



Heterogeneity, Hybridity,

Multiplicity: Asian

American Differences

In a poem by Janice Mirikitani, a Japanese American nisei woman describes her sansei daughter's rebellion. The daughter's denial of Japanese American culture and its particular notions of femininity reminds the nisei speaker that she, too, has denied her antecedents, rebelling against her own more traditional issei mother:¹

I want to break tradition—unlock this room
where women dress in the dark.
Discover the lies my mother told me.
The lies that we are small and powerless
that our possibilities must be compressed
to the size of pearls, displayed only as
passive chokers, charms around our neck.
Break Tradition.
I want to tell my daughter of this room
of myself
filled with tears of shakuhatchi,
.
poems about madness,
sounds shaken from barbed wire and
goodbyes and miracles of survival.
This room of open window where daring ones escape.
My daughter denies she is like me . . .
her pouting ruby lips, her skirts

swaying to salsa, teena marie and the stones,
 her thighs displayed in carnivals of color.
 I do not know the contents of her room.
 She mirrors my aging.
 She is breaking tradition.²

The nisei speaker repudiates the repressive confinements of her issei mother: the disciplining of the female body, the tedious practice of diminution, the silences of obedience. In turn, the crises that have shaped the nisei speaker—internment camps, sounds of threatening madness—are unknown to and unheard by her sansei teenage daughter. The three generations of women of Japanese descent in this poem are separated by their different histories and by different conceptions of what it means to be female and Japanese. The poet who writes “I do not know the contents of her room” registers these separations as “breaking tradition.”

In another poem, by Lydia Lowe, Chinese women workers are also divided by generation but, even more powerfully, by class and language. The speaker is a young Chinese American who supervises an older Chinese woman in a textile factory.

The long bell blared,
 and then the *lo-ban*
 made me search all your bags
 before you could leave.

Inside he sighed
 about slow work, fast hands,
 missing spools of thread—
 and I said nothing.

I remember that day
 you came in to show me
 I added your tickets six zippers short.
 It was just a mistake.

You squinted down
 at the check in your hands

like an old village woman peers
at some magician's trick.

That afternoon
when you thrust me your bags
I couldn't look or raise my face.
Doi m-jyu.

Eyes on the ground,
I could only see
one shoe kicking against the other.³

This poem, too, invokes the breaking of tradition, although it thematizes another sort of stratification among Asian women: the structure of the factory places the English-speaking younger woman above the Cantonese-speaking older one. Economic relations in capitalist society force the young supervisor to discipline her elders, and she is acutely ashamed that her required behavior does not demonstrate the respect traditionally owed to parents and elders. Thus, both poems foreground commonly thematized topoi of immigrant cultures: the disruption and distortion of traditional cultural practices—like the practice of parental sacrifice and filial duty or the practice of respecting hierarchies of age—not only as a consequence of displacement to the United States but also as a part of entering a society with different class stratifications and different constructions of gender roles. Some Asian American discussions cast the disruption of tradition as loss, representing the loss in terms of regret and shame, as in the latter poem. Alternatively, the traditional practices of family continuity and hierarchy may be figured as oppressively confining, as in Mirikitani's poem, in which the two generations of daughters contest the more restrictive female roles of the former generations. In either case, many Asian American discussions portray immigration and relocation to the United States in terms of a loss of the "original" culture in exchange for the new "American" culture.

In many Asian American novels, the question of the loss or transmission of the "original" culture is frequently represented in a family narrative, figured as generational conflict between the Chinese-born first generation and the American-born second generation.⁴ Louis Chu's 1961 novel *Eat a Bowl*

of *Tea*, for example, allegorizes the differences between “native” Chinese values and the new “westernized” culture of Chinese Americans in the conflicted relationship between father and son. Other novels have taken up this generational theme; one way to read the popular texts Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975) or Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) would be to understand them as versions of this generational model of culture, refigured in feminine terms, between mothers and daughters. In this chapter, however, I argue that interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians. The reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition. Such reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian American *cultural* differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation of the kind discussed in Chapter 1.

To avoid this homogenizing of Asian Americans as exclusively hierarchical and familial, I would contextualize the “vertical” generational model of culture with the more “horizontal” relationship represented in Diana Chang’s “The Oriental Contingent.”⁵ In Chang’s short story, two young women avoid the discussion of their Chinese backgrounds because each desperately fears that the other is “more Chinese,” more “authentically” tied to the original culture. The narrator, Connie, is certain that her friend Lisa “never referred to her own background because it was more Chinese than Connie’s, and therefore of a higher order. She was tact incarnate. All along, she had been going out of her way not to embarrass Connie. Yes, yes. Her assurance was definitely uppercrust (perhaps her father had been in the diplomatic service), and her offhand didacticness, her lack of self-doubt, was indeed characteristically Chinese-Chinese” (173). Connie feels ashamed because she assumes herself to be “a failed Chinese”; she fantasizes that Lisa was born in China, visits there frequently, and privately disdains Chinese Americans. Her assumptions about Lisa prove to be quite wrong, however; Lisa is even more critical of herself for “not being genuine.” For Lisa, as Connie eventually discovers, was born in Buffalo and was

adopted by American parents; lacking an immediate connection to Chinese culture, Lisa projects on all Chinese the authority of being “more Chinese.” Lisa confesses to Connie at the end of the story: “The only time I feel Chinese is when I’m embarrassed I’m not more Chinese—which is a totally Chinese reflex I’d give anything to be rid of!” (176). Chang’s story portrays two women polarized by the degree to which they have each internalized a cultural definition of “Chineseness” as pure and fixed, in which any deviation is constructed as less, lower, and shameful. Rather than confirming a traditional anthropological model of “culture” in which “ethnicity” is passed from generation to generation, Chang’s story explores the relationship between women of the same generation. Lisa and Connie are ultimately able to reduce each other’s guilt at not being “Chinese enough”; in each other they are able to find a common frame of reference. The story suggests that the making of Chinese American culture—the ways in which it is imagined, practiced, and continued—is worked out as much “horizontally” among communities as it is transmitted “vertically” in unchanging forms from one generation to the next. Rather than considering “Asian American identity” as a fixed, established “given,” perhaps we can consider instead “Asian American cultural practices” that produce identity; the processes that produce such identity are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences. Stuart Hall has written that cultural identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.”⁶

Asian American discussions of ethnic culture and racial group formation are far from uniform or consistent. Rather, these discussions contain a spectrum of positions that includes, at one end, the desire for a cultural identity represented by a fixed profile of traits and, at the other, challenges to the notion of singularity and conceptions of *race* as the material *locus* of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities. These latter efforts attempt to define Asian American identity in a manner that not only ac-

counts for the critical inheritance of cultural definitions and traditions but also accounts for the *racial formation* that is produced in the negotiations between the state's regulation of racial groups and those groups' active contestation and construction of racial meanings.⁷ In other words, these latter efforts suggest that the making of Asian American culture may be a much less stable process than unmediated vertical transmission of culture from one generation to another. The making of Asian American culture includes practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented; Asian American culture also includes the practices that emerge in relation to the dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian and Asian American cultures as "other."⁸ As the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* suggests, perhaps one of the more important stories of Asian American experience is about the process of critically receiving and rearticulating cultural traditions in the face of a dominant national culture that exoticizes and "orientalizes" Asians. She asks: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?"⁹ Or the dilemma of cultural syncretism might be posed in an interrogative version of the uncle's impromptu proverb in Wayne Wang's film *Dim Sum*: "You can take the girl out of Chinatown, but can you take the Chinatown out of the girl?"¹⁰ For rather than representing a fixed, discrete culture, "Chinatown" is itself the very emblem of shifting demographics, languages, and populations. The residents of the urban "bachelor society" Chinatowns of New York and San Francisco from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s, for example, were mostly male laborers—laundrymen, seamen, restaurant workers—from southern China, whereas today, immigrants from Taiwan, mainland China, and Hong Kong have dramatically reconfigured contemporary suburban Chinese settlements such as the one in Monterey Park, California.¹¹

I begin with these particular examples drawn from Asian American cultural texts in order to observe that what is referred to as "Asian America" is clearly a heterogeneous entity. As I have argued in Chapter 1, in relation to the state and the American national culture implied by that state, Asian Americans have certainly been constructed as different, and as other than,

white Americans of European origin. But from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are extremely different and diverse among ourselves: as men and women at different distances and generations from our “original” Asian cultures—cultures as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Thai, or Cambodian—Asian Americans are born in the United States and born in Asia, of exclusively Asian parents and of mixed race, urban and rural, refugee and nonrefugee, fluent in English and non-English-speaking, professionally trained and working-class. As with other immigrant groups in the United States, the Asian-origin collectivity is unstable and changeable, with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification with and relation to a “homeland,” and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from “majority culture” in the United States. Further, the historical contexts of particular waves of immigration within single groups contrast one another; Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II encountered social and economic barriers quite different from those faced by individuals who arrive from Japan to southern California today. And the composition of different waves of immigrants varies in gender, class, and region. For example, in the case of the Chinese, the first groups of immigrants to the United States in the 1850’s were from Canton Province, male by a ratio of ten to one, and largely of peasant backgrounds, whereas the more recent Chinese immigrants are from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the People’s Republic (themselves quite heterogeneous and of discontinuous “origins”) or from the Chinese diaspora in other parts of Asia, such as Malaysia or Singapore, and they have a heterogeneous profile that includes male and female assembly and service-sector workers as well as “middle-class” professionals and business elites.¹² Further, once arriving in the United States, very few Asian immigrant cultures remain discrete, impenetrable communities; the more recent groups mix, in varying degrees, with segments of the existing groups; Asian Americans may intermarry with other racialized ethnic groups, live in neighborhoods adjacent to them, or work in the same businesses and on the same factory assembly lines. The boundaries and definitions of Asian American culture are continually shifting and being contested from pressures both “inside” and “outside” the Asian-origin community.

I stress heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity in the characterization

of Asian American culture as part of a twofold argument about cultural politics, the ultimate aim of which is to disrupt the current hegemonic relationship between “dominant” and “minority” positions. Heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity are not used here as rhetorical or literary terms but are attempts at naming the material contradictions that characterize Asian American groups. Although these concepts appear to be synonymous in their relationship to that of “identity,” they can be precisely distinguished. By “heterogeneity,” I mean to indicate the existence of differences and differential relationships within a bounded category—that is, among Asian Americans, there are differences of Asian national origin, of generational relation to immigrant exclusion laws, of class backgrounds in Asia and economic conditions within the United States, and of gender. By “hybridity,” I refer to the formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations; for example, the racial and linguistic mixings in the Philippines and among Filipinos in the United States are the material trace of the history of Spanish colonialism, U.S. colonization, and U.S. neocolonialism. Hybridity, in this sense, does not suggest the assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination. Finally, we might understand “multiplicity” as designating the ways in which subjects located within social relations are determined by several different axes of power, are multiply determined by the contradictions of capitalism, patriarchy, and race relations, with, as Hall explains, particular contradictions surfacing in relation to the material conditions of a specific historical moment.¹³ Thus, heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity are concepts that assist us in critically understanding the material conditions of Asians in the United States, conditions in excess of the dominant, “orientalist” construction of Asian Americans. Although orientalism seeks to consolidate the coherence of the West as subject precisely through the representation of “oriental” objects as homogenous, fixed, and stable, contradictions in the production of Asians and in the noncorrespondence between the orientalist object and the Asian American subject ultimately express the limits of such fictions.

On the one hand, the observation that Asian Americans are heterogeneous is part of a strategy to destabilize the dominant discursive construction

and determination of Asian Americans as a homogeneous group. As we have seen in Chapter 1, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asian populations in the United States were managed by exclusion acts, bars from citizenship, quotas, and internment, all of which made use of racialist constructions of Asian-origin groups as homogeneous. The “model minority” myth that constructs Asians as the most successfully assimilated minority group is a contemporary version of this homogenization of Asians. On the other hand, it is equally important to underscore Asian American heterogeneities—particularly class, gender, and national differences among Asians—to contribute to a dialogue within Asian American discourse, to point to the limitations inherent in a politics based on cultural, racial, or ethnic identity. In this sense, I argue for the Asian American necessity to organize, resist, and theorize *as* Asian Americans, but at the same time, I inscribe this necessity within a discussion of the risks of a cultural politics that relies on the construction of sameness and the exclusion of differences.

The first reason to emphasize the dynamic fluctuation and heterogeneity of Asian American culture is to release our understandings of either the “dominant” or the emergent “minority” cultures as discrete, fixed, or homogeneous and to arrive at a different conception of the terrain of culture. In California, for example, it has become commonplace for residents to consider themselves as part of a “multicultural” state, as embodying a new phenomenon of cultural adjacency and admixture; this “multiculturalism” is at once an index of the changing demographics and differences of community in California and a pluralist attempt at containment of those differences.¹⁴ For if racialized minority immigrant cultures are perpetually changing—in their composition, configuration, and signifying practices, as well as in their relations to one another—it follows that the “majority” or “dominant” culture, with which minority cultures are in continual relation, is also unstable and unclosed. The understanding that the general cultural terrain is one social site in which “hegemony” is continually being both established and contested permits us to theorize about the roles that racialized immigrant groups play in the making and unmaking of culture and to explore the ways that cross-race and cross-national projects may work to change the existing structure of power, the current hegemony. We remember that

Antonio Gramsci writes about hegemony as not simply political or economic forms of rule but as the entire process of dissent and compromise through which a particular group is able to determine the political, cultural, and ideological character of a state.¹⁵ Hegemony does not refer exclusively to the process by which a dominant group exercises its influence but refers equally to the process through which emergent groups organize and contest any specific hegemony.¹⁶ The reality of any specific hegemony is that, although it may be for the moment dominant, it is never absolute or conclusive. Hegemony, in Gramsci's thought, is a concept that describes both the social processes through which a particular dominance is maintained, as well as the processes through which that dominance is challenged and new forces are articulated. When a hegemony representing the interests of a dominant group exists, it is always within the context of resistances from emerging groups.¹⁷ We might say that hegemony is not only the political process by which a particular group constitutes itself as "the one" or "the majority" in relation to which "minorities" are defined and know themselves to be "other," but is equally the process by which various and incommensurable positions of otherness may ally and constitute a new majority, a "counterhegemony."¹⁸

Gramsci writes of "subaltern," prehegemonic, not unified groups "unrealized" by the State, whose histories are fragmented, episodic, and identifiable only from a point of historical hindsight. They may go through different phases when they are subject to the activity of ruling groups, may articulate their demands through existing parties, and then may themselves produce new parties. In "History of the Subaltern Classes" in *The Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci describes a final phase at which the "formations [of the subaltern classes] assert integral autonomy" (52). The definition of the subaltern groups includes some noteworthy observations for our understanding of the roles of racialized immigrant groups in the United States who have the histories of being "aliens ineligible to citizenship." The assertion that the significant practices of the subaltern groups may not be understood as hegemonic until they are viewed with historical hindsight is interesting, for it suggests that some of the most powerful practices may not always be the explicitly oppositional ones, may not be understood by contemporaries, and may be less overt and recognizable than others. That the subaltern classes are by definition "not unified" is provocative, too—that

is, these groups are not a fixed, unified force of a single character. Rather, the assertion of “integral autonomy” by “not unified” classes suggests a coordination of distinct, yet allied, positions, practices, and movements—class-identified and not class-identified, in parties and not, race-based and gender-based—each in its own, not necessarily equivalent manner transforming, disrupting, and deconstructing the apparatuses of a specific hegemony. The independent forms and locations of challenge—cultural, as well as economic and political—constitute what Gramsci calls a “new historical bloc,” a new set of relationships that together embody a different hegemony and a different balance of power. In this sense, we have in the instance of the growing and shifting racialized immigrant populations in California an active example of this new historical bloc described by Gramsci; and in the negotiations between these groups and the existing “majority” over what interests constitute the “majority,” we have an illustration of the concept of hegemony, not in the more commonly accepted sense of “hegemony maintenance,” but in the often ignored sense of “hegemony creation.”¹⁹ The observation that the Asian American community and other racialized and immigrant communities are both incommensurate and heterogeneous lays the foundation for several political operations. First, by reconceiving “the social” so as to centralize the emergent racialized and immigrant groups who are constantly redefining social relations in ways that move beyond static oppositions such as “majority” and “minority,” or the binary axis “black” and “white,” we recast cultural politics so as to account for a multiplicity of various, nonequivalent racialized groups, one of which is Asian Americans. Second, the conception of racialized group formation as heterogeneous provides a position for Asian Americans that is both historically specific and yet simultaneously uneven and unclosed. Asian Americans can articulate distinct challenges and demands based on particular histories of exclusion and racialization, but the redefined lack of closure—which reveals rather than conceals differences—opens political lines of affiliation with other groups in the challenge to specific forms of domination insofar as they share common features.

The articulation of an “Asian American identity” as an organizing tool has provided a concept of political unity that enables diverse Asian groups

to understand unequal circumstances and histories as being related. The building of “Asian American culture” is crucial to this effort, for it articulates and empowers the diverse Asian-origin community vis-à-vis the institutions and apparatuses that exclude and marginalize it. Yet to the extent that Asian American culture fixes Asian American identity and suppresses differences—of national origin, generation, gender, sexuality, class—it risks particular dangers: not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities among Asians, but it may also inadvertently support the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group, that implies Asians are “all alike” and conform to “types.” To the extent that Asian American culture dynamically expands to include both internal critical dialogues about difference and the interrogation of dominant interpellations, however, Asian American culture can likewise be a site in which the “horizontal” affiliations with other groups can be imagined and realized. In this respect, a politics based exclusively on racial or ethnic identity willingly accepts the terms of the dominant logic that organizes the heterogeneous picture of differences into a binary schema of “the one” and “the other.” The essentializing of Asian American identity also reproduces oppositions that subsume other nondominant groups in the same way that Asians and other groups are marginalized by the dominant culture: to the degree that the discourse generalizes Asian American identity as male, women are rendered invisible; or to the extent that Chinese are presumed to be exemplary of all Asians, the importance of other Asian groups is ignored. In this sense, a politics based on racial, cultural, or ethnic identity facilitates the displacement of intercommunity differences—between men and women or between workers and managers—into a false opposition of “nationalism” and “assimilation.” We have an example of this in recent debates where Asian American feminists who challenge Asian American sexism are cast as “assimilationist,” as betraying Asian American “nationalism.”

To the extent that Asian American discourse articulates an identity in reaction to the dominant culture’s stereotype, even if to refute it, the discourse may remain bound to and overly determined by the logic of the dominant culture. In accepting the binary terms (“white” and “nonwhite” or “majority” and “minority”) that structure institutional policies about race, we forget that these binary schemas are not neutral descriptions. Bi-

nary constructions of difference utilize a logic that prioritizes the first term and subordinates the second; whether the pair “difference” and “sameness” is figured as a binary synthesis that considers “difference” as always contained within the “same” or that conceives of the pair as an opposition in which “difference” structurally implies “sameness” as its complement, it is important to see each of these figurations as versions of the same binary logic. The materialist argument for heterogeneity seeks to challenge the conception of difference as exclusively structured by a binary opposition between two terms, by proposing instead another notion of “difference” that takes seriously the historically produced conditions of heterogeneity, multiplicity, and nonequivalence. The most exclusive construction of Asian American identity—one that presumes masculinity, American birth, and the speaking of English—is at odds with the formation of important political alliances and affiliations with other groups across racial and ethnic, gender, sexuality, and class lines. An exclusive “cultural identity” is an obstacle to Asian American women allying with other women of color, and it can discourage laboring Asian Americans from joining with workers of other colors, conjunctions that are explored in Chapter 7. It can short-circuit potential alliances against the dominant structures of power in the name of subordinating “divisive” issues to *the* national question.

Some of the limits of “identity politics” are discussed most pointedly by Frantz Fanon in his books about the Algerian resistance to French colonialism. Before turning to some Asian American cultural texts to trace the ways in which the dialogues about identity and difference are represented within the discourse, I would like to consider one of Fanon’s most important texts, *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961). Although Fanon’s treatise was cited in the 1960s as the manifesto for a nationalist politics of identity, rereading it in the 1990s, we ironically find his text to be the source of a serious critique of nationalism. Fanon argues that the challenge facing any movement that is dismantling colonialism (or a system in which one culture dominates another) is to provide for a new order that does not reproduce the social structure of the old system. This new order must avoid, he argues, the simple assimilation to the dominant culture’s roles and positions by the emergent group, which would merely caricature the old colonialism, and it should be equally suspicious of an

uncritical nativism or racialism that would appeal to essentialized notions of precolonial identity. Fanon suggests that another alternative is necessary, a new order, neither assimilationist nor nativist inversion, that breaks with the structures and practices of cultural domination, that continually and collectively criticizes the institutions of rule. One of the more remarkable turns in Fanon's argument occurs when he identifies both bourgeois assimilation and bourgeois nationalism as conforming to the same logic, as being responses to colonialism and reproducing the same structure of domination. It is in this sense that Fanon warns against the nationalism practiced by bourgeois postcolonial governments: the national bourgeoisie replaces the colonizer, yet the social and economic structure remains the same. Ironically, he points out, these separatisms, or "micronationalisms," are themselves legacies of colonialism: "By its very structure, colonialism is regionalist and separatist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces and separates them."²⁰ That is, a politics of bourgeois cultural nationalism may be congruent with the divide-and-conquer logics of colonial domination. Fanon links the practices of the national bourgeoisie that has "assimilated" colonialist thought and practice with "nativist" practices that privilege one group or ethnicity over others; for Fanon, nativism and assimilationism are not opposites—they are similar logics that both enunciate the old order.

Fanon's analysis implies that an essentialized bourgeois construction of "nation" is a classification that excludes subaltern groups that could bring about substantive change in the social and economic relations, particularly those whose social marginalities are due to class: peasants, immigrant workers, transient populations. We can add to Fanon's criticism of nationalism that the category of "nation" often erases a consideration of women: the fact of difference between men and women and the conditions under which they live and work in situations of economic domination. This is why the concentration of women of color in domestic service or reproductive labor (child care, home care, nursing) in the contemporary United States is not adequately explained by a nation-based model of analysis.²¹ It is also why the position of Asian and Latina immigrant female workers in the current global economy, discussed in Chapter 7, exceeds the terms offered by racial or national analyses. We can make more explicit—in light of feminist

theory that has gone perhaps the furthest in theorizing multiple determinations and the importance of positionalities—that it may be difficult to act exclusively in terms of a single valence or political interest—such as race, ethnicity, or nation—because social subjects are the sites of a variety of differences. Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chela Sandoval, Angela Davis, and others have described the subject-positions of women of color as constructed across a multiplicity of social relations. Trinh writes:

Many women of color feel obliged [to choose] between ethnicity and womanhood: how can they? You never have/are one without the other. The idea of two illusorily separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or more precisely female), partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer tactics. . . . The pitting of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles against one another allows some vocal fighters to dismiss blatantly the existence of either racism or sexism within their lines of action, as if oppression only comes in separate, monolithic forms.²²

In other words, the conceptualization of racism and sexism as if they were distinctly opposed discourses is a construction that serves the dominant formations; we cannot isolate “race” from “gender” without reproducing the logic of domination. To appreciate this interconnection of different, nonequivalent discourses of social stratification is not to argue against the strategic importance of Asian American identity or against the building of Asian American culture. Rather, it is to suggest that acknowledging class and gender differences among Asian Americans does not weaken the group. To the contrary, these differences represent greater opportunity to affiliate with other groups whose cohesions may be based on other valences of oppression rather than “identity.” Angela Davis argues, for example, that we might conceive of “U.S. women of color” not as a “coalition” made up of separate groups organized around racial identities but as a *political formation* that decides to work together on a particular issue or agenda. She states: “A woman of color formation might decide to work around immigration issues. This political commitment is not based on the specific histories of racialized communities or its constituent members, but rather constructs an agenda agreed upon by all who are a part of it. In my opinion, the most

exciting potential of women of color formations resides in the possibility of politicizing this identity—basing the identity on politics rather than the politics on identity.”²³

As we have already seen, within Asian American discourse there is a varied spectrum of discussion about the concepts of racialized group identity and culture. At one end are discussions in which cultural identity is essentialized as the cornerstone of a cultural nationalist politics. In these discussions the positions of “cultural nationalism” and of assimilation are represented in polar opposition: cultural nationalism’s affirmation of the separate purity of its culture opposes assimilation of the standards of dominant society. Stories about the loss of a “native” Asian culture tend to express some form of this opposition. At the same time, there are criticisms of this cultural nationalist position, most often articulated by feminists who charge that Asian American nationalism prioritizes masculinity and does not account for women. Finally, at the other end, interventions exist that refuse static or binary conceptions of culture, replacing notions of “identity” with multiplicity and shifting the emphasis from cultural “essence” to material hybridity. Settling for neither nativism nor assimilation, these interventions expose the apparent opposition between the two as a constructed figure (as Fanon does when he observes that bourgeois assimilation and bourgeois nationalism often conform to the same colonialist logic). In tracing these different types of discussions about identity through Asian American cultural debates, literature, and film, I have chosen several texts because they are accessible, “popular,” and commonly held. But I do not intend to limit “discourse” to only these particular forms. By “discourse” I intend a rather extended meaning—a network that includes not only texts and cultural documents but also social practices, formal and informal laws, policies of inclusion and exclusion, institutional forms of organization, and so forth, all of which constitute and regulate knowledge about its object, Asian America.

The terms of the debate about “nationalism” and “assimilation” become clearer if we look first at the discussion of Asian American identity in certain debates about the representation of culture. Readers of Asian American literature will be familiar with the attacks by Frank Chin, Ben

Tong, and others on author Maxine Hong Kingston, attacks that have been cast as nationalist criticisms of Kingston's "assimilationist" works. Her novel/autobiography *The Woman Warrior* is the target of such criticism because it was virtually the first "canonized" piece of Asian American literature. In this sense, a critique of how and why this text became fetishized as the exemplary representation of Asian American culture is necessary and important. But Chin's critique reveals other kinds of notable tensions in Asian American culture: he does more than accuse Kingston of having exoticized Chinese American culture, arguing that she has "feminized" Asian American literature and undermined the power of Asian American men to combat the racist stereotypes of the dominant white culture. Kingston and other women novelists such as Amy Tan, Chin charges, misrepresent Chinese history to exaggerate its patriarchal structure; as a result, Chinese society is portrayed as being even more misogynistic than European society. While Chin and others have cast this conflict in terms of nationalism and assimilationism, perhaps it may be more productive to see this debate, as Elaine Kim does, as a symptom of the tensions between nationalist and feminist concerns in Asian American discourse.²⁴ I would add to Kim's analysis that the dialogue between nationalist and feminist concerns animates a debate about identity and difference, or identity and heterogeneity, rather than between nationalism and assimilationism. It is a debate in which Chin and others insist on a fixed masculinist identity, whereas Kingston, Tan, or such feminist literary critics as Shirley Lim or Amy Ling, with their representations of female differences and their critiques of sexism in Chinese culture, throw this notion of identity repeatedly into question. Just as Fanon points out that some forms of nationalism can obscure class, Asian American feminists point out that Asian American cultural nationalism—or the construction of a fixed, "native" Asian American subject—obscures gender. In other words, the struggle that is framed as a conflict between the apparent opposites of nativism and assimilation can mask what is more properly characterized as a struggle between the desire to essentialize ethnic identity and the condition of heterogeneous differences against which such a desire is spoken. The trope that opposes nativism and assimilationism can be itself a "colonialist" figure used to displace the challenges of heterogeneity, or subalternity, by casting them as assimilationist or anti-cultural nationalist.

The trope that opposes nativism and assimilation does not only organize the cultural debates of Asian American discourse but figures in Asian American literature as well. More often than not, however, this symbolic conflict between nativism and assimilation is figured in the topos with which I began, that of generational conflict. There are many versions of this topos; I will mention only a few so as to elucidate some of the most relevant cultural tensions. In one model, a conflict between generations is cast in strictly masculinist terms, between father and son; in this model, mothers are absent or unimportant, and female figures exist merely as peripheral objects to the side of the central drama of male conflict. Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* exemplifies this masculinist generational symbolism, in which a conflict between nativism and assimilation is allegorized in the relationship between the father Wah Gay and the son Ben Loy in the period when the predominantly Cantonese New York Chinatown community changes from a "bachelor society" to a "family society."²⁵ Wah Gay wishes Ben Loy to follow "Chinese" tradition and to submit to the father's authority, whereas the son balks at his fathers "old ways" and wants to make his own choices. When Wah Gay arranges a marriage for Ben Loy, the son is forced to obey. Although the son had had no trouble leading an active sexual life before his marriage, once married, he finds himself to be impotent. In other words, Chu's novel figures the conflict of nativism and assimilation in terms of Ben Loy's sexuality: submitting to the father's authority, marrying the "nice Chinese girl" Mei Oi and having sons, is the so-called traditional Chinese male behavior; this path represents the nativist option. By contrast, Ben Loy's former behaviors—carrying on with American prostitutes, gambling, and the like—are coded as the American path of assimilation. At the "nativist" Chinese extreme, Ben Loy is impotent and is denied access to erotic pleasure, and at the "assimilationist" American extreme, he has great access and sexual freedom. Rather than naming the U.S. state as the "father," whose immigration laws determined the restricted conditions of the "bachelor" society for the first Chinese immigrants, and the repeal of which permitted the gradual establishment of a "family" society for the later generations, Chu's novel allegorizes Ben Loy's cultural options in the "oedipal" story of the son's sexuality. The novel suggests that a third "Chinese American" alternative becomes available, in which Ben Loy is able to experience erotic pleasure with his Chinese wife, when the couple moves away to another

state, away from his father Wah Gay; Ben Loy's relocation to San Francisco Chinatown and the priority of pleasure with Mei Oi over the begetting of a son (which, they ultimately do have) both imply important breaks from his father's authority and the father's representation of "Chinese" tradition. Following Fanon's observations about the affinities between nativism and assimilation, we can consider Chu's 1961 novel as an early masculinist rendering of culture as conflict between the apparent opposites of nativism and assimilation, with an oedipal resolution in a Chinese American male "identity." Only with hindsight can we propose that the opposition may itself be a construction that allegorizes the dialectic between an articulation of a fixed symbolic cultural identity and the context of heterogeneous differences.

Amy Tan's more recent *Joy Luck Club* refigures this topos of generational conflict in a different social context, among first- and second-generation Mandarin Chinese in San Francisco. Tan's book rearticulates the generational themes of *Eat a Bowl of Tea* but deviates from the figuration of Asian American identity in a masculine oedipal dilemma by refiguring it in terms of mothers and daughters. This shift to the relationship between women alludes to the important changes after the repeal acts of 1943–1952, which permitted Chinese women to immigrate to the United States and eventually shifted the "bachelor" society depicted in Chu's novel to a "family" society. Yet to an even greater degree than *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, *Joy Luck Club* risks being appropriated as a text that privatizes social conflicts and contradictions, precisely by confining them to the "feminized" domestic sphere of family relations. In *Joy Luck Club*, both privatized generational conflict and the "feminized" relations between mothers and daughters are made to figure the broader social shifts of Chinese immigrant formation.²⁶

Joy Luck Club represents the first-person narratives of four sets of Chinese-born mothers and their American-born daughters; the daughters attempt to come to terms with their mothers' demands, while the mothers try to interpret their daughters' deeds, the novel thus expressing a tension between the "Chinese" expectation of filial respect and the "American" inability to fulfill that expectation. Although it was heralded and marketed as a novel about mother-daughter relations in the Chinese American family (one cover review characterized it as a "story that shows us China, Chinese American women and their families, and the mystery of the mother-

daughter bond in ways that we have not experienced before”), *Joy Luck Club* also betrays antagonisms that are not exclusively generational but due as well to different conceptions of class and gender among Chinese Americans. Toward the end of the novel, for example, Lindo and Waverly Jong reach a climax of misunderstanding, in a scene that takes place in a central site for the production of American femininity: the beauty parlor. After telling the stylist to give her mother a “soft wave,” Waverly asks her mother, Lindo, if she is in agreement. The mother narrates: “I smile. I use my American face. That’s the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand. But inside I am becoming ashamed. I am ashamed she is ashamed. Because she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother but she is not proud of me.”²⁷ The American-born daughter believes she is treating her mother, rather magnanimously, to a day of pampering at a chic salon; the Chinese-born mother receives this gesture as an insult, clear evidence of a daughter ashamed of her mother’s looks. The scene not only marks the separation of mother and daughter by generation but, perhaps more important, their separation by class and cultural differences that lead to divergent interpretations of how “femininity” is understood and signified. On the one hand, the Chinese-born Lindo and American-born Waverly have different class values and opportunities; the daughter’s belief in the pleasure of a visit to an expensive San Francisco beauty parlor seems senselessly extravagant to the mother whose rural family had escaped poverty only by marrying her to the son of a less humble family in their village. On the other hand, the mother and daughter also conflict over definitions of proper female behavior. Lindo assumes female identity is constituted in the practice of a daughter’s deference to her elders, whereas for Waverly, this identity is determined by a woman’s financial independence from her parents and her financial equality with men, by her ability to speak her desires, and is cultivated and signified in the styles and shapes that represent middle-class feminine beauty. In this sense, it is possible to read *Joy Luck Club* not as a novel that exclusively depicts “the mystery of the mother-daughter bond” among generations of Chinese American women but rather as a text that thematizes how the trope of the mother-daughter relationship comes to symbolize Asian American culture. That is, we can read the novel as commenting on the national public’s aestheticizing of

mother-daughter relationships in its discourse about Asian Americans, by placing this construction within the context of the differences—of class and culturally specific definitions of gender—that are rendered invisible by the privileging of this trope.

Before concluding, I turn to a final text that not only restates the narrative that opposes nativism and assimilation but also articulates a critique of that narrative, calling the nativist/assimilationist dyad into question. If *Joy Luck Club* can be said to pose the dichotomy of nativism and assimilation by multiplying the figure of generational conflict and thematizing the privatized trope of the mother-daughter relationship, then Peter Wang's film *A Great Wall* (1985)—both in its emplotment and in its medium of representation—offers yet another alternative.²⁸ Wang's film unsettles both poles of the antinomy of nativist essentialism and assimilation by performing a continual geographical juxtaposition and exchange between the national spaces of the People's Republic of China and the United States. *A Great Wall* portrays the visit of Leo Fang's Chinese American family to China and their month-long stay with Leo's sister's family, the Chaos, in Beijing. The film concentrates on the primary contrast between the habits, customs, and assumptions of the Chinese in China and the Chinese Americans in California by going back and forth between shots of Beijing and northern California, in a type of continual filmic "migration" between the two, as if to thematize in its very form the travel between cultural spaces. From the first scene, however, in the opposition between "native" and "assimilated" spaces, the film foregrounds that neither space begins as a pure, uncontaminated site or origin; and as the camera eye shuttles back and forth, both poles of the constructed opposition shift and are altered. (Indeed, the Great Wall of China, from which the film takes its title, is a monument to the historical condition that not even ancient China was "pure" but coexisted with "foreign barbarians" against which the Middle Kingdom erected such barriers.) In this regard, the film contains a number of emblematic images that call attention to the syncretic, composite quality of many cultural spaces, particularly in the era of transnational capital: the young Chinese Liu is given a Coca-Cola by his scholar-father when he finishes the college entrance exam; children crowd around the single village television to watch a Chinese opera singer imitate Pavarotti singing Italian opera; the Chinese

student learning English recites the Gettysburg Address. Although the film concentrates on both illustrating and dissolving the apparent opposition between Chinese Chinese and American Chinese, a number of other contrasts are likewise explored: the differences between generations within both the Chao and the Fang families; differences between men and women (accentuated by two scenes, one in which Grace Fang and Mrs. Chao talk about their husbands and children, the other in which Chao and Leo get drunk together); and finally, the differences between capitalist and Communist societies (highlighted in a scene in which the Chao and Fangs talk about their different attitudes toward “work”). The representations of these other contrasts complicate and diversify the ostensible focus on cultural differences between Chinese and Chinese Americans, as if to testify to the condition that there is never only one exclusive valence of difference but rather that cultural difference is always simultaneously bound up with gender, economics, age, and other distinctions. In other words, when Leo says to his wife that the Great Wall makes the city “just as difficult to leave as to get in,” the wall at once signifies the construction of a variety of barriers—not only between Chinese and Americans but also between generations, men and women, capitalism and Communism—as well as the impossibility of ever remaining bounded and impenetrable, of resisting change, recomposition, and reinvention.

The film continues with a series of contrasts: the differences in their bodily comportments when the Chinese American Paul and the Chinese Liu play table tennis, between Leo’s jogging and Mr. Chao’s tai chi, between Grace Fang’s and Mrs. Chao’s ideas of what is fitting and fashionable for the female body. The two families have different senses of space and of the relation between family members. Ultimately, just as the Chao are marked by the visit from their American relatives, by the time the Fang family returns home to California, each brings back a memento or practice from their Chinese trip, and they, too, are altered. In other words, rather than privileging either a nativist or assimilationist view or even espousing a “Chinese American” resolution of differences, *A Great Wall* performs a filmic “migration” by shuttling between the two national cultural spaces. We are left, by the end of the film, with the sense of culture as dynamic and open material site.

In keeping with the example of *A Great Wall*, we might consider as a possible model for the ongoing construction of “identity” the migratory process suggested by Wang’s filmic technique and emplotment, conceiving of the making and practice of Asian American culture as contested and unsettled, as taking place in the movement between sites and in the strategic occupation of heterogeneous and conflicting positions. This is not to suggest that “hybrid” cultural identities are occasioned only by voluntary mobility and literally by the privileges that guarantee such mobility; as Saul-Ling Cynthia Wong has pointed out in *Reading Asian American Literature*, the American nation is founded on myths of mobility that disavow the histories of both the immobility of ghettoization and the forced dislocations of Asian Americans.²⁹ Rather, the materialist concept of hybridity conveys that the histories of forced labor migrations, racial segregation, economic displacement, and internment are left in the material traces of “hybrid” cultural identities; these hybridities are always in the process of, on the one hand, being appropriated and commodified by commercial culture and, on the other, of being rearticulated for the creation of oppositional “resistance cultures.” Hybridization is not the “free” oscillation between or among chosen identities. It is the uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violences of the U.S. state, and the capital imperatives served by the United States and by the Asian states from which they come, and the process through which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives.

The grouping “Asian American” is not a natural or static category; it is a socially constructed unity, a situationally specific position, assumed for political reasons. It is “strategic” in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s sense of a “strategic use of a positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.”³⁰ The concept of “strategic essentialism” suggests that it is possible to utilize specific signifiers of racialized ethnic identity, such as “Asian American,” for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of “Asian American” so as to insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower. This is not to suggest that we can or should do away with the notion of Asian American identity, for to stress only dif-

ferences would jeopardize the hard-earned unity that has been achieved in the last thirty years of Asian American politics. Just as the articulation of identity depends on the existence of a horizon of differences, the articulation of differences dialectically depends on a socially constructed and practiced notion of identity. As Stuart Hall suggests, cultural identity is “not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin.’”³¹ In the 1990s, we can afford to rethink the notion of racialized ethnic identity in terms of differences of national origin, class, gender, and sexuality rather than presuming similarities and making the erasure of particularity the basis of unity. In the 1990s, we can diversify our practices to include a more heterogeneous group and to enable crucial alliances—with other groups of color, class-based struggles, feminist coalitions, and sexuality-based efforts—in the ongoing work of transforming hegemony.