



# The Retractability of American Identity from Chinese Americans:

## A Function of Geopolitical Crises

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### Abstract

My essay critically examines how geopolitical crises can set off sectarian tensions and the punishing of ethnic/racial minorities by the dominant ethnic/racial group. I make operative the term ‘ethnocracy,’ defined by Rodolfo Stavenhagen as the dominant ethnic or racial group in control of cultural and material resources in society, to explain how Chinese Americans have been punished locally if geopolitical crises surface. I show how other historical precedents have affected groups like Arab Americans, especially after the September 11, 2001 attacks. My essay notes how an increasingly powerful China might not bode well for Chinese Americans. Moreover, my essay illuminates how a retraction of American identity has historically befallen many minorities engaged with the American experience, a process that suggests how American democracy is frequently intermittent and segmented, and thus of low quality, failing to create a shared humanity that can be unequivocally ‘American.’

**Key Words:** Chinese Americans, nativism, ethnocracy, identity, multiethnic, Arab Americans

My exploratory paper considers a real concern about how geopolitically demonizing China might be transplanted to Chinese Americans, a process which I argue is patiently underway in America’s foreign policy discourse. Should an acute geopolitical crisis between China and the United States take place, the

Chinese American diaspora will be targeted by those who harbor Sinophobic sentiments, with punishment meted out to this community regardless of individuals’ degree of assimilation. This critical essay, then, should be taken as a cautionary tale for Chinese immigrants to the United States so that they realize how the minority American experience can be intimately linked to foreign policy and realpolitik events tied to their geographical womb.

Currently, the geopolitical narrative on China is one that is rendered from a *realpolitik* US foreign-policy view, one that has inspired a reactive stance against the purported Sinofication of the entire Far East and, if one were to believe the Sinophobes, the world. The US polity is enabling another iteration of the Cold War to surface, resurrecting a Huntington ‘East vs. West’ ideology for the 21st century. This can already be seen in an atavistic Cold War scenario involving US-Russian relations over Crimea. A *casus belli* is required for the Pacific as Beijing exerts its claims in the South China Sea. But until the *casus belli* erupts, Washington and its regime change junkies, along with its military industrial complex that former President Eisenhower warned us about, will continue to have lucrative deals surface between itself and Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam to name but a few countries.

Simplistic binaries aside, however, China—rendered a diabolical trope of the East—is already an emergent superpower, at the very least a regional power. Although China and the United States are syn-

chronizing their globalization dynamics, with “interlocking financial and manufacturing arrangements,” the fact remains that China is an economic competitor to the United States (Kwong and Chen 2010:10). What will happen if the economic dimension is trumped by a political crisis remains to be seen. As such, Chinese Americans’ historical experiences in the United States are inextricably tied to relations between the two states.

The aim of this paper is to remind readers that the Chinese Americans are still in the process of politically and existentially ‘becoming,’ and that their American experience will always contain the contradiction of being viewed as perpetual foreigners, even long after they have become scions of first generation immigrants from the frontier expansion wave (1820-1870), the industrialization wave (1880-1925), or the continuation of the globalization wave (1965-present) (Fu and Hatfield 2008; Kritz and Gurak 2004; Fareley and Haaga 2001). The Chinese American identity continues to be rendered more culturally complex by the continuity of Chinese migration to the United States over time, creating new first generation communities every generation. The continuing immigration to the United States may further the disjuncture within the ilk as second generation Chinese Americans with mastery of English coexist with new arrivals that may reinforce a ‘perpetual foreigner’ status, a status that has been used to condemn other phenotypically Far Eastern Asian American groups as well (Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodia, and Hmong, to name but a few) (ibid.; see also Masuoka 2010).

The Chinese exodus to the United States has taken place for over 170 years. The first arrivals landing on the shores of the western United States by the 1840s came for gold and to serve as workers on the transcontinental railroad, even before many eastern and southern European groups (Italians and eastern European Jews, for example) arrived to America’s east coast (Kwong and Chen 2010). Initially embarking on their exodus from China’s Guangdong province, provincial and linguistic diversity of the Chinese ilk since the 1840s have come from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and by the mid 1960s—with the relaxation of immigration

through the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965—from the Chinese diaspora of Southeast Asia dispersed across Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. These diasporas included many Chinese who had never set foot in their geographical womb of China. Indeed, after the Vietnam War many ‘boat people’ were diasporic Chinese from Vietnam (while the author was born in Laos and raised in Thailand prior to emigrating to the United States). While immigration to the US during the 1800s to the *fin-de-siècle* period entailed primarily industrial workers who were unable to bring their wives, due to the US government’s desire for male Chinese worker to remain only temporarily on American shores, the post 1965 generation included wealthier entrepreneurs, scientists, technocrats, and engineers, as well as their families.

Since the US resumed diplomatic ties with China in 1979, the vast majority of Chinese immigrants hail from China, with 60% coming from the mainland. Today 63% remain foreign born, yet their worlds may be inextricably tied to those Chinese American scions, many of whom do not culturally associate with the motherland, do not speak the various dialects, and remain illiterate with the Chinese script (Kwong and Chen 2010:16). There are 3.5 million Chinese Americans today in the United States. The potential for an acute political crisis to occur between China and the United States thus behooves us to address how geopolitical dynamics will trickle down to Chinese Americans. My manuscript attempts to fulfill this task by employing a crisis chronology of the United States to make a point of entry into America’s history. With a crisis chronology, one begins to see a particular ethnic/racial group punished during times of social crisis. Their American identity is retracted away from them by domestic policies and/or communal violence, and by the interests of what sociologist Rodolfo Stavenhagen (1986,1996) terms as the *ethnocracy*, the ethnic/racial group that controls social capital and political power in multiethnic or multi-racial states. Every multi-racial or ethnically diverse state has an ethnocracy. The question is whether it is benevolent, diffused toward a shared humanity with fellow citizens, or dysfunctional.

The staying and reproducing power of the ethnocracy, alternatively articulated by Stavenhagen (1996:197) as the ethnic/racial group that “attempts to impose its own particular... interests on the whole of...national society,” can also be made operative for analyzing how it enacts punitive actions against ethnic minorities. In the process, *nativisms* (Higham 1963), that is, anti-immigrant sentiments actions are enabled by the ethnocratic state that “acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic community in terms of ideologies, its policies and its resource distribution” (Brown 1994:36). Stavenhagen employed the term on a global scale under the auspices of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and was able to make visible consistent patterns of ethnocratic injustices in numerous multicultural states he visited for research purposes.

My essay thus conveys to readers the need to consider how an acute political crisis between China and the United States, may mean a retractability of American identity from Chinese Americans as well. There are many precedents that span the long chronology of the American experience. Indeed, this has already happened during the early 1980s when the growing Japanese economy was causing concern for American workers: anti-Japanese sentiments in the lackluster American auto-industry resulted in the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, in Detroit, Michigan. Perceived by one of the murderers as being Japanese, Ronald Ebens decried before the assault, “It’s because of you [expletive]...that we’re out of work!” Ronald and his stepson, Michael Nitz, later bludgeoned Chin to death with a baseball bat. Ebens and Nitz never served any prison time.

The task I have set forth in this essay should not be viewed as subversive, however. Fully aware of my positionality as a Thai-Chinese American, my critique should only be seen as a means to test the incessant sloganeering of the United States as a beacon of democracy. My ideas aim to scrutinize the validity of American democracy, which, as will be seen in this essay, has always been intermittent and segmented, and, in many instances, of exceptionally low quality. If the United States espouses democracy, then it behooves the polity and its proponents to realize that a

healthy democratic society is one that must allow its citizens to engage in self-constructive criticism of the system at hand: women acquired the right to vote while African Americans and fellows supporters brought down Jim Crow in this manner. Democracy then, should never be identified simply by the act of electing political leaders since, as noted in an important 2006 *Foreign Policy* article on failed states, voting “might give voice to the disenfranchised, but they don’t necessarily translate to good governance.” (‘Failed States Index’, *Foreign Policy* 2006:50).

This manuscript will also explore the history of the ethnocracy’s retractability of American identity from minorities in America. The process of such a retraction will be used as a heuristic device to gaze into the chronology of America’s crisis catalysts that set into motion the retractions themselves. I hope to demonstrate that because of these consistent patterns of identity retraction during times of American political crisis, the foundations for the same retractability of American identity from Chinese Americans—communal, legal, or both—may surface again in the near future (Fong 2008).

### **Ethnocratic Retraction of American Identity and Atavisms of Nativisms**

In the immediate aftermath of September 11—an event that unequivocally haunts every American that was mature enough understand its existential, political, and nationalist implications—notions of who constituted being an “American” fell into disarray since the hegemonic construction of “nation” has to attend to patriotic, aesthetic, and contradictory sentiments about what it means to be an American. Such contradictions saw sentiments that would be channeled for geopolitical justice serve the domestic emergence of hate crimes directed against those that fit the phenotypical imagination of what an “Arab” or a “Middle Easterner” might look like. Indeed, there was an increase in hate crimes in the United States directed against male Sikhs—who are neither Arabic nor Muslim—due to their wearing of turbans. One victim, a forty-nine year old Sikh by the name of Balbir Singh Sodhi, was shot to death on September 15,

2001 in Mesa, Arizona, by Frank Silva Roque.

On Saturday morning, Balbir Sodhi went to Costco where he had been named Businessman of the Year. Costco had sold out their American flags. While there, Sodhi spotted a Red Cross Fund for victims of September 11 and donated around \$75, all the money he had in his pocket at the time. Then he went back to the gas station because the landscapers were coming. Sodhi was beautifying the spot with flowers and a lawn. The landscapers spent most of the morning working on the area around the station. They called Sodhi out to take a look at their work.

Frank Silva Roque, 42, who worked for Boeing's helicopter division and had recently moved to Mesa from Alabama, drove up to the gas station in his pickup truck. Instead of stopping at one of the pumps, he drove straight up to Balbir Sodhi and shot him with a .380 calibre firearm. Three rounds hit him in the back. When police arrived at Roque's mobile home he yelled, "I'm an American patriot, arrest me and let the terrorist go wild." (Thavil and Singh 2003)

Before the police arrested Roque, he had already shot at a Lebanese clerk and riddled an Afghani family's home with bullets. In the following days, Frank Sesno, Washington Bureau Chief for CNN reported:

SESNO: It is an ugly, yet sadly predictable undercurrent following last week's terror and destruction [Images of rowdy teen with flag screaming]—expressions of hate directed against Arab Americans: a mosque in Cleveland rammed by a car [Images of car being towed out of damaged mosque], an Iraqi pizzeria in Massachusetts torched [Images of worker, perhaps owner, cleaning up]... One watchdog group has catalogued more than two hundred incidents so far. The FBI is looking into more than fifty specific complaints. [Muslim woman speaks]: "There have been some women who have been attacked and many of my family members and friends have advised me to change the way I dress." (Sesno 2001)

NBC reported:

There's outright fear in the Arab community. Another mosque in Washington was attacked today. In Detroit, an Arab American newspaper is getting hundreds of hate calls: [actual voicemail message is played] "I hope every Arab-born dies, slimy piece of &#\$@ race." In suburban Chicago police broke up an angry mob of three hundred outside a mosque (MSNBC 2001, September 22). (MSNBC 2001)

Yet in this period of post-September 11 America, where certain articulations of collective pain was violently fused with nationalist anger, a sector of American civil society surprisingly emerged to produce what is, on the surface, a visual anthem celebrating America's multicultural diversity: The Ad Council produced the well-intentioned "I'm an American" public service announcement (PSA) that aired ten days after September 11, for duration of three to four months. The vast majority of Americans have seen iterations of this PSA on television, where individuals in different settings proclaim they are "American" while a warm fiddle melody nurtures a folkloric and elegiac mood to invoke a sense of sensitivity, sense of togetherness (Ad Council 2004). The individuals in the ad were mostly American minorities, that is, phenotypically non-Whites, with a few personalities proclaiming their "Americanness" with a heavy foreign accent.

According to ad executives and Roy Spence, President of the Texas-based ad agency GSD&M that designed the PSA for the Ad Council, it was "the most important work we have ever done" (Ad Council 2004b:28). The Ad Council noted in its 2004 report "Public Service Advertising that Changed a Nation," how "photographers filmed scores of Americans of every background and age imaginable in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Reno, Dallas, Austin, and Raleigh. By the time the spots were completed, over 100 people had donated their time and talents" (Ad Council 2004b:28). After the PSA aired, Judy Trabulsi, one of the co-founders of GSD&M noted, "I would say the campaign received easily over 500 emails. Maybe it's closer to 1,000. It's just totally amazing that almost three years later, there is still so much interest in a spot that ran for maybe three or four months in 2001" (Ad Council 2004b:28). Ad Council President and CEO Peggy Conlon noted: "It was a tremendous collaborative effort that shows how quickly the ad industry can respond when it is needed most... The unprecedented volunteer effort by the advertising industry was our gift to America" (Ad Council 2004b:29).

The Ad Council and GSD&M still celebrate that teachers, human resources executives all covet copies



of the ad so as to “incorporate it into diversity training” as well as for “everyday Americans who want it for inspiration” (Ad Council 2004b:29). Therefore, following September 11, we have two contradictory trajectories in how nation-construction occurred in the United States: (1) racist backlash was meted out to ethnic minorities of the United States by the ethnocracy, especially if they phenotypically appeared Middle Eastern—with the former group engaged in the extrajudicial punishment of the latter (Stavenghagen 1986, 1996; Brown 1994) (2) the ethnocracy’s attempt to convince all Americans and American minorities (as in the Ad Council’s “I’m an American” PSA) that the latter’s citizenship status and legitimacy are indeed sound because they really do belong to the multicultural tapestry that comprises the people of the United States.

There are some important implications that can be drawn from these dynamics: although the aforementioned trajectories appear diametrically opposed (that is, at the level of lived experience is the racist backlash directed against Americans who phenotypically appeared Middle Eastern, and at the level of political and cultural discourse, the desire to generate unity), in reality the cultural implication is the same: they are both, in fact, derivative of how “American” is still constructed along a Eurocentric theme and therefore, the American identity is *retractable* from its ethnic minorities during times of crisis.

The retractability of American identity during times of crisis is an important and anomalous socio-cultural feature that will be made visible because it points to the inherent asymmetrical nature of multiculturalism (Fong 2008). By asymmetrical multiculturalism, I intend to convey the view that there is an inherent inequality in how citizenship is experienced through multicultural relationships, and that this inequality exhibits a key attribute: the inequality is relatively obscured in times of national stability, thus allowing multicultural articulations to prioritize an expression that celebrates diversity through relativism, aesthetics, and commodification (Modan 2008). In times of national crisis, however, some constituents of the ethnocracy will abandon its relativistic stance by situating cultural groups on a hierarchical scale, to be

followed by the retraction of American identity from minority groups.

The American experience befalling minorities as approached in this article is thus one where the material consequences of ethnicity and race intermittently connect and disentangle from socio-cultural and socio-political phenomena. Here I derive my perspective from Pierre Van Den Berghe’s (1996) criticism of the view that frequent usage and interpretation of cultural markers by ethnic groups thus qualifies ethnicity as a purely symbolic phenomenon. Although Van Den Berghe (1996:58) concedes that ethnicity can be a primarily symbolic articulation, this feature is exhibited only when ethnic groups live in regional proximity with one another over time, thus diluting the genetic and phenotypical markers that would otherwise set them apart. That is, if there are long periods of exogamy, conquest, or the condition of being conquered, the resulting populations in neighboring ethnic groups will “look...much alike” (Van Den Berghe 1996:58). Only when there are visual similarities, will cultural markers such as language be more effective than genetic or phenotypical markers for differentiating between ethnies:

Norwegians and Swedes...could never be racists toward one another, even if they wanted to. They have to listen to one another before they can tell who is who. The Nazis tried to be racists with the Jews but their biological markers worked with perhaps 10 to 15 percent reliability. In practice, they used mostly cultural markers: circumcision, synagogue attendance, the Star of David, denunciations, surnames, etc. They actually had a very difficult time picking out the Jews from their Gentile neighbors, especially in the assimilated Jewry of Western Europe. (Van Den Berghe 1996:61)

Van Den Berghe also notes that *when* phenotypical markers “do a reliable job” of differentiating between groups, the exclusive use of these markers for discernment, and in a less-than-desirable scenario, prejudicial punishment, takes precedence. European colonization of the world is an example where the great distances involved in territorial acquisition inevitably activated this phenotypical contrast, which was articulated biologically to justify and reinforce ethnic stratification and the belief in racial superiority.

In other words, phenotypical discernment and consciousness is “activated” between groups that are phenotypically different, such as between the Zulus and Boers of Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonization of southern Africa: “you could shoot at 500 meters and never make a mistake” (Van Den Berghe 1996:61).

Facial features (notably eye, lip and nose shape), hair texture and physical stature are also used where they are diacritic... In Rwanda and Burundi where the Hutu-Tutsi-Twa distinction is marked by large group differences in height, stature is widely used as a criterion. It works better in Rwanda where a rigid caste system hindered interbreeding, than in the more fluid social structure of Burundi, but in both cases, the physical distinction was used as a quick and dirty basis for sweeping genocidal action. (Van Den Berghe 1996:61)

Since ethnic communities in the US exhibit both phenotypical *and* cultural differences, US multiculturalism is a socio-cultural imbroglio, historically conflict-prone, with many of its actors prone to hyper-discernments of the “other.” Yet this process should be seen in terms of degree as groups that control socio-political institutions are more prone to exhibit an insidious articulation of this discernment, while the subordinated group/s tend to activate the discernment for defensive purposes, a mode activated under exigent social circumstances. That is, a fourth generation Japanese American, or *yonsei*, who is card-carrying member of the Sierra Club and a member of the California Teacher’s Association are not helpful identities if there is a race conflagration directed against them. And since September 11, a phenotypically Arab American may find a large segment of the American population dismissive of his Christian background, Oxford education, or other superfluous affiliations. These persons will have to activate ethnic/race identity to protect an assault on their ethnicity or race. In the context of crisis, it is in the interest, then, for the actor of the minority group to choose a return to a primary identity since, as Barth (1969) argues, its boundaries “define the group [and] not the cultural stuff that it encloses.”

Relativistic views of diversity fail to acknowledge

the power of an ethnocratic stratum in constructing multicultural configurations and ossifying exonyms in an orientalist process. Stavenhagen’s concept of ethnocracy thus identifies this tendency clearly in how the ethnocracy can dominate other ethnies in the image of its own, and through its institutional structures “impose its own particular ethnic interests on the whole of national society” (Stavenhagen 1996:197; see Fong 2008b). The ethnocratic state thus “acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic community in terms of ideologies, its policies and its resource distribution” (Brown 1994).

Brown lists three main tendencies of the ethnocratic state: The first tendency is how the majority ethnue is disproportionately and overwhelmingly granted access to state elite positions, the civil service, and the armed forces. Moreover, “where recruitment...from other ethnic origins does occur, it is conditional upon their assimilation into the dominant ethnic culture” (Brown 1994:36-48). Brown (1994:37) notes that “the state elites use these positions to promote their ethnic interests, rather than act as either an ‘autonomous’ state bureaucracy or as representatives of the socio-economic class strata from which they originate. But Brown was not the only one to notice this ubiquitous pattern of multicultural asymmetry. In 1987, Weiner noted some basic features of multicultural societies:

In country after country, a single ethnic group has taken control over the state and used its powers to exercise control over others... In retrospect there has been far less “nation-building” than many analysts had expected or hoped, for the process of state building has rendered many ethnic groups devoid of power or influence. (Weiner 1987:36-37)

The second tendency is how the ethnocratic state privileges its own values at the top of a *vertical* multicultural scale, and constructs its history in a hegemonic fashion. Although ethnocratic states often claim a sort of utopianistic universalism, the ethnocentric assumptions underlying their domestic policies render the state neither “ethnically neutral nor multi-ethnic, but...mono-ethnic” (Brown 1994:36). Indeed, few Americans realize that two years before

Pearl Harbor, German American Nazis staged a massive rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City which 22,000 people attended, the “single most striking display of Nazism in the history of the United States” (Brown 1994:261). A large portrait of America’s first president, George Washington, was appropriated to signify a great America and dominated the *mise-en-scène*. There was not an equivalent Executive Order 9066 that amassed in the same numbers of explicitly pro-fascist German and Italian Americans, even though evidence against the latter two groups’ seditious politics was overwhelmingly more abundant than that which could similarly be incriminated against the Japanese American population.

Finally, the third tendency is how ethnocentric states utilize the outputs of their institutional structures, “its constitutions, its laws and its political structures” to reinforce a monopoly on power for the ethnocentric polity (Brown 1994:37). Overall, politics in an ethnocentric state is based on the “introduction of values and institutions of the ethnic group into the peripheral communities” (Brown 1994:38). During political crises, one can speculate an intensification of the aforementioned processes. Barth is thus prescient in noting that the “processes whereby ethnic units maintain themselves are thus clearly affected...by the variable of regional security” (Barth 1969:37).

US ethnocentric tendencies during political crises, and nation-construction via the retractability of American identity from actors of minority nations, reinvigorate the need to revisit the tenets of the internal colonial thesis. Defined by Michael Hechter in his 1975 work *Internal Colonialism: the Celtic Fringe in National Development, 1536-1966*, internal colonialism is a process where the “core of the nation state comes to dominate the periphery politically and exploit it materially” (Hechter 1975:9). Although the much hackneyed criticism of Hechter’s ideas were based on the lack of critical evidence to demonstrate the processes as it affected Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, internal colonialism is still useful in how it allows analysts to see how multiethnicity is asymmetrically manifested within the state. For Havens and Flinn (1970:111), internal colonialism

remains useful of analytical purposes because it illuminates “arrangements typified by a relatively small dominant group which controls the allocation of resources, and a large, subjected mass composed of various groups...blocked from means of social mobility.”

Carmichael and Hamilton’s *Black Power: the Politics of Liberation in America* notes how the ethnocentric power structure “quickly becomes a monolithic structure on issues of race” and “when faced with demands from black people the multi-faction whites unite and present a common front” (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967:7). Carmichael and Hamilton’s adaptation of internal colonialism along racial lines is prescient because it addresses, decades ago, what scholars currently exploring immigration and its consequences uncover: immigration trends perceived as threatening to an overarching construction of union will compel some ethnocentric constituencies to regain control of its imagined universe, often by promoting nativism nationalisms (Chavez 2001; Brettell and Hollifield 2000; Sanchez 1997; Cornelius, Martin and Hollifield 1994; Castles and Miller 1998). Sassen (1998) shares similar perspectives when she describes globalization as a process that includes the denationalization territory, but notes “it is opposite when it comes to people, as is perhaps most sharply illustrated in the rise of anti-immigrant feeling and the renationalizing of politics.” Therefore, internal colonialism could be understood along these criteria: (1) it relegates minority ethnies to subordinated citizens; (2) it denies them proportional representation in the political structure; (3) they are constructed as scapegoats during times of crisis; and finally, and (4) they are punished through public policy and nativist violence. Ethnocentric discrimination is thus a total consolidated trajectory that affects interactional, cultural, political, and economic lives of minority ethnies. Indeed, if there is one defining continuing pattern in US history, it has been the way the ethnocracy has “dealt with” and punished different minority ethnies during crisis.

## Atavisms of Nativisms

To facilitate a discussion regarding the tensions of United States multiculturalism requires us to invoke concepts by classic and prescient thinkers on ethnicity and race: John Higham and his examination of *nativism* (Higham 1963), and Milton M. Gordon and his examination of *historical identification* (Gordon 1964). Higham and Gordon's analyses are further enhanced when fused with propositions by contemporary development and political scholars such as Rodolfo Stavenhagen (1986, 1996) and David Brown (1994), both of whom have contributed greatly to our understanding of multicultural asymmetry through their discussions of the concept of ethnocracy.

Higham's important 1963 work *Strangers in the Land* delineates a unique type of discrimination known as nativism. Whereas "racism" refers to the discrimination toward a group due to beliefs about the racial inferiority of that group, nativism refers to the dominant group's discrimination of a minority group based on its "foreign (i.e., 'un-American') connections" as well as its institutions and ideas (Higham 1963:3-4). Whereas racist discrimination includes discrimination of groups perceived to be foreign, it is not exclusively based on this theme since discrimination can be directed to groups already assimilated in American life (via language for example), as in the case of anti-African American discrimination. Nativism, however, is flexible, and is a sentiment that changes as certain minority groups become what Higham describes as "irritants" to shifting "conditions of the day" (Higham 1963:4).

Higham identifies three forms of nativism, further expanded upon by Sanchez (1997). The first was anti-Catholicism, "nurtured in Protestant evangelical activism, which deemed Catholics as incapable of the independent thought characterized as critical to American citizenship" (Sanchez 1997:1019). The second and third forms, however, are more pertinent to the scope of our discussion: antiradicalism, as exemplified by the notions that radicalized foreigners were a threat to the stability of American institutions, and a racial nativism that Anglo-Saxonized the "origins of the American nation" (Sanchez 1997:1019). Most im-

portant for our discussion is how the third form of nativism is based on an Anglo-Saxon construction of American identity, one ideologically crystallized into beliefs regarding what America *should be* and not what America *should not be*. For example Higham (1963:5) notes how in 1837, Horace Bushnell, a prominent American theologian at the time, warned Americans to protect "their noble Saxon blood against the miscellaneous tide of immigration, and in the 1850s there were occasional suggestions that a Celtic flood might swamp America's distinctive Anglo-Saxon traits."

For Higham, nativism represents periodic outbursts of frustration against the failure of assimilation as well as the dominant group's fear of minorities' "disloyalty" against the dominant culture and its history. Such minority groups are frequently the most recently arrived immigrants who are at the prototypical stage of some form of rudimentary assimilation. The point that needs to be underscored is that political crisis is an important societal mechanism which alters multicultural relationships by shifting it toward what Gordon (1964:54) called *historical identification*, a process by which the ethnic and/or racial group becomes the dominant locus of identification. In this situation, the structural separations between cultural groups are intensified and solidified. Historical identification, then, occurs when there is a need for "those of the same ethnic group but...different social class" to share a "sense of peoplehood" (Gordon 1964:53).

For Gordon, the sentiment that most compels people to historically identify across class lines is based on the expression "I am ultimately bound up with the fate of these people." The key point, however, is that Gordon's prescient view on historical identification represents a function of the "unfolding of past *and* current historic events [*italics added*]" (Gordon 1964:53). Higham would be the scholar who argued that the unfolding of the past and present occurs through a politics of exclusion, or nativism. Alternatively, three important cues can be derived from a fusion of Higham and Gordon's analyses of multicultural configurations: (1) during times of social and economic stability, nativism is relatively muted; (2) during national crisis, nativism is a form of historical identification that emanates from the



ethnocracy; (3) nativism affects the degree of assimilation during times of national crisis; and (4) nativism is activated as a form of cultural protectionism during national crisis to sustain the political and cultural hegemony of ethnocracy.

During crises in the United States the discourse of nativism validates Americans who possess a White heritage. Indeed, the well-intentioned “I’m an American” PSA is but a poor attempt at multicultural understanding insofar as how servility is implied: the images appeared as if ethnic minorities were queued up to articulate a message where the proclamation of “I’m an American” paralleled a means of begging for their identity back. I could not help but wonder what stratum of American society they were proclaiming this message to. Who did they have to remind? Consider that ethnocratic Americans did not repeat this process six years earlier during the 1995 aftermath of Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of Oklahoma City’s Murrah Building. The Ad Council was nowhere to be found: members of the ethnocracy did not have to go on national television to remind all other Americans that they were American (Fong 2008). Instead, news reports included vitriolic and hostile phone messages left at Muslim organizations that blamed the group as being responsible for the tragedy. Moreover, the public did not seek out European Americans to mete punitive measures against them, i.e., there was not a White equivalent of Balbir Sing Sodhi: the American identity of the former group was never questioned nor retracted. This is the privilege the ethnocracy is accorded in maintaining asymmetrical multicultural relations. In this context, it is important for us to consider Leo Chavez’s points in *Covering Immigration*, as to whether “America is defined by its racial/national origins—British and northwestern European” or whether America is still “a nation of immigrants...defined more by the principles that guide it” (Chavez 2001:17).

In the context of the United States, ethnocratic power can construct cultural and social obstacles that prevent minorities, especially recent immigrants, from acquiring cultural capital, making it difficult for them to assimilate (Rumbaut 1997; Portes 1995; Portes, Parker and Cobas 1980). Chavez suggests that na-

tivism’s ability to historically establish assimilative obstacles is but a means of ensuring how immigrant actors are to be “dealt with.” Chavez further argues that nativists “view today’s immigrants as a threat to the ‘nation,’ which is still conceived as a singular, predominantly White American, English-speaking culture,” a sentiment which parallels Higham’s contentions (Chavez 2001:8). Furthermore:

Minority groups...differ in rate at which they do achieve some degree of acculturation and assimilation. Historically...Scandinavians, the Germans, and the Scots and Welsh moved up quickly and with little friction...Irish, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs, faced stiff resistance and moved slowly... Racial groups experienced the greatest resistance...subjected to greater degrees of prejudice and discrimination and have moved most slowly of all. (LeMay 2005:37)

Depending on historical period, the retraction of American identity is a convenient consciousness of xenophobia that efficaciously identifies a scapegoat in the realm of public interaction and at the institutional level. In the communal realm, the murders of Vincent Chin and Balbir Singh Sodhi, of which both accounts were relayed at the beginning of the article, are but examples among many.

Sikh Americans were, in the decade prior to September 11, 2001, already experiencing discrimination. Margaret Gibson’s 1989 ethnographic study of Sikh immigrants in a northern California town revealed that “white residents are extremely hostile toward immigrants who look different and speak a different language...Punjabi teenagers are told they stink...told to go back to India...physically abused by majority students who spit at them, refuse to sit by them in class or in buses, throw food at them or worse” (Gibson 1989:289). In the context of post-September 11, however, this can readily be seen in the case of anti-Arab American sentiment:

Consider...the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Many in the media and most Americans believed an Arabic or extremist Muslim group was responsible for the bombing. Only when federal authorities arrested Timothy McVeigh, a Christian Identity believer, did the nation think otherwise... Close to 200 violent incidents

against Arabs had been reported. Another incident of scapegoating included TWA Flight 800... Again, until federal authorities assessed mechanical failure as the cause of the explosion, rumors within the media persisted that some Arab group had committed an act of terrorism. (Lemay 2005:70)

Although the slaying of Vincent Chin in 1982, was but one element used to set off this manuscript's orientation, political crises—current and past—have been dredged to play their part in communal anger and violence against Chinese Americans as well. In 1989 in Raleigh, North Carolina, Jim Loo was playing pool when brothers Robert and Lloyd Piche pistol-whipped Loo, killing him, calling Loo and his friends “chinks” and “gooks,” and blaming them for deaths of American soldiers during the Vietnam War (Ancheta 2010:623); in 1999 in Southern California, Filipino postal worker Joseph Iletto was shot nine times by a white supremacist who thought he was a “chink or a spic” (Ancheta 2010:624). In the *2002 Audit of Violence Against Asian Pacific Americans: Tenth Annual Report* by the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, reports included a Korean American woman at a supermarket in Fort Lee, New Jersey, being verbally assaulted by a couple who yelled “Where did you learn how to drive? You chink!” while another customer affirmed, yelling “Yeah, go back to your own country”; another revolved around three Chinese American families at a casino in Lake Tahoe, NV, verbally and physically assaulted by an individual who noted, “This is America, you [expletive]...chinks. Do you want some of me?” He later noted to the security guard that subdued him, “Hey man, I can respect you. Not like these [expletive]...slant eyes who are just here to take our money” (National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium 2004:14-21). Many similar episodes have certainly remained unreported and disappeared from our history.

The next level is institutional: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which was passed to protect White workers from Chinese laborers in California and was not repealed until 1943, with prohibitions against Chinese-White marriage lasting until 1948. Although the presence of Chinese Americans was initially tolerated, gold prospectors who later could not find gold and rail workers who felt Chinese laborers took away

rail jobs from White Americans, mobilized to single out the Chinese to be banned from the United States on the basis of race, the first group in US history to experience such a legal precedent. Less well known was the Page Act of 1875 that had stipulations against “immoral Chinese women” from entering the United States under the assumption that they were prostitutes (Peffer 1986). Additionally, the Immigration Act of 1924—which included the Asian Exclusion Act—was designed to halt South and Eastern Europeans, along with Far East Asians, and South Asians from entry to the US. It was drafted by fervent supporters of eugenics, many of whom believed in Nordic supremacy as articulated in the 1916 publication of *Passing of the Great Race* by Madison Grant. Grant was concerned by the influx of inferior non-Nordic populations and the expansion of Blacks into major urban strongholds (Grant and Osborn 2010).

Another episode took place in 1999, when Wen Ho Lee was accused of nuclear espionage following a series of complex events orchestrated by Republican representatives Christopher Cox of California and Fred Thompson of Tennessee, both of whom were on committees that scrutinized Chinese military espionage. A link was concocted between the dissemination of nuclear arms information to China and New Mexico's Los Alamos National Laboratory. Incarcerated at the end of December, Lee was placed under solitary confinement for nine months and released when 58 of the federal charges against him could not be proven. He was instead charged with only one count of mishandling sensitive data. Federal judge James A. Parker and President Bill Clinton both issued apologies, with the former criticizing the prosecution for “having misled him into believing that Lee was a great security risk” (Chang 2010:715) and that the prosecution had “embarrassed our entire nation and each of us who is a citizen” (Mears 2006).

## Epilogue

Since September 11, 2001, our nation has not fully completed its mourning of citizens lost on that date, but more symbolically, the wound it has left behind on the American *geist*—the spirit—if I may use the

Hegelian term. In the wake of September 11, the polity and much of our populations activated their jingoisms to forward military action. A segment of the ethnocracy meted out punishment—first through rhetoric, then communally. In past epochs, the third step of punishment revolved around public policy that explicitly and directly punished a minority group. There is thus a trinity of social dysfunctions seen in the wake of crisis. Americans must be weary of this pattern and seriously consider how this is a particular dysfunction of democracies.

Ethnic and race identities are large cultural repositories that collect self-authored, collectively referenced, and exonymically constructed histories. Cultural histories, narratives, and denials are frequently placed in its reservoirs where its constituents, in turn, churn out new hopes and new chapters. Decades ago, however, scholarly address of ethnicity—especially from Marxian thinkers—tended to view ethnic and racial articulations as nuisances and “impediments to effective state-integration” (Connor 1972:319). If there was an address of ethnic diversity, it was formulated in a manner that does not make it problematic for integration. Such is the nature of the modernist paradigm insofar as ethnic and racial identities are concerned: it assumes that actors of antagonistic identities will ultimately defer to a state’s construction of nation through assimilation. However, Robert Putnam’s study on diversity eerily points to the reality of America’s diversity fatigue in community and civil society.

In his examination of Americans, Putnam (2007) found that the more diverse communities are, the less communal trust exists, not only between ethnic and racial groups, but surprisingly within the ethnic as well. There were correspondingly lower levels of community involvement, voter turnout, and lower levels of happiness. Not surprisingly, in homogenous communities, intra-group trust was high. The extent that we ignore the consequences of these dynamics as different groups rise to appropriate being “American,” sometimes at the expense of others, must be considered in a long-term account of the United States’ social and cultural development. Indeed, Gurr (1993) notes in his important work *Minorities at Risk* how

modernization has not withered away ethnic identity in the context of diversity but has strengthened it as democratizing societies open up channels for more ethnic articulations to take place. Such articulations will likely encompass or amalgamate the narratives between those who are primordially linked to their geographical womb and those that desire a more explicit entry into mainstream America. Navigating and negotiating the aforementioned cultural and world-view boundaries will allow Chinese Americans to continue being coauthors in the continuing and complicated saga that is the American experience, especially its crisis-generated sociological dysfunctions.

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