

## Preface

Understanding Asian immigration to the United States is fundamental to understanding the racialized foundations of both the emergence of the United States as a nation and the development of American capitalism. This is far from claiming that Asians are the only group to have been racialized in the founding of the United States but rather to suggest that the history of the nation's attempt to resolve the contradictions between its economic and political imperatives through laws that excluded Asians from citizenship—from 1790 until the 1940s—contributes to our general understanding of *race* as a contradictory site of struggle for cultural, economic, as well as political membership in the United States. To this end, I have engaged in a materialist critique of the institution of citizenship, not to discount the important struggles through which Asian immigrants have become, after the 1940s, citizens and in that capacity have widened the meaning of “rights” in democratic society, but to name the genealogy of the legal exclusion, disenfranchisement, and restricted enfranchisement of Asian immigrants as a genealogy of the American institution of citizenship. I have sought to link this particular genealogy of citizenship to the importance of Asia in the development of Western capitalism globally and the use of Asian labor in the development of capitalist America. The failure of citizenship to guarantee truly equal rights to all the nation's citizenry is not only an index of the historical and persistent racial, class, and gender contradictions of American society but also a condition exacerbated since World War II by the contradiction between U.S. national institutions and the imperatives of the global economy.

In the period from 1850 to World War II, Asians entered the United States along the economic axis, while the state has simultaneously distinguished Asian immigrants along racial and citizenship lines, accordingly distancing Asian Americans—even as citizens—from the terrain of national culture. In light of the importance of American national culture in forming subjects as citizens, this distance has created the conditions for the emergence of Asian American culture as an alternative cultural site and the place where

the contradictions of immigrant history are read, performed, and critiqued. My discussions consider Asian American cultural forms as alternatives to national cultural forms and as sites for the emergence of subjects and practices that are not exhausted by the narrative of American citizenship. Culture is the terrain through which the individual speaks as a member of the contemporary national collectivity, but culture is also a mediation of history, the site through which the past returns and is remembered, however fragmented, imperfect, or disavowed. Through that remembering, that re-composition, new forms of subjectivity and community are thought and signified. Cultural forms are not inherently “political”—indeed, culture in the modern nation-state has been traditionally burdened to resolve what the political forms of the state cannot—but the contradictions that produce cultural differences are taken up by oppositional practices that are brought to bear on the political institutions that presently exist. Alternative cultural forms and practices do not offer havens of resolution but are often eloquent descriptions of the ways in which the law, labor exploitation, racialization, and gendering work to prohibit alternatives. Some cultural forms succeed in making it possible to live and inhabit alternatives in the encounter with those prohibitions; some permit us to imagine what we have still yet to live.

In this book, I have wished to make connections between Asian American cultural studies and the current range of ethnic cultural studies projects, between discussions of race in the United States and Marxist theories, and between literary study and feminist analyses of racialized women’s work. I am not positing an orthodoxy to be followed but connecting these discussions in order to open a space in which others, perhaps finding worthy gaps, errors, or elisions, will make use of and build on the work only begun here.

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