Eric Liu

The Accidental Asian

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

1.

The Asian American identity was born, as I was, roughly thirty years ago. In those three decades it has struggled to find relevance and a coherent voice. As I have. It has tried to adapt itself to the prevailing attitudes about race—namely, that one matters in this society, if one is colored, mainly to the extent that one claims a race for oneself. I, too, have tried to accommodate these forces. 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.

What I am saying is that I can identify with the Asian American identity. I understand why it does what it does. It is

as if this identity and I were twin siblings, separated at birth but endowed with uncanny foreknowledge of each other's motives. The problem is, I disagree with it often. I become frustrated by it, even disappointed. The feeling is mutual, I suspect. We react to the same world in very different ways.

And yes, I do think of this identity as something that reacts, something almost alive, in the way that a shadow, or a mirror image—or a conscience—is almost alive. It has, if not a will of its own, then at least a highly developed habit of asserting its existence. It is like a storm, a beautiful, swirling weather pattern that moves back and forth across my mind. It draws me in, it repulses me. I am ever aware of its presence. There is always part of me that believes I will find deliverance if I merge with this identity. Yet still I hold it at a remove. For I fear that in the middle of this swirl, this great human churn, lies emptiness.

2.

What must it be like to be told you are Asian American? Imagine that you are an immigrant, young, but old enough to get by, and you have been in America for only a few months. Imagine that you come from Korea. Imagine that you speak Korean, read Korean newspapers, eat Korean food. Imagine that you live in East Flushing or in South Central and you see only the Korean faces. There are other faces, yes, brown and black and yellow and white, but the ones you see, the ones you can read,

are Korean. Imagine that time passes, and you realize now that you see the other faces. Imagine that the order of life in this city, the invisible grid, has become visible to you. More than that, it has affected you. What was Korean before is not exactly Korean anymore: your speech is interspersed now with fragments of English, Spanish; your daily paper you must find at a crowded, strange-smelling newsstand, tucked among bundles of other scripts and shades of print; your strong, salty food, supplemented now by frosted cereal and cookies, you eat while quietly absorbed by a television program you cannot understand except in mime. Imagine that you are becoming a Korean American. Is that not shock enough? To know that what was once the noun is becoming the adjective? And so perhaps you retreat, you compensate, you remind yourself every night before you pray that you are Korean so that you and your Maker will not forget. But imagine that the forgetting is relentless. That more time passes, and a knock on the door of your apartment brings you face-to-face with a Japanese, and something deep inside you, a passing sneer or a cautionary tale, a history, twinges. And imagine that this Japanese begins speaking to you in English, the kind of English the television produces, and you understand perfectly what she is saying. Imagine that what she is saying is that she needs your help. That you are invited to a rally (or is it a party?). That we—you and this Japanese and so many unseen others—must stand together against a common foe. Imagine that what she is saying is that you are Asian American. What must it be like? What do

you think about when you close the door and walk to the window and realize, while peering out over a scene of so many unknowable lives but four knowable colors, how faint the aroma of your own kitchen has become, how strong the scent of the street?

3.

I find myself in a cavernous television studio, seated beside the anchorwoman. The cameras are on us, lights are burning overhead. I am nervous, although I shouldn't be: this is my job. I do commentary for a cable news network and I come to this studio often. This day, I have been called in as a "special guest" to discuss a recent and controversial cover of the *National Review* magazine depicting the president, vice president, and first lady in yellowface—that is, in stereotypical Oriental caricature. "The Manchurian Candidate," reads the cover text, referring, of course, to Bill Clinton and his role in the "Asian money" scandal that has been brewing since the 1996 election.

The news package leading up to my entrance describes the brouhaha that has arisen over the cover, and as the tape comes to a close a red light comes on, signaling that we are on the air. The anchor turns to me, her brow knit at the appropriate angle of concern: "What about this cover do you find offensive, Eric?"

Truth be told, I was not deeply offended when I first saw the cover. (My mother, in fact, was much angrier.) I mainly

thought it was juvenile, sophomoric. And I didn't think about it again until a few days later, when my producer waved it at me and asked for a reaction. I knew what answer he was looking for; what answer any self-respecting Asian would give.

"Well," I say, turning now to the camera, "these caricatures play off a long history of demeaning anti-Asian stereotypes—the buckteeth, the slanted eyes, the bamboo hat. They are racist in their effect." And on I go. I play, in other words, the Asian spokesman, ever vigilant against affronts to my race. The anchor nods understandingly as I speak.

Soon a staff writer from the *Review* joins the discussion via satellite. He, too, is Asian American, South Asian. "We didn't think this cover would be particularly controversial," I hear this other Asian say. "Normal people aren't offended by it."

Normal people? The more this other Asian talks, the more heated I become in my responses. At first I assume it's the adrenaline rush of verbal combat. But as he goes on mouthing his disingenuous party line—something like, "We would've used leprechauns if this scandal was about Irish money"—I become more than just irked, more than angry, until suddenly I realize that I am 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*.

"Somehow, we have gotten to the point where those who protest bias and insensitivity are *demonized* more than those who commit it!" I boom.

"I'm not demonizing you," the other Asian offers.

The segment ends shortly afterward, the red light goes off. An Asian American employee comes over to shake my hand. I feel pleased with myself, pumped up. But 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.

That's how it is with Asian American identity—nothing brings it out like other people's expectations and a sense of danger. Until recently, I rarely self-identified as "Asian American." I might say "Chinese American," if asked. Otherwise, pointedly, "American." But there are times when what you choose to call yourself becomes irrelevant. Ask Tiger Woods, whose insistence that he was "Cablinasian" didn't keep the media from blackening him, when he first arrived, into golf's Jackie Robinson. There are times when other people *need* to think of you as X, even if you believe you are Y. This was one of those times. I was in the studio to speak *as an Asian American.*

Of course, I was complicit in this casting; I chose to take the role. What was curious to me, however, is how I managed, if even for a moment, to lose myself in it. Here is where the sense of danger came into play. I may not have started out being terribly exercised about the perils of Yellow Peril stereotyping. But once I perceived the smarmy hypocrisy of this fel-

low—once I heard his intransigent insistence that the fault lay only with whiny, race-peddling Asians like me—I was chilled by the sense that maybe there *is* a danger out there. Maybe it *is* true, as I was then asserting on camera, that what separates insulting caricatures from more troubling forms of anti-Asian sentiment is only a slippery slope. At that moment I began to comprehend the most basic rationale for pan-Asian solidarity: self-defense.

I still understand that rationale, and many others. I understand, that is, why so many Americans of various ethnic origins have chosen, over the last generation, to adopt a one-size-fits-all "Asian American" identity. It is an affirming counterstatement to the narrative in which yellow people are either foreigners or footnotes. It is a bulwark against bigotry. It is, perhaps most important, a community. I can recount the ways, over the years, that I've become more Asian American myself. I've learned the appropriate cultural and political references. I've become familiar with the history. And of course, I've spoken out against Asian-bashing on national television.

Nevertheless, the fact remains: I am not an Asian American activist; I just play one on TV. Even though I have a grasp of why this identity matters, I cannot escape the feeling that it is contrived and, in a more profound way, unnecessary. In a way, I envy those who choose to become wholeheartedly Asian American: those who believe. At least they have a certain order to their existence. I, on the other hand, am an accidental

Asian. Someone who has stumbled onto a sense of race; who wonders now what to do with it.

4.

We are inventors, all. We assemble our selves from fragments of story.

Every identity is a social construction, a drawing of arbitrary lines. But are all identities *equally* arbitrary—and equally necessary? It's worthwhile to compare a racial identity like "Asian American" with what might be said to exist "within" it (ethnicity) and "around" it (nation).

An ethnic identity like "Chinese" matters because it is a medium of cultural continuity and meaning. "Chineseness," to be sure, is not an easy thing to delineate. It is a simplified marker for a complex reality. But the fact is that when I speak of my heritage—or when I speak of losing my heritage—I am referring to sounds and stories and customs that are *Chinese* American.

National identity, in the American case, is more problematic. It is far-flung and often contradictory. It is more reliant on myth and paradox than many other national identities. It is not, however, empty of meaning. 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. The syntheses that America generates are, for better and worse, what pushes humanity forward today.

Race matters, too, of course. The difference is, race matters mainly because race matters. It's undeniable, in other words, 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.

Don't get me wrong: it's not that I wish for a society without race. At bottom, I consider myself an identity libertarian. I wish for a society that treats race as an option, the way white people today are able to enjoy ethnicity as an option. As something cost-free, neutral, fluid. And yet I know that the tendency of race is usually to solidify: into clubs, into shields.

To a great degree, then, my misgivings about racial identity flow from a fear of ethnosclerosis: the hardening of the walls between the races. But perhaps my worries, like the pageants of difference that prompted them, belong to a time that is already passing. Perhaps over the horizon, beyond multiculturalism, awaits the cosmopolitan realm that David Hollinger calls "postethnic America." And perhaps there is no way to call forth this horizon but with the stories we have at hand.

5.

I have a friend from college who used to be a deracinated East Coast suburban ABC—someone, in other words, quite like me. When he moved to the West Coast for graduate school, though, he got religion. He was, for the first time, in a place where Asian Americans were not few and far between. He joined the Asian student union, began reading Asian American journals and literature anthologies, spent more and more of his days with Asian friends, entered into his first relationship with a girl who wasn't white (she was Japanese, to the vexation of his parents). Soon he was speaking to me in earnest about the importance of being Asian. And he seemed genuinely happy, at ease.

It's not hard to see why my friend became what I call a "born-again Asian." He had found fellowship and, with the fellowship, meaning. He had found a place where he would always fit in, always be recognized. He had found a way to fill a hole, the gnawing sense of heritage deficit that plagues many a second-generation banana. And the mortar he was using was not anything so ancient and musty as Chinese civilization; it was a new, synthetic, made-in-the-U.S.A. adhesive called "Asianness." For my friend, this was *exciting* as well as fulfilling.

My own conversion, if I can call it that, is far from complete. Having spent so much of my life up through college soft-pedaling my Asianness, I began afterward to realize how unnecessary that had been. I began, tentatively, to peel back

the topmost layers of my anti-race defenses. Did I have an epiphany? No; I think I simply started to grow up. I became old enough to shed the mask of perpetual racelessness; old enough, as well, to sense in myself a yearning for affinity, for *affiliation.* So I joined a couple of Asian American organizations, began going to their meetings and conventions. And I was welcome. Nobody questioned my authenticity, my standing. Mainly I encountered people quite like me: second-generation, mainstream, in search of something else. Soon I was conversant in the patois of "the community." Soon I was calling myself, without hesitation, "Asian American."

Don't give me too much credit, though. The truth is, I was mainly exploring the public, institutional, side of Asian America. The private side, the realm of close friendships formed through race, I have entered only lately. Perhaps the most you could say of me is that I am an assimilist in recovery: once in denial, now halfway up the twelve-step to full, self-actualized Asian Americanness. I am glad to have climbed this far and to have left behind some insecurities. I am not sure, however, how much farther I should go.

6.

Thirty-some years ago, there were no "Asian Americans." Not a single one. There were Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, and so on: a disparate lot who shared

only yellow-to-brown skin tones and the experience of bigotry that their pigmentation provoked. Though known to their countrymen, collectively, as "Orientals," and assumed to share common traits and cultures, they didn't think of themselves at all as a collective. It really wasn't until the upheavals of the late 1960s that some of them began to.

Stirred by the precedent of Black Power, a cadre of Asian student activists, mostly in California, performed an act of conceptual jujitsu: they would create a positive identity out of the unhappy fact that whites tend to lump all Asians together. Their first move was to throw off the "Oriental" label, which, to their thinking, was the cliché-ridden product of a colonial European gaze. They replaced it with "Yellow," and after protests from their darker-hued constituents, they replaced "Yellow" with "Asian American." In their campaign for semantic legitimacy, the ex-Orientals got an unlikely assist from bean-counting federal bureaucrats. Looking to make affirmative action programs easier to document, the Office of Management and Budget in 1973 christened the term *Asian and Pacific Islander* for use in government forms. In the eyes of the feds, all Asians now looked alike. But this was a *good* thing.

The greatest problem for "Asian America," at least initially, was that this place existed mostly in the arid realm of census figures. It was a statistical category more than a social reality. In the last few decades, though, Asian American activists, intellectuals, artists, and students have worked, with increasing success, to transform their label into a lifestyle and to create, by every means available, a truly pan-ethnic identity for their ten million members. They have begun to build a nation.

The scholar Benedict Anderson has aptly defined the nation as an "imagined community," a grouping that relies for cohesion on an intangible, exclusive sense of connection among its far-flung members. Sometimes a nation has a state to enforce its will, sometimes it does not. But it must *always* have a mythology, a quasi-official culture that is communicated to all who belong, wherever they may be.

The Asian American narrative is rooted deeply in threat. That is one of the main things polyglot Americans of Asian descent have had in common: the fear of being discriminated against simply on account of being, metaphorically if not genetically, Chinamen. It is no accident that an early defining skirmish for Asian American activists was the push for Asian American Studies programs at San Francisco State and Berkeley in 1968. For what these programs did, in part, was to record and transmit the history of mistreatment that so many immigrants from Asia had endured over the centuries. Today, in the same vein, one of the most powerful allegories in Asian American lore is the tale of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American beaten to death in 1982 by two laid-off white auto workers who took him to be Japanese. The Chin story tells of a lingering strain of vicious, indiscriminate racism that can erupt without warning.

Yet no race can live on threat alone. To sustain a racial identity, there must be more than other people's racism, more than a negation. There must also be an affirmative sensibility, an aesthetic that emerges through the fusing of arts and letters with politics. Benedict Anderson again, in *Imagined Communities*, points to vernacular "print-capitalism"—books, newspapers, pamphlets—as the driving force of an incipient national consciousness. On the contemporary scene, perhaps no periodical better epitomizes the emerging aesthetic than the New York–based bimonthly *A. Magazine: Inside Asian America*.

Founded eight years ago by a Harvard graduate and entrepreneurial dynamo named Jeff Yang, *A. Magazine* covers fashion, politics, film, books, and trends in a style one might call Multiculti Chic. To flip through the glossy pages of this publication is to be swept into a cosmopolitan, cutting-edge world where Asians *matter*. It is to enter a realm populated by Asian and Asian American luminaries: actors like Jackie Chan and Margaret Cho, athletes like Michael Chang and Kristi Yamaguchi. It is to see everyday spaces and objects—sporting events, television shows, workplaces, bookstores, boutiques—through the eyes of a well-educated, socially conscious, politically aware, media-savvy, left-of-center, twenty-to-thirty-something, second-generation Asian American. It is to create, and be created by, an Ideal Asian.

There is something fantastic about all this, and I mean that in every way. That the children of Chinese and Japanese

immigrants, or Korean and Japanese, or Indian and Pakistani, should so heedlessly disregard the animosities of their ancestors; that they should prove it possible to reinvent themselves as one community; that they should catalog their collective contributions to society so very sincerely: what can you say, really, but "Only in America"? There is an impressive, defiant ambition at work here: an assertion of ownership, a demand for respect. But there is also, on occasion, an under-oxygenated air of fantasy, a shimmering mirage of whitelessness and Asian self-sufficiency. A *dream*.

The dream of a nation-race called Asian America makes the most sense if you believe that the long-discredited "melting pot" was basically replaced by a "quintuple melting pot." This is the multicultural method at its core: liquefy the differences *within* racial groups, solidify those *among* them. It is a method that many self-proclaimed Asian Americans, with the most meliorative of intentions, have applied to their own lives. They have thrown the *chink* and the *jap* and the *gook* and the *flip* into the same great bubbling cauldron. Now they await the emergence of a new and superior being, the *Asian American*. They wish him into existence. And what's troubling about this, frankly, is precisely what's inspiring: that it is possible.

The invention of a race testifies not only to the power of the human imagination but also to its limits. There is something awesome about the coalescence of a sprawling conglomerate identity. There is something frustrating as well, the sense

that all this creativity and energy could have been harnessed to a greater end. For the challenge today is not only to announce the arrival of color. It is also to form combinations that lie beyond color. The creators of Asian America suggest that racial nationalism is the most meaningful way of claiming American life. I worry that it defers the greater task of confronting American life.

7.

Power. Race, in the guise of whiteness, has always been about power. Now, in the masks of color, it is also about countervailing power. To call yourself a minority today is not only to acknowledge that you are seen by whites as nonwhite. It can also be to choose, as a matter of vocation, to sustain the dichotomy.

Frank Wu, a law professor and correspondent for *AsianWeek*, once wrote a candid and elegant essay in which he confessed to becoming a Professional Asian American. "Much like someone who becomes famous for being famous," he wrote, "I am making a career out of my race." He is not alone, of course, in his career choice. Over the last twenty years, there has been a proliferation of pan-Asian associations, advocacy groups, and political lobbies. These groups offer their members connections, capital, standing, protection. They do important work on

behalf of those without a voice. Together, they represent the bureaucratization—the mechanization, really—of the race. The Professional Asian Americans who run these groups have learned well from their black and Hispanic counterparts that *if you build it, they will come:* if you construct the institutions that a "legitimate" race is supposed to have, then people will treat your race as legitimate.

One thing Professional Asian Americans are quick to point out is that they are not honorary whites. Fair enough: one would like to be able to do well in this country without being called white. And one should be able to address the fact that plenty of Asian Americans, unlike "real" whites, still pay a social penalty for their race. But something Professional Asian Americans sometimes overlook is that they are not honorary blacks either. African Americans created the template for minority politics in this country. That template, set in the heavy type of protest and opposition, is not always the best fit for Asian Americans. For Asian Americans haven't the moral purchase that blacks have upon our politics.

Asian Americans belong not to a race so much as to a confederation, a big yellow-and-brown tent that covers a panoply of interests. And while those interests converge usefully on some points—antidiscrimination, open immigration—they diverge on many others. This is a "community," after all, that consists of ten million people of a few dozen ethnicities, who have roots all across America and around the globe, whose

families have been here anywhere from less than a week to more than a century, whose political beliefs run the ideological gamut, who are welfare mothers and multimillionaires, soldiers and doctors, believers and pagans. It would take an act of selective deafness to hear, in this cacophony, a unitary voice.

Without a unitary voice, however, there can never be maximum leverage in the bargaining for benefits. There can be no singular purpose for the Professional Asian American, no stable niche in the marketplace of identities. It will grow ever harder to speak of "the race." So be it. What will remain is the incalculable diversity of a great and growing mass of humanity. And there, in the multitudes, will lie a very different kind of power.

8.

What maketh a race?

To people in China, the Chinese constitute a single race. Except, that is, for those Chinese who aren't Chinese; those who aren't of the dominant Han group, like the Miao or Yao or Zhuang or whatever. They belong to separate races.

To the Chinese, Indians are a single, and separate, race. But "Indian," to many Indians, is like "Asian American" to me: an artificial, monochrome label. The distinctions that matter in India are between Bengalis and Punjabis and Gujeratis and others.

To the Japanese, who certainly think of themselves as a race, the Chinese, Indians, and Koreans are all separate races. To the Koreans, the Filipinos are; to the Filipinos, the Vietnamese. And so on.

To the Anglos who founded the United States, the Irish who arrived in great waves in the early nineteenth century were a separate race. To the Germans who killed Jews in this century and the French who watched, the Jews were a separate race. To the blacks of America, the Anglos and the Irish and the Germans and French and the Jews have always ended up being part of the same, and separate, race.

To the judiciary system of the United States, Asian Indians were held to be: probably not white (1909), white (1910), white again (1913), not white (1917), white (1919 and 1920), not white (1923), still not white (1928), probably never again white (1939 and 1942).

To those who believe in race, the spaces in between are plugged tight with impurities: quadroons, octoroons, mulattoes, morenas, mutts, mongrels, half-castes, half-breeds, halfies, hapas.

To those who do not believe, there is only this faith: the mixed shall inherit the earth.

What maketh a race is not God but man. What maketh a race is only the sin of self-love.

9.

Last May, I received in the mail a calendar of events and exhibits "celebrating Asian Pacific American Heritage Month." Here is what it included: A Celebration of APA Women's Leadership into the Twenty-first Century. An APA Spring Benefit. An APA Scholarship Dinner. An APA Performance Series. An APA Writers' Reading. A Performance of Music in the Lives of APAs. An APA Heritage Festival. (The theme this year: "One Vision, One Mission, One Voice.")

When I read the calendar the first time, I took all the information at face value, noted a few events that sounded interesting. When I read it a second time, a question pressed its way through the hazy membrane of multiculturalism in my brain and presented itself starkly, even rudely: What the heck is an "APA"?

If "Asian Pacific American" is an overbroad generalization, then what is "APA" but a soulless distillation of an overbroad generalization? I know it's a typographical and linguistic convenience, like the "USA" in *USA Today*. But the truncation and abbreviation of *experience* that the label perpetrates reflects the truncation and abbreviation of *reasoning* that you'll find in the call for celebration.

I agree that in the form of a coalition—that is, as a set of political alliances among organized groups—the Asian American identity can be quite important. But it is not a coalition that I am being asked to celebrate. It is a *race*: a discrete entity

with "one vision, one mission, one voice." A race, which is supposed to be more primordial than any temporary, tactical alliance. A race, which apparently does not need justification for its existence but merely *is*. One celebrates the race as a matter of tradition, because it is there. Moreover, to celebrate the race is to nourish it, to sustain it. And that is precisely what gives me pause.

In a provocative book called *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, Daniel Harris describes the way that the longtime isolation of the gay community inspired an intensely creative and pointedly oppositional gay culture. Now that intolerance and ostracism are declining, Harris says, elements of that subculture are being coopted by the mainstream: assimilated. He laments this fact, because in his view, a real cultural legacy is disappearing. But he does not lament it so much that he wishes for a return to the kind of homophobia that had yielded the subculture in the first place. Gay culture is no longer so necessary, Harris reluctantly acknowledges, and this is a triumph as much as it is a tragedy.

The case of gay culture is relevant because it raises the big questions of identity politics: After discrimination subsides, is it still necessary for a minority group to keep the cultural wagons circled? Should walls that once existed to keep a minority group *out* now be maintained to keep them *in*? Should a prison of identity be converted, upon liberation, into a home? It seems that many who cheer Asian Pacific American Heritage Month are saying "yes" to these questions.

I don't mean to suggest that Asian Americans are able to live bigotry-free lives today, or that most Asian American activists are cultural segregationists, or that the gay community provides a perfect parallel to the Asian community. What I am saying, simply, is that more than ever before, Asian Americans are only as isolated as they want to be. They—we—do not face the levels of discrimination and hatred that *demand* an enclave mentality, particularly among the second generation, which, after all, provides most of the leadership for the nation-race. The choice to invent and sustain a pan-Asian identity is just that: a choice, not an imperative.

When you think about it, though, this choice seems almost like a reflex, a compensatory reaction to a derogatory action. What troubles me about becoming Asian American is not that it entails associating with a certain kind of person who, in some respects, is like me. What troubles me is associating with a certain kind of person whose similarity to me is defined on the primary basis of pigmentation, hair color, eye shape, and so forth. On the basis, that is, of the very badge that was once the source of stigma. This progression is natural, perhaps even necessary. But it lends a fragile quality to calls for "Asian American pride." For what is such pride, in this light, but shame turned upside down?

There are, of course, many ways to be Asian American: single-mindedly, offhandedly, out of conviction, out of convention. Racial identity needn't be an all-or-none proposition. But the more I have had occasion to let out my "inner Asian,"

the more I have felt a tinge of insincerity. For it is as if I were applying a salve to a wound I am not even sure I have, nursing a memory of exclusion and second-class treatment that people who look like me are presumed to suffer. Is this memory of wounds, this wounded memory, really mine? Is there anything more to my "APA-ness"?

10.

What's missing from Asian American culture is culture.

The idea seems absurd at first. No Asian American culture? What about Zen Buddhism, feng shui, karaoke bars? Well, yes. The problem, though, is that these and other forms of culture inherited by Asian Americans are *ethnic* in origin. The folkways are Chinese, for example, not "Asian." The holidays are Vietnamese, the language Korean, the dress Japanese. As far as an organically *pan-Asian* culture is concerned, there isn't much there. As one Asian American activist once said tellingly, "I think Asian American culture is anything that Asian Americans are doing. Just that."

Does the same logic apply to "Asian American history"? There is something undeniably powerful about a work like *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki's synoptic history of Asian Americans. Chinese laborers built the railroads and challenged discriminatory laws, Japanese Americans fought for principle and for country in World War II. More peo-

ple should know about these and other legacies. But herding such facts under the heading of "Asian American history" feels faintly like anachronism. In a subtle way, it ascribes to distinct ethnic communities of the past the pan-ethnic mind-set of the present. It serves to create collective memory *retroactively*.

Collective memory, like individual memory, can of course be constructed after the fact. But it has greater force in the world when it derives from a past of collective action and shared experience. And that is something that Asian Americans—*as* Asian Americans—have had for only two or three decades. That's why, compared with the black or Jewish or even Latino identity, the Asian American identity seems so awfully incoherent. 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.

It is more meaningful, I think, to celebrate Korean or Vietnamese or Chinese heritage—something with an identifiable cultural core. Something deeper than a mere label. Ultimately, though, my objection is not only to the APA label; it is to the labeling mind itself. The hunger for ethnic heritage is a hunger for classification, for the nostalgic certainty of place. "Heritage" offers us a usable past, coded easily by color. It does

not tell us enough about how we—we of every color—should fashion a workable future.

Let me admit: When I read accounts of growing up Nisei in the middle of the century, when I read short stories by Indian immigrants about the struggle of life here, or when I read poems by the children of those immigrants, poems of loss and discovery, I feel connected to something. I find it easy to see in these characters and to hear in their diction the faces and voices of my own family. The scents, textures, and rhythms of my childhood come speeding into vibrant immediacy. This, the knowledge of cross-cultural connection, the possibility of pan-Asian empathy, is something to be valued.

But why, in the end, should empathy be skin-deep? Experiences like migration, generational conflict, language barriers, and ostracism are not the sole province of Asians or any other "race." I admire many Asian American writers who deal in such themes. I cannot get enough of Chang-Rae Lee's work. I quite enjoy Gish Jen. I find David Mura and Shawn Wong powerful. But at the same time, some of the most resonant scenes of youthful acculturation I ever read were to be found in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. Or *Colored People*, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Or Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*. Or Norman Podhoretz's *Making It*.

I define my identity, then, in the simplest way possible: according to those with whom I identify. And I identify with whoever moves me.

11.

No identity is stable in today's wild, recombinant mix of culture, blood, and ideas. Things fall apart; they make themselves anew. Every race carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.

Today, close to 50 percent of Asian Americans under thirty-five are marrying non-Asians, which promises rather quickly to change the meaning of the race. At the same time, growing numbers are reconstituting themselves into subcommunities of ethnicity, spurred by the Indian, Filipino, Korean, and other "Asian" Americans who have at times felt like extras in this Chinese- and Japanese-dominated show. Meanwhile, mass immigration has made for an Asian American population that is now two-thirds foreign-born, and among many recent arrivals, a pan-Asian identity seems uncomfortable and unnecessary. Finally, the accelerating whirl of global capitalism now means that the most noteworthy kind of Asian American culture may be Asian/American culture: fads and fashions that arrive directly from Asia; things you don't have to be Asian American to enjoy or to claim.

To put it simply: the Asian American identity as we now know it may not last another generation. Which makes doubters like me grow more doubtful—and more hopeful. There was something about the creation of this race, after all, that embodied the spirit of the times: compensatory, reactive, consumed

with what Charles Taylor calls "the politics of recognition." There is something now about the mutation of the race that reflects a change in that spirit. 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. And in this way, the future of the race may reflect the future of race itself. A future beyond recognition.

12.

I am speaking now to a group of students, mostly freshmen and sophomores, at a small midwestern college. It is Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, and the students are members of the Asian Student Association. I have come to implore them to get more involved in politics, in public life.

College is supposed to be where Americans of Asian descent become Asian Americans, where the consciousness is awakened. But not this college. The students, improbably, are looking to me for guidance. Though they haven't said it in so many words, they want to know why it is they gather. They want to know what it is, besides the fact that there are so few of them on this white prairie campus, that should bring and

hold them together; what, besides great potluck dinners, there is for them to *do*.

I am tempted for a moment to preach the gospel of The Individual, of the "unencumbered self" who has transcended such trivialities as race. I consider telling them that the Asian American identity is a leaky raft and that they had better learn to swim. But I don't have the heart to say any of this. For I, too, am of two minds. Instead, I tell them they should search for meaning as Asian Americans, if they so choose, or as whatever variety of self they feel free to express. So long as they feel free.

Afterward, I join a few students for dinner at a local Japanese restaurant. It is a nice place, spare and serene. We order, and then the oldest among them thanks me formally for coming to their school. For a few minutes, their attention is focused on me; they ask questions about my work, my opinions. Pretty soon, though, they're just talking to one another, in two or three different conversations, laughing, telling tales, flirting. That's all right with me. I am a stranger to them, after all, an outsider who doesn't know their stories. I am here by accident. And so I sit back, quietly, as they share their meal.

The Chinatown Idea

There is a map. In a book I am reading about Chinatown there is a map of lower Manhattan that marks off those precincts where the "proportion of Chinese" is 46 percent or more. It is tidy, this grid of black and white rectangles, a demographer's false imposition of order. And yet it is also perfectly apt. For this is how we know Chinatown, how we prefer to discover it: as a series of shaded cantons, discrete and contained. This map will never attest to the flesh and mortar of the streets; it cannot tell the history of those ancient tenements where the Fuzhounese are sedimented atop the Cantonese atop the Puerto Ricans atop the blacks atop the Jews. It reveals nothing about the ragged topography of private lives. But what it does chart with sad precision is the mentality, the love of clean boundary, that makes Chinatown so sadly sovereign. It is, in the end, a map of our own partitioned soul.