspicuously in times of great political duress (Fong 5-8), it is intriguing to think along even broader cross-ethnic and cross-community lines. Such an approach is, after all, also condoned by a variety of literary texts and other artifacts that focus or touch upon the possibility and reality of political, personal, familial and communal coalitions among groups that are largely set apart in the American political spectrum. Jennifer Lee recognizes these inclinations when invoking "a sense of 'panminority' identity based on our shared experience as nonwhites in a predominantly white society" (2002: 213).

Thus, Ralph Ellison's articulation of a literary-political programme in his collection of essays *Shadow and Act* (1953, 1972) brings me to a set of

<sup>2</sup> Even the terminology circulating nowadays in ethnic studies reflects the assumption that it is the racial/ethnic other who is in need of being theorized, more often than not cast as a split subject both in popular and academic parlance. Thus Asian American, African American, Hispanic American, etc. is posed alongside the fictive "American," who by that logic excludes these but includes – whom? Richard Dyer addresses in his study the tacit assumptions of the discourse of whiteness, which constructs itself as a standard of normalcy against which the others have to measure up (1997: 1).

demands that Chin and other Asian American writers were making for Asian American literature in the 1970s and afterwards. To sum up, it is Ellison's insistence on the conjunction of culture creation, the invention of a new language and the emergence of a distinctive masculinity (1972: xvii, xviii) that echoes in the 1974 anthology of Asian American writing. These uncannily similar formulations of cultural and political goals, aiming at the recognition of the Asian Americans' status within American society and promoting the group's peculiar cultural expressions and achievements (as men), brought different minority groups together during the embattled 1960 and the early 1970s and at least temporarily signalled their shared cultural and political alignments.

The second phase that can provisionally be located in the post-1965 milieu, as a result of the revamping of American immigration laws (itself a direct result of the civil rights efforts), greater influx of Asian immigrants into the country and subsequent change in the social and educational profile of Asian immigrants entering the United States, moves away from some of the rhetorical motions voiced by the "cultural nationalists" (less insistence on a specific cultural language, for instance). It assumes greater variation, subtlety and obliquity in the choice of strategies and idioms that new Asian American writers use in order to articulate their aesthetic or political concerns. In this post-cultural nationalist phase, Asian American authors sometimes turn their gaze towards the African American community but with somewhat different aims in mind than were relevant for the earlier generations of Asian American writers. This permanent, if somewhat ambiguous, appeal for Asian American male writers still inscribes interesting possibilities of textual and social dialogues and debates, centering on the status and symbolic valence of ethnic masculinities in contemporary United States.

Before turning to these questions, let me outline the stakes that masculinity issues have in the project of inscribing one's place in American social formations. One of the continuing "primal scenes" (cf. Eyerman 2001: 1) to which Asian American studies seem inevitably to revert to, either to draw their sustenance from it or to lament lost opportunities, is a link between the belated assumption of citizenship status on the part of the Asian American subject and the concomitant shadow it casts

on the subject's "masculinity," given the insistence on (white) man as a nationally representative subject.<sup>3</sup> We see in these conjunctions that, first, an exemplary national subject is historically constructed as male—initially as white and propertied, additionally after the Civil War as black, only later as Asian (Mexican, Latino, etc.); secondly, it is through the plot of his induction into or the achievement of citizenship that his ethnic (moreover, racially marked) masculinity may become equally an asset as a liability. Women, on the other hand, as shown by Tracey Sedinger, seem to be incompatible with the idea of a representative national subject (2002).

After the massive intervention of feminism, in its academic and more stringently political forms, and with the additional efforts on the part of other projects based on alternative sexual identities, as suggested by David Eng (2001), the accepted profile of a citizen has indeed become a more comprehensive and inclusive affair. Still for Asian American criticism one of the crucial question is how to undo the psychologically damaging denigration of Asian American masculinity, which manifested itself in two principal ways, as pointed out by Lisa Lowe among others; namely, emasculation (accompanied by gendering) and racialization (1996: 1-36). Patricia Chu similarly notes the strategy of abjection resorted to by the racialized and emasculated subject in order to vindicate his "masculinity" against the other(s), who in their turn can be cast as even more vulnerable (2000). This strategy of abjection of the Other in order to bolster up one's

<sup>3</sup> It is very instructive in that respect to consider briefly the tenor of the plot in Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961). The bowl of tea in the title refers to the herbal remedy prescribed for the young Chinese American protagonist Ben Loy's incapacity to perform with his wife, Mei Oi. Coupled with his failed masculinity (especially as ties between sexuality and reproduction are emphasized in the tightly knit Chinese community in question, New York Chinatown in the late 1940s to early 1950s) is Loy's strange paralysis when it comes to avenging his masculinity by confronting his wife's roguish lover, who could almost be her father or older cousin. If we read his impotence occasioned by his frequent visits with (white) prostitutes as a sinister consequence of the forced attempt to inscribe his masculinity in ways compatible to the white man's, in the latter case, Loy's incapacity to act could be attributed to the elders' paralyzing younger males in the Chinese community, which is not merely a result of interiorizing the common (Orientalist) stereotypes but also reflects a problematic generational dynamic in Chinese communities at the time, or as David Eng puts it, only elders/fathers wield the regimenting power of the phallus. (Cf. Eng 167-203)

own position is somewhat reminiscent of the subservient position of the black person in the South (and elsewhere in the States) which enabled every white person in turn to feel their superior and better (Eyerman 34). To these two historical tendencies Eng adds a third one, that of queering, which is especially visible in the circumscription of Asian Americans in the geographical and social enclaves and the effective prevention of family life since women were not allowed to emigrate (Eng 18; Okihiro 67-68). Going back to the stories of the six Asian American men from the beginning of the essay, racism in its various forms exacts a high psychological cost through "routine slander," which could be seen as constant abjection that culminates in the interiorization of racist attitudes as summed up by one of the participants, "I hate being Japanese".<sup>4</sup> It is also reflected in the "expediency", as a Chinese American lawyer put it, of losing one's ancestors' culture and language, in the film investigated under the headline of "cultural amputation," which recalls a specter of "racial castration" as evoked by Eng (2001).

In the 1980s, however, the cultural representations of Asian Americans had more to do with typically masculine values as exhibited in the capitalist economy, such as managerial prowess and an aggressive business sense. Still, warns Viet Thanh Nguyen, this time the problem resided in the fact that the conflation of Asian (especially Japanese) businessman with Asian Americans constructed them as excessively competitive (2000: 133), in other words, almost inhumanely greedy and profit-driven. Paradoxically, due to the perception of Asian men as fierce economic competitors during that decade, Asian American men were in turn construed as excessively aggressive, almost to the detriment of their humanity as shown by Sheng-mei Ma in the Vincent Chin murder case,

<sup>4</sup> The concept of abjection (partial, but systemic, exclusion and repudiation) is used in reference to Julia Kristeva's application of Freudian categories to the construction of some salient social spheres (for instance, religion). It is seen as being continuously engaged in founding and maintaining the boundaries of the civic society and the nation-state by defining some categories of objects or beings as undesirable, disposable and alien (cf. Kristeva 1-132). This model has found application in Asian American studies (cf. Eng, Chu).



where the issues of race, (national) economy and masculinity strongly intersected (2000: 76-92).

It is of course very infelicitous to claim that the "primal scene," a site of collective identity formation, is the same for, let us say, Maxine Hong Kingston's mythological-factual great-grandfather who cleared the land in Hawai'i, John Okada's rebellious and doubt-torn Ichiro, or for one of Dan Lee's modern-day Hamlet-like heroes.<sup>5</sup> Yet, some sort of obsessive reckoning has taken place affecting the two nodal points in the masculine self-identification; namely, the hypothetical but overbearing whiteness, on one hand, and, on the other, Orientalist stereotypes that, as shown by Ma (2000), emasculated and feminized Asian American male bodies or cast them as "whiter than white". On the example of two contemporary Asian American novels, *China Boy* (1991) and *Native Speaker* (1995), I will try to show the stages in the fashioning of Asian American masculinity, first as it surfaced prompted by the emergent Civil Rights model, and, subsequently, in a contemporary moment marked by tremendous fluidity, which calls for a new American social syntax (*Native Speaker*, 1996), different strategic positioning among ethnic/racial groups and redefinition, but by no means rescinding, of the civil rights contributions.

## 2

It is significant that the Civil Rights movement and its offshoots are centrally concerned with issues of citizenship. For African Americans, it will be coming into their own after the failed promises of the Reconstruction (cf. Eyerman 2001), whereas for Asian Americans and other minority groups these mark a concerted effort to effect a new definition of their social position that will be crucially tied to the concept of subject as citizen. As pointed out by Lowe, the period of the intensive redefinition of the concept of the American body politic is also inextricably tied to the comprehensive revamping of the immigration laws begun in 1965, which

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<sup>5</sup> The reference here is to the works by John Okada (*No-No Boy*, 1957), Maxine Hong Kingston (*China Men*, 1989) and Don Lee (*Yellow*, 2001).



for the first time provides a vocabulary for considering the immigrants from Asia as potential national subjects and citizens-to-be (7). Next, I would like to turn to the texts that on different levels, but addressing the above mentioned historical junctures, deal with the emergence of citizen subjects, and particularly so through an interaction between Asian American and African American characters, with side participation of other ethnic masculinities. The salient fact of these dialogues/conflicts is that they are played out in a manner of what Kosofsky Sedgwick terms "homosocial" bonding that curiously reflects desires and investments into the project of claiming American citizenship, and as such takes place among men.<sup>6</sup>

Gus Lee's 1991 novel *China Boy* dramatizes in a semi-autobiographical narrative his story of initiation into manhood, which for this aristocratic boy from northern China turns out to lead through the most unlikely of places, his predominantly San Francisco African American working-class neighbourhood. Lee thus intertwines in the novel three paramount knots of situating the subjects in the social machine, namely, race, class and gender (this last mostly as a minus sign in that the progressive attainment of "masculine" traits entails for the character a painful shedding of some gendered facets of his identity, here encoded not only as feminine and transmitted through the mother but also as non-Western, non-violent and therefore suspect moulds of Asian masculinity). For instance, his elders continuously point to the danger of damaging his karma if committing any violent actions against other life forms. Thus is the revered concept of non-violence set directly against the concept of "[s]treetfighting [which] was like menstruation for men" (CB 4, 3). In the gritty street world of the Panhandle neighbourhood, an ultimate Western frontier for its ethnic/racial pioneers, the masculinity is set up through the elaborate and unsettlingly violent forms of performance, especially so through street fights, and in a more accomplished form, through boxing and other "manly" sports as practiced at the local YMCA.

<sup>6</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick outlines the parameters of "social bonds between persons of the same sex," and shows how these correlate with "the gender system as a whole" indicating wider socio-historical and class arrangements (1-15).



Kai, a Chinese American boy at the onset of his process of socialization, cannot rely on the models in his ethnic community either promoted by his elders (most notably his uncle, a mother's cousin) or unsuccessfully embodied by his father (who is a defeated Chinese soldier). This "failure" points to a severely reduced role of tradition-hallowed masculine identity formation in Chinese American communities due to several adverse processes. They are observable first of all in the formidable historical forces that have shattered a traditional structure in the boy's family and wiped out social models available to his class, forcing them to seek refuge through series of displacements, first in India, later in the USA. Once they have settled in San Francisco, their makeshift status has to be enforced by the extant racial formations. American racial taxonomy, however, fails to find a place for varied subject formations of Asian American men and generally lumps them together as "Orientals"; an ominous appellation not the least because it signifies non-eligibility for citizenship status and thus posits a defective or lacking masculinity. Asian men are presumably emasculated, which effectively precludes the most logical and straightforward path of identity formation for the boy, that of modelling himself on his father. In addition, he finds himself at a very early age bereft of the "feminizing" influence of his mother (107), hence in need of finding other, more circuitous ways of affirming himself as a male subject. In the process of his Americanization and masculinization, Kai has to abject the traditional, old rules of Chinese culture which are invalidated not only by being placed in the context of a sterile community of old, wizened Chinese bachelors but also by his father, who embraces American military ethos. There is a sense here of the inefficacy of Chinese culture as such, of its lingering decay predicated on the loss of heroic, soldierly valour, which becomes even more obvious in the new American surroundings.

Viet Thanh Nguyen situates the process of the Asian American male identity formation through a strategic deployment of violence as a site for self-regeneration, thus evoking Richard Slotkin's model (137-38).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Slotkin strives to account for the overwhelming impact of violence in American history and culture by positing in his three-volume study a mythic scenario, which plays itself out in three stages, which he then follows from early Puritan to late twentieth-century USA. In the first phase, the separation ensues between the civilized, old-world norms and the individual; secondly, he regresses to a more primitive, natural state; thirdly, in a

Simultaneously, Nguyen articulates a presumed hierarchy of violence, such as relegates the ghetto violence (associated primarily with African American masculinity) to the bottom rung, whereas violence discharged in sports or in the military represents sanctioned "formative" practices for men in the white society (138). The circumscribed and controlled violence which is practiced and promoted at the YMCA serves a curiously mixed purpose for Kai and its other largely minority patrons. On one level it provides necessary survival skills for Kai and secures a channelling of his potentially disruptive emotions through socially condoned masculine rituals (boxing, martial arts). Also it engages the coaches, recruited from virtually all available minorities at the time, and their young charges in a doubly encoded exchange. One strain of the training routine seems to be a regulated encouragement of aggressive impulses and violent reactions as corollaries to American masculinity. The wider framework is offered by the looming presence of the Korean War as a large scale and government sponsored discharge of violence.

The underside of the process, however, turns out to be such a management of violence that will keep it restricted and safely relegated to the geographic enclaves of the ghetto/inner city, where it will play itself out in the forms of interethnic violence. Ironically and unwittingly, Kai's coaches, themselves awesome examples of ethnic masculinities and highly proficient in the strategic use of violence become accomplices in larger social processes when inculcating into their pupils the received models of violent behaviour. Also, Asian Americans among them show to what extent the "abjection" paradigm has to be adopted in order to fashion Asian subjects into proper (Asian) American citizens.

Alongside the axis of white masculinity, the abjection is persistently played out in the pitting of male subjectivity against its female counterpart.

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violent conflict with the uncivilized other he regenerates himself in a bloody ritual, and conquers his "dark side". As shown by Slotkin, this strain runs through representative US cultural forms, be it early Indian captivity narratives or contemporary Westerns. It finds application also in the Cold War scenario and in its politics of containment enacted both on the new frontier abroad (particularly in Asia) or on the homefront (faced with "domestic" enemies, the marginalized and the deprived). Cf. Slotkin 1992: 347-660.

This strategy finds its poignant expression in what appears to be one of the turning episodes in the novel, which shows how in the racial hierarchy of the inner city, which in itself is partly a fringe form of mainstream social formations, but partly supports those same forces that marginalize it, a young Asian male occupies the lowest rung. I am referring to the episode in which a ten-year old African American girl bashes Kai so badly that a nearby Mexican American mechanic, Hector Pueblo (as one in a series of father substitutes for Kai), has to intervene, which ultimately leads to his taking charge of Kai and to Kai's enrollment into the YMCA as a beginning of his attainment of (racialized) American working-class boyhood. It is pertinently illustrative of wider social arrangements that it is in combat with female characters (African American assertive girls; Edna, Kai's archetypal evil white step-mother; domestic disciplining of African American wives, etc) that this masculinity performs itself. Eng repeatedly warns in his study of Asian American masculinity how the cultural-nationalist model comes into its own to the extent that it marginalizes the Other as homosexual and/or feminine, thus sanctioning the same process that is in the first place historically played out on Asian American men.<sup>8</sup>

In Kai's troubled navigation of conundrums contained by American multiethnic society it is particularly instructive to see different ethnic/racial masculinities embroiled in a common (homosocial) project of mediating Asian American masculinity's coming into being in the Cold War, patriarchal and racially divided America, even as these political and social priorities are beginning to be challenged.

<sup>8</sup> In order to underscore that masculinity is a relational category and not simply a biological fact, let me point to Don Lee's "Yellow," where an Asian American character wreaks emotional havoc on his white ("genteel") girlfriend and comes eerily close to self-annihilation both in physical and emotional sense due to his ultimately foiled desire to project his masculinity onto the white woman's body.

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*China Boy* has already preprogrammed us, by virtue of its introduction of various performances of ethnic masculinities, for the sense of absolute diversity that permeates Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* (1995). His young male Korean American protagonist, Henry Park, finds himself extricated from the most pressing concerns that assailed Kai, this thanks to his comfortable middle-class position. The underlying tenor of the Korean meteoric upward mobility (meteoric when we consider them as one of the most recent immigrant communities that arrived in the USA in significant numbers in the 1950s, in the wake of the Korean War and especially after 1965) is by now a well-rehearsed stereotype of the "model minority". As pointed out by Eng, there are two stereotypical moulds imposed upon the Asian American community in the USA: one is their apparent inassimilability (the sojourner thesis) and the other is their excessive assimilability ("whiter than white") translated as the "model minority thesis" (204, 259 n). In the sense that the society constructs them as exceptionally adept at "speaking" the language of the immigration pattern which predicts that hard work and self-reliance lead to success, it may be said that Koreans, and especially Henry's father, are the "native speakers".

Aside from asserting his middle-class position by moving to the elite New York City suburban area thanks to his father's entrepreneurship, Henry Park successfully negotiates his entrance into what Tim Engles refers to as "doxic whiteness", a set of social and cultural norms that "pass[es] unmarked" but "organizes both social relations and individual conceptions of identity" (1995: n. pag.), by way of marrying a white middle-class woman, Lelia. Such a marriage "contract," according to Patricia Chu, often signifies the "successful" closure of the Bildungsroman plot, which she defines as a "search for a partner that would americanize the hero" (19). However, in view of the fact that the novel opens with the collapse of such "assimilationist" strategy, as seen in the breakup of Henry's marriage, it is desirable to see the novel as engaging other forms of identity formation for its protagonist. It is also possible to read the novel against the backdrop of fairly recent and dramatic scenes of

conflict involving two minorities in the American cities, namely Korean and African Americans.<sup>9</sup> The first set of events relates to the boycott of some Korean businesses in African American neighbourhoods, while the novel also glosses over the implications of the LA upheaval for the future panethnic coalitions. Lee both engages the sinister aspect of the ethnic/racial roster in American society based on the way the subjects are interpellated as members in the racial stratification and tries to transcend its constricting models.

A poignant example of the crucial moment of American society constructing its (racial) Others is given in the documentary *Sa-I-Gu* (April 29), an independent production that gives voice to the Korean American women shop-owners many of whom suffered economic and emotional damage during the inner city Los Angeles upheavals in 1992. (Although the documentary primarily gives space to women, there is no question that they are meant to stand as representatives of the traumatic experience that struck the community as a whole.) Although the Koreans have been settling in Los Angeles for the past 20 years, still they have never articulated their position in their non-white neighbourhoods. In fact, the events during the unrest showed the precariousness of their (even geographical) position, "...Koreatown, whose very location – between the black South Central area and Hollywood – signifies the 'middleman minority' and 'buffer' roles played by Korean merchants" (Omi and Winant 1993: 105). However, the film made clear that they considered themselves US citizens, as such entitled to police and National Guard protection during the events that erupted immediately after the Rodney King trial and for several days raged in Los Angeles Koreatown and nearby areas (Cho 1993: 201-2).

Denied government protection and left without government reparation, as articulated in the film, Korean Americans became extremely

<sup>9</sup> For the LA upheaval a collection of essays edited by Gooding-Williams provides a good source of information and offers astute analyses. Some articles engage also the earlier New York boycott (Cho). See also Fong 173-187; Wu 29-36, 67-77. Jennifer Lee addresses the post-crisis management of interracial affairs in her socio-ethnographic study (2002).

self-conscious as regards their position in the American socio-political system. Amazingly, this ritual of blood and fire, whose implications go well beyond Black/Korean conflict, prompted them to question their assumptions about the system of racial othering that they were subjected to and in their own turn applied to others, made them realize the unspoken racist assumptions underlying American institutions and gave them a voice, angry but resolute to air their grievances.

Describing a process of coming into self-awareness as a racialized subject, that could in the context of the LA events be applied to most Korean Americans, one of the women recalls the initial moments of the rioting. Like most shop-owners she had a very slight knowledge of Rodney King and the subsequent trial, just as she, along with other Korean Americans, had no knowledge of her subject position in the social machine. This is not to claim that it is necessarily through the agency of a tremendously violent social upheaval that ethnic minorities attain self-awareness but, according to Elaine Kim, it points to the interactions along the axis of race and class that in contemporary US still serve as engines of both destructive and constructive ethnic emergence (1993: 219).

It is a tragic occurrence that makes the birth of the collective self so painful. The awful violence marked what could be termed the Korean American "primal scene," that traumatic moment in which one's identity comes into being. As one of the women interviewed in the film poignantly put it, Korean immigrants so far cast as "sacrificial lambs" have begun to denounce their instrumentalization in the larger conflict caused by racial and social inequity in the USA. In the process they are becoming more conscious of the thus so-far unarticulated ethnic identification, that previously was subsumed under the false sign of "whiteness," usually coated over with terms of economic success and mobility. In one of the peaceful rallies in the wake of rampage, looting and arson, a Korean American carries a placard which reads, "Justice for all people of color," thus signifying a potential for the empowering self-definition that cuts across race and ethnic divides, but is critically positioned against the normative "whiteness".

*Native Speaker* points to the inherent difficulties encountered on the way of peaceful negotiations of identity positions, as acknowledged among

others by Ma: "Any construction of identity requires a reconfiguration, sometimes rather violently, of one's psyche and history" (2000: xi). Henry warily integrates moments conducive to his potential primal scene, exemplified especially through his interactions with John Kwang. The rise and fall of this Korean immigrant success-story businessman-turned-politician is exemplary and somewhat comparable to the identity formation observable in the LA events. Kwang's constituency is an ethnic beehive in one of New York City's boroughs, where Kwang with remarkable success manages to weave an interethnic coalition, a strategy exemplified also by varied backgrounds of his campaign staff. He also reaches out towards the disaffected African American community locked in a bitter feud with Korean American merchants and shop-owners. Thus is the shop-owners' position correspondent to what commentators call a "middleman minority" status, foregrounding the racial middle-ground that Asian American allegedly occupy in American social and racial hierarchies (Okhiro xi, 52-53; Omi and Winant 105; Fung 179; Lee 2002). Kwang is, to borrow a term, "masquerading" his ethnicity (Ma xv); indeed, his whole project of running for New York City mayor is predicated on marketing his image as a carefully balanced mix of his immigrant and his American self. Lee clearly engages the insidious clutch that media generated images exert upon politics and, also, the extent to which the enactment of ethnicity in the public arena may be a far cry from the building up of an authentic ethnic identity.

Kwang's public self (in his subsequent demise shown to be virtually inextricable from his private [ethnic] self) is dangerously premised on the concept of performing an ethnic identity that will conform with rather solidified Orientalist imaginary, as laid out in Shang-mei Ma's study of some of its long-standing premises. At the point when Kwang seriously threatens to demolish that framework, in which even his PR officer is constantly putting him, most dramatically with his coalition building with African Americans and with his financial funds administered to all people in need (rather than just ethnic Koreans), the Orientalist paradigm is reinforced, ironically through the agency of a Latino American volunteer and in the final scenes we witness an extraordinary reduction of Kwang to a defeated immigrant. In other words, we have witnessed a supreme failure

of an Asian American subject to claim, from his root identity position (as a racialized subject), a place in the American power system, from where he might be able to affect a cultural and social redefinition of his position. In that sense, even though Kwang seems to be an accomplished "speaker," he is still an outsider, an inassimilable other. What I find unsettlingly correct in such a scenario is Lee's astute observation that the creation of the "panminority identity" as a powerful countermodel to the prevalent colour-blind, but in reality white, model will not be possible as long as the dominant policy is in place, that is, as long as the minority members themselves fail to acknowledge the degree to which they are co-opted to serve as spies and agents of the dominant, sophisticated, high-tech model of managing ethnicity.

It is interesting to view Lee's foray into a troubled American multiethnic scene against the background of the instrumentalization of the so-called Black/Korean conflict. Careful readings of the upheaval analyses and close viewing of some video and TV footage from the LA upheaval show that media constructions are carefully and pointedly generating and multiplying images that will fit in with the stereotypical expectations. Within this frame, Koreans are cast as self-centered and insensitively profit-minded; African Americans figure as little more than a looting and unruly mob; Latinos are for the most part unaccounted for in the media reconstruction of the events, precisely because they break down the Black/Korean conflict paradigm (Cho 205-7), which leaves us with "whites" — also largely absent from the account, which, according to Kim, serves to reinforce the hidden but controlling mechanism of the whiteness discourse (1993: 217).

Henry tries to pass as a "native speaker" all the time but in the process of carefully articulating the sounds of English, he forsakes the ability to engage the silences, gestures and motions that are outside of the purview of the dominant discourse of the assumed white middle-class ideal. It takes him a long time to drop through his sessions with the Filipino therapist (*NS 21*) and learning from Kwang's demise the (racial) reflexes underlying his spying job, an inscrutable and self-disciplined Asian as a perfect dissimulator (173). Henry's position is rather peculiar, since he neither identifies with his father nor with the other emphatically



fatherly figure, Kwang, the two Asian American men that don't display openly any signs of "racial castration". His father is rendered, however, as a stereotypically inhumane, business minded immigrant (47, 49, 54), while Kwang ultimately succumbs to the emasculating plot. Ironically, it is the nature of his despicable job and the maneuvers of his boss that force Henry to enter a range of fake panethnic coalitions with respect to other immigrants and Asian Americans. In a move that echoes the plaint of the wounded Asian American masculinity – its (racial) castration – he turns to other (white) men to achieve his masculine identification under the aegis of the corporate sponsored "ethnic identity," which exists only as a virtual, symbolic, interchangeable mask that can be donned at will (17, 160). Still his "romance" with Kwang (139), echoing ethnic homosocial bonding as set in the incredible mix of contemporary urban America, ultimately gives Henry a redemptive potential to engage primarily his own racial identity and subsequently other positions, whose names are yet to be incorporated into the still defective social models at least until the moment when the white masculine position will cease to be considered a privileged model, hallowed by historical primacy in the United States nation formation.

In another example, that of the New York City boycotts of Korean owned establishments by their African American patrons, other petrifying constructions are employed, that of Koreans as a hard-working, self-reliant business community, the already mentioned "model minority" (also by implication, a silent, voiceless, "enduring" community) against a vociferous, trouble-making, vocal and inflammable African American community (J. Lee 158-162, 254). Says Chang-rae Lee in a bitterly ironical denunciation of the imposed and self-inflicted pigeonholing: "...we [Korean Americans] believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground" (NS 53). Ultimately, as shown by the Rodney King trial, confrontations can be triggered by an event that has no direct bearing upon the two communities in question but forcefully reflects the racialized stratification of the society form which no minority group is exempt. Novels like *Native Speaker*, films

like *Stolen Ground* and *Sa-I-Gu* try to find a way out of such an impasse but this requires a whole new vocabulary and, what is more, this calls for a serious overhauling of the system which right now apparently cannot abide the emergence of the long-term coalitions between structurally similarly positioned groups.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4

My attention—focused as it has been in this analysis on some structural *parallels* in the historically *distinct* experiences of US minorities—ideally should bring to the fore the racializing structures of long duration—whether viewed as the historically primordial “black”/“white” axis of racialization or more recently emerging multiracial/multiethnic model—that inform many institutional practices in the United States. It also has addressed the multifaceted responses that the Asian American minority, who shares with other minorities the position of a subaltern, racialized and othered social formation, adopts in order to actively challenge and engage those practices. Very often such challenge results in an unexpected coalition-building but also in potentially disruptive interethnic rifts. Hence, the texts mentioned here may contribute to a greater extent than the actual socio-political practice and the disciplinary practices of various ethnic studies to creating new models of participation in American society, such that might ultimately bring about a change in the received definitions of how one acts as an American citizen.

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<sup>10</sup> Most studies referenced here are keen to point out an occasional and pragmatic cooperation and strategy building which takes place among different ethnic/racial groups or even take pains to demonstrate the more than symbolic ties between them that go back a long way. Okiihiro (39-48) extends certain parallels between chattel slavery and coolie exploitation; cf. also the discussion of the draft refusal by some black nationalists during the Vietnam War (Deutsch 193), but Omi and Winant's study shows the structural incapacities of the present model of social formations to promulgate a long-term panminority union (1986).

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## "POVIJESTI KOJE BISMO SVI TREBALI ZNATI": AZIJSKO-AMERIČKI MUŠKI SUBJEKT IZ MEĐUETNIČKE PERSPEKTIVE

Etnički studiji, posebice dio koji se bavi tekstovima azijsko-američke tematike, zanima se za pitanja muškosti i građanskoga statusa kao i procesom asimilacije kroz utjecaj dominantnih, bjelačkih, modela muških uloga. U novijim tekstovima azijsko-američkih autora, od kojih se ovdje interpretiraju neki vidovi romana *China Boy* (1991) kinesko-američkog autora Gusa Leeja te *Native Speaker* (1995) korejsko-američkog pisca Chang-rae Leeja, taj se model homosocijalnih odnosa (ovdje preuzet od Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), pomiče od bjelačkog prema međuetničkom i polietničkom modelu, osobito kroz znakovite interakcije s afro-američkim likovima i kulturnim elementima. Time se komentira i upozorava na znakovite promjene u shvaćanju statusa etničkoga subjekta, imigranta i potencijalnog građanina u nekoliko faza koje slijede nakon razdoblja borbe za građanska prava, te se ocrtava novi model međuetničkih odnosa u suvremenom SAD-u.

*Key words:* Asian American, masculinity, interethnic, Gus Lee, Chang-rae Lee

*Ključne riječi:* azijski Amerikanci, muškost, međuetničko, Gus Lee, Chang-rae Lee

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