

In the series:

Asian American History and Culture

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ORIENTALS

ASIAN AMERICANS IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Temple University Press **PHILADELPHIA**

The film *Mississippi Masala* is a contemporary example of Asian Americans' resistance to their racial subordination as Orientals in popular culture. Directed by Mira Nair, the film is ostensibly about an interracial love affair between an Indian American woman and an African American man, but maps a critique of the contemporary racial landscape in America shaped by class, gender and immigration. *Mississippi Masala* simultaneously calls our attention to the transnational character of contemporary Asian American immigration and to the multiple statuses of Asian Americans, as both bourgeoisie and working class and as a "middleman minority" within local racial and class hierarchies. The film rejects both the evasion of liberal multiculturalism and the essentialism of ethnonationalism in favor of a political consciousness shaped by an understanding of contradictory histories and the complexity of power. Only the full consciousness of these global histories and local positions make possible class alliances and trans-racial coalitions. In its utopian vision of a racial democracy, *Mississippi Masala* stands with Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* in the Asian American tradition of resisting the Oriental.

The "Heathen Chinees" on God's Free Soil

What Was Your Name in the States? Nostalgic California

Oh, what was your name in the States?
Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?
Did you murder your wife
And fly for your life?
Say, what was your name in the States?¹

The popular song "What Was Your Name in The States?" invoked the often shadowy, sometimes tragic, background of many an American who fled to the California gold country. It also established California as a place sufficiently distant to destabilize personal histories, a space for rehabilitation if not redemption. In the 1850s, California was constructed in the popular mind as a Jacksonian community of independent small producers, miners, and pioneers. These men imagined California as a place where a lost American organic community could be reconstructed and their own identities remade. Mid-century California, on the fringe of the American core economy, was the site of a nostalgia wrought by a sense of collapsed space and time. Its distance from "the States" and its position at the farthest reach of the continent represented both the expanse and the limits of continental expansion.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, James Cook, the British explorer of the South Pacific, first used the word "nostalgia" in its pathological sense as "a form of melancholia caused by a prolonged absence from one's home or country, severe homesickness." In 1770, Cook noted in his journals of

his voyages to the South Pacific, "The greatest part of them [the ship's company] was now pretty far gone with the longing for home which the Physicians have gone so far as to esteem a disease under the name of Nostalgia." A mid-nineteenth-century meaning of nostalgia is the "sense of loss of time," and this temporal sense is extended to the "regret or sorrowful longing for the conditions of a past age; regretful or wistful memory or recall of an earlier time." The dictionary's definitions remind us that nostalgia can be traced to the dislocation that resulted from early capitalist expansion.

I remember, I remember when the Yuba used to pay,
With nothing but a rocker, five hundred dollars a day.
We used to think 't'would always last, and would, with perfect ease,
If only Uncle Sam had stopped the coming of Chinese.

"California As It Was and Is," published in 1855 in *Put's Original California Songster*, laid the blame for the passing of California's "golden" era squarely on the arrival of immigrants from China. "Put" was the pseudonym of John A. Stone, who wrote the largest number and most popular of California gold rush songs, including "Sweet Betsy from Pike." Stone had come to California in search of gold and discovered a single quartz boulder that contained a vein of gold worth \$15,000. Put immediately retired to write songs as a full-time occupation.² The subtitle of his collection, *Giving in a Few Words What Would Occupy Volumes, Detailing the Hopes, Trials, and Joys of a Miner's Life*, explains the cultural project of the publication. The songster constructs a popular narrative of California from the vantage point of its imagined past. Like many of the other songs in the collection, "California As It Was and Is" is a lament mourning the passing of an earlier California, imagined as a pre-capitalist idyll. The singer is called to "remember" his cabin "still among the sugar pines" and a time when "we hadn't any laws/ We could live in peace among the diggers and their squaws."

In the pastoral image of "California As It Was and Is," the Chinese immigrant represents the entering wedge of disruptive capitalism. After the arrival of the Chinese, independent placer mining on the Yuba collapsed and, the song complains, "We're compelled to pay a tax which people say is gambled off. . . . And certain ones are trying to give our mineral lands away/ to build a railroad from the States to San Francisco Bay." The song goes on to lament the state of party politics—"But now its Whigs and Democrats, and Know Nothings of late/All fighting after office, with a chance to rob the State"—and in the face of rampant corruption mourns the loss of a more direct system of justice: "When Captain Lynch was boss, we had no use for prison brigs. . . . But now it's thieves on every side, political thieves in flocks."

Virtually all the song's claims are false. The arrival of Chinese miners in the mining districts of California had nothing to do with the decline in gold prices. Miners and other Anglo settlers carried out a ruthless extermination of the largely peaceful coastal Indians of California. Even the song's picturesque image of the bucolic miner's cabin "beneath a sugar pine" was more likely to have been a ragged tent in a rock-strewn arroyo. Like "California As It Was and Is," a score of popular songs published between 1855 and 1882 portrayed the Chinese immigrant as an agent of economic decline and social disorder for free white workingmen and their families.

"California as It Was And Is" differed little from the hundreds of songs that popularized a nostalgic pastoral vision of California for nineteenth-century American audiences. The music historian Nicholas Tawa pinpoints the 1820s as the period in which a mass market for music developed and songwriters began to craft tunes for a popular audience. By the 1850s, musicians could speak of "the people's song" or "a music for the millions" that was distinct from the opera and art songs intended for a musically sophisticated and trained elite. Rooted in American and British sentimental ballads and the minstrel show, the new music was simple and straightforward, its message immediately and reassuringly identifiable. A writer for the *Musical Review* in 1855 remarked, "By the people's song we mean a style so simple and easy (yet pure and chaste) as is ever within the reach of all, including the uncultivated and unlearned."³

Popular music offered a powerful medium for an ideology of nostalgia. As a ritual that both reflects and produces group solidarity, popular song is in the broadest sense liturgical.⁴ Popular songs were not to be passively consumed in the listening, but were intended for singing around the campfire, in the boardinghouse parlor, in the saloon and music hall, and at the political rally. As oral ritual, popular music provided social identity and encouraged group solidarity. The lyric imagery, symbolism, and metonymy of popular songs evoked memory and emotion, linking the atomized present to the collective past. The very simplicity of its form, its use of fixed chord progressions, its emphasis on strong, unadorned melody, assured effortless and immediate accessibility to "the uncultivated and unlearned." An emphasis on harmony brought the individual into the group's voice. At once audience and performer, the singers not only apprehended the lyric of the song but enacted its narrative as performance.

Despite its simplicity, this "music for the millions," with all of its references to a pastoral past, rarely came out of a folkloric or oral tradition in an ethnological sense. Although many of these popular songs were set to traditional tunes and melodies, songs published in songsters relied on lyrics or melodies pirated from currently popular tunes or minstrel

songs.⁵ "California As It Was and Is" derived from an older favorite, "I Remember When," a nostalgic lament for lost childhood innocence. Produced by urban writers and publishers for consumption by a largely urban audience, these songs were written in the first instance for the saloon, minstrel show, or musical stage before finding their way into the songster.

In the decades between 1820 and 1860, the nation's population tripled, going from just under 10,000,000 to more than 31,000,000.⁶ By the 1850s, when the publishing of inexpensive songsters became a truly national business, American printers had already been turning out inexpensive collections of popular songs for more than a century.⁷ In 1846 the development of the "Lightning Press," a steam-powered rotary press, allowed printers to increase their output by 400 percent and lower the price of reproduction. In the 1850s songsters could be bought for a dime; by the 1880s, for as little as a nickel. Songsters like *Put's Original* were published in cities throughout the country in inexpensive and portable pocket editions, primarily for the millions of new city dwellers.

In the two decades before the Civil War, the Hutchinson Family Singers, natives of New Hampshire, became the premier troupe of family singers in America. The Hutchinsons had been deeply moved by the religious fervor of the "Second Great Awakening" that swept through rural New England in the 1830s. By the late 1840s they had become the musical voice of moral reform, singing of salvation and temperance. The Hutchinsons received their greatest notoriety for bringing the Free Soil and Abolition messages to the popular musical stage. One of their Free Soil songs, "Ho for California," brought together two visions of California as an earthly paradise. In the first few stanzas of the song, California was portrayed as a "promised land" where gold could be had for the picking up.

We've formed our band and are well mann'd,
To journey afar to the promised land,
Where the golden ore is rich in store,
On the banks of the Sacramento shore.

As we explore that distant shore,
We'll fill our pockets with the shining ore.
And how 'twill sound, as the word goes round,
Of our picking up gold by the dozen pound.

In another stanza, California embodies the prophesied golden City on a Hill, a providentially ordained land reserved for Free Labor.

Ho for California!
In the days of old, the Prophets told
Of the City to come, all framed in gold,

Peradventure they saw the day
Now dawning in California.

O! the land we'll save, for the bold and the brave
Have determined there never shall breathe a slave;
Let foes recoil, for the sons of toil
Shall make California GOD'S FREE SOIL.

Then, ho! Brothers ho! to California go,
No slaves shall toil on Gods' Free Soil,
On the banks of the Sacramento.
Heigh O, and away we go
Chanting our songs of Freedom, O.⁸

Ironically, this popular Free Soil vision of California was sung to the tune of Dan Emmett's blackface minstrel song "De Boatman Dance."⁹

Thousands had flocked to the Sierra Nevada foothills after gold was found at Sutter's Mill. For the many men who lacked experience, skills, or capital, prospecting for gold was the more alluring alternative to becoming wage workers in the rapidly industrializing Northeast or to farming on the prairie.¹⁰ For such men, prospecting for gold represented a return to the small producer economy. Henry George, in *Poverty and Progress*, his magnum opus defense of the white small producer, "remembered" gold mining in California during the early years of the gold rush as a pastoral pursuit strikingly similar to that memorialized in "California As It Was and Is."

The placer miner, who found in a river bed or surface deposit the glittering particles accumulated for ages by a slow processes of nature, picked up or washed out his "wages" (as he called them) in actual money—coin being scarce, gold dust passed as currency by weight—and at the end of the day had his wages in a buckskin bag in his pocket. There can be no dispute as to whether these wages came from capital or not. They were manifestly the produce of his labor.¹¹

California imagined as a small producer economy—free of slavery, free of the cash nexus of capitalism, and free of the Chinese, "when the Yuba used to pay, with nothing but a pan and pick, five hundred dollars, in a day," represented the nostalgic heart of Free Soil California.

The great economic transformation that took place between 1815 and 1855 was experienced culturally as a collapse of both space and time.¹² The effects of capitalist expansion were at once global and local. The rise of factory production created both an industrial metropolitan core and a huge rural periphery that was tied to the core through a web of commerce. Industrial capitalism fundamentally changed the relationship between town and country, between master and servant, and among age-old relationships within the family; and it loosened the web of social

relations, mores, and values that had, as tradition, for centuries held village and family life together. Connections were forged between places that had not previously been linked; age-old links were sundered. Distances, measured as travel time, between these newly linked places were shortened by roads, rail, and steamship routes, and by the monetarization of labor, which could pay for travel. Individuals often experienced the effects of these profound transformations as an inchoate sense of loss.

Among immigrants from the industrializing Northeast, nostalgia for a pre-industrial pastoral was already part of the cultural vocabulary. Historian Herbert Gutman finds that female millworkers writing in the *Lowell Offering*, a journal published during the mid-1840s, showed a deep "attachment to nature [that] was the concern of persons working machines in a society still predominantly 'a garden.'" In neighboring New Hampshire, mill workers petitioned their employers not to cut down an elm tree to make room for an additional mill. They wrote that the huge tree "belonged to a time when the yell of the red man and the scream of the eagle were alone heard on the banks of the Merrimack."¹³

One Eastern transplant who noted the nostalgic sensibility even in the earliest days of the American settlement of California was Hubert Howe Bancroft. In 1849, while in his early teens, Bancroft accompanied his parents to California from Springfield, Mass. In 1856, the young Bancroft established H. H. Bancroft, a trading and publishing house, one of whose projects was to amass material for documenting virtually every aspect of California life. Although its founder was not university-trained, H. H. Bancroft would become, over the next three decades, the preeminent historian of California.

Bancroft's description of San Francisco's "steamer days"—the two or three times each month when the mail steamers arrived and departed from San Francisco, connecting it with the States—evokes the intensity of the nostalgia at the heart of the California imaginary. Steamer days stirred up anxiety about the collapsing structure of time and space. "It is difficult," Bancroft writes, "for one who has not lived it through to realize with what nervous pulsations these vessels were watched as they came and went." Nervousness gave physical expression to the sense of dislocation, the sense of being "beyond the pale of civilization, of Sabbath and home influence, of all the sweet memories and amenities that make life endurable." Americans in Gold Rush California were "voluntary exiles, cut off from friends and all congenial society, doomed for a period of life of self-abnegation and hard labor." Even as Steamer Days reminded Americans of their exile, the arrivals and departures of the mail packets and clippers were "links in the life-chain that was to bind the future to the past."¹⁴

Steamer days, for Bancroft, seemed to represent the intensity of early California capitalism. They captured the complex amalgam of nostalgia, hope, and memory, the collapse of space and time that California, at the intersection of core and periphery, represented. On these occasions the past and future seemed to mingle with the present, and hope, regret, and dogged determination filled the heart with longings indescribable.¹⁵ In this state of nostalgic funk, Bancroft wrote,

The present went for nothing, or worse than nothing, perhaps; for it might be a nightmare, a horrible dream, something to be blotted from the memory as soon as it ended. When the steamer came in . . . what a flood of tender recollections rushed in upon the soul!¹⁶

Bancroft observed that just beneath the surface "flood of tender recollections" resuscitated by the arrival of the mail packet lay the unrelenting cash nexus of a burgeoning capitalist economy.

Steamer-days . . . were the great tickings in social and commercial time. Bills were made to fall due on those days, letters must be written on that day and collections and remittances made. . . . They were feverish fidgety days. From morning till night collection clerks with a package of bills in one hand, and the mouth of a canvas coin-bag slung over the shoulder in the other, were rushing about the streets, and seldom was the office lamp extinguished before twelve or two o'clock.¹⁷

Americans in California did not only pine for "the States" but almost immediately constructed a nostalgic narrative about California itself. Bancroft noted the tendency of even the earliest of Americans settlers to speak of San Francisco in nostalgic and pastoral terms. Bancroft cited at length William Van Voorhies' address to the Society of California Pioneers in 1853.

I can well remember . . . when the bay of San Francisco afforded ample room and verge enough for easy and unobstructed passage of the largest class mail steamers. . . .

I can remember well also when an unobtrusive *casa*, compared with the immense structures which now rise here and there at magnificent distances, was all that met the eye; when the Parker House, the old Portsmouth house, the United States Hotel, Howard's Store, the venerable adobe on the Plaza, then a customs house, afterwards a broker's shop and now no more, with one or two other shanties, looked to us immigrants of '49 like palaces; when seraped natives chased the wild bullock over the surrounding hills, satisfying a lean lank traffic, not commerce, with the offering of a hide or horn; when a Chinese was a *lusus naturae*, and a woman on the street—which was an imaginary line drawn in red and blue in on paste board—an absolute and unmitigated wonder.¹⁸

By this time Chinese were no longer freaks of nature in San Francisco. Between 1848 and 1853, some 22,000 Chinese had arrived in California. Their number would double in the next two years. A handful of Chinese arrived in San Francisco prior to the gold rush, but substantial numbers of immigrants from Guangdong Province set out for California after the news of the gold strike reached South China. In 1850 and 1851, advertisements in Hong Kong newspapers attracted passengers for ships returning to America.¹⁹ By 1851 the rush from Guangdong to California was on in force.

Between 1848 and 1851, the great majority of Chinese immigrants to California were import-export merchants, shopkeepers, and tradesmen.²⁰ Skilled craftsmen were also among the Chinese who came; the first stone buildings in San Francisco were built by Chinese stonemasons with stone imported from Guangdong.²¹ Peter Parker, the U.S. consul in Canton, reported that between January 1, 1851, and January 1 of the following year, 14,000 Chinese embarked for California. The following year the number of immigrants jumped to 20,025; it leveled off to an average of roughly 4,000 immigrants per year for the next decade.²² This initial surge seems to have been a response to the lure of gold; immigrants came primarily from the farming districts outside Canton, and many headed into the mining districts in search of gold. By the mid 1850s California seems to have lost its allure for the Chinese. Only in the late 1860s, when China coast newspapers again carried advertisements for workers on California's railroads and in agriculture, was there another wave of immigration from China.²³

The arrival of the Chinese disrupted the nostalgic image of pastoral California evoked by Put's song or Van Voorhies' orations by providing a visible reminder of the capitalist enterprise at the heart of the American settlement of California. But long before the Chinese arrived in large numbers in the 1850s, American merchants from New England and the Northeast had begun to pull Spanish and Mexican California into the trade orbit of the United States.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Boston traders had begun to see San Francisco as an outpost in the web of commerce that tied Boston, Canton, and Hawaii. By 1820, Bryant, Sturgis and Co. had made San Francisco a key port in its China trade and had made huge profits in the trade in sea otter pelts. When the Mexican government authorized trade in hides and tallow at California ports in 1822, Bryant Sturgis, along with other American and British firms, seized the opportunity to tap a new supply of raw material for the growing shoe and harness industry in New England. Alfred Robinson, the first Bryant Sturgis agent in San Francisco, is estimated to have shipped a half million hides to New

England ports alone. The San Francisco trade was immensely profitable; during the peak of the hide trade in the mid-1830s, American merchants could sell their manufactured goods for prices that averaged 300 percent above the Boston cost.²⁴ San Francisco merchants expanded their trade so quickly in the four years after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill that only three cities—New York, Boston, and New Orleans—could claim a larger share of the nation's foreign commerce. California merchants developed a near-monopoly on the Hawaiian and Philippine trade, built a respectable trade with Japan, and shared the China trade with New York. California agriculture in the 1850s and 1860s fed a coastal shipping trade that outstripped the shipping trade to Eastern ports. By the time of the Civil War, San Francisco was the nation's sixth busiest port.²⁵

Chinese immigration was part of a global working-class migration that fueled San Francisco's explosive population growth in the 1850s and 1860s. Compared to the country as a whole, an extraordinarily ethnically diverse population settled in San Francisco. In 1850 only one in ten Americans had been born overseas, but fully half of San Francisco's residents had been born abroad. In 1860 San Francisco trailed after only New York and Boston as a center of immigration. California attracted not only old-stock Anglo-Americans displaced from farms and workshops in the Northeast, but also immigrants from the hinterlands of Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

The transition to the market economy in capitalism's periphery was likely to be experienced as economic hardship and social dislocation. This was as true in Andalusia, Norway, or the Mezzogiorno, or the West Counties of Ireland, as it was in South China, where between 1830 and 1930 more than 70 percent of the peasants lost their land.²⁶ The hope of millions of peasants and laborers was to migrate toward the economic core. Money, now earned as wages from the landlord or borrowed against future wages in the metropole, became the key to travel along the new steamship and railroad lines that connected the world's countryside to its cities. Labor historian David Montgomery observes,

One thing was clear to immigrants from the periphery. Their own world had become monetized. . . . By the turn of the century, however, rural laborers in those countries knew well that they could earn in one day in the United States what they could in five or six days at home.²⁷

The California Ball: Crisis and Chaos

Those who were fortunate enough to take gold from California's Free Soil, or to extract it from others who had, filled the forward compartments of the steamers, "going home with all the prestige of travel and

adventure in strange lands," Bancroft observed. He noted that these sojourners were careful to project a suitable image of themselves as pioneer miners.

It is matter of pride with many to be seen by their friends in their mining costume; so the bushy hair and the long beard are protected with care, and every hole in the battered hat, every patch in the woolen shirt, every dirt stain on the greasy pantaloons, are regarded with affection.²⁸

For many others the fevered search for gold led to failure, frustration, and ruin. Economic growth in California in the middle decades of the nineteenth century was chaotic, and prosperity wildly uneven. During the 1850s, the San Francisco-based economy experienced four separate cycles of boom and bust related more to local supply and demand problems than to the national business cycle. Although working-class men from the East continued to arrive in San Francisco to fuel California's population growth, only one person in ten stayed for more than thirty years, and three out of four left within eight years of arriving in the city.²⁹

Bancroft also observed hundreds of these less successful sojourners boarding the same steamers for "home."

In the steerage also were many penniless persons, broken in health and spirits going home to die. There were those . . . already morally dead; there were self-pitying unfortunates, whining and complaining; . . . and there were those who had manfully fought the battle and had been beaten. Faithfully and patiently these last had toiled and suffered, hope and fear alternating between fortune and disease, unwilling to give themselves the needed rest and care with wealth and happiness just within their grasp; and so, with their pale faces, and sunken eyes, and hollow cheeks, they feebly drag themselves about with hope crushed, and this world forever lost to them.³⁰

One such failed sojourner was Hinton Rowan Helper. His family, like many of the others in the area, were non-slave-holding small farmers in Rowan County, in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Although his father died when Helper was young, the family managed to send him to a well-known local academy. From there, Hinton Helper apprenticed as a clerk in Salisbury, N.C., and then went north. When fortune eluded him in New York, he left for the gold fields of California.

Although he had not killed his wife, Helper, like many another immigrant to California, arrived with something of a shadowed past in "the States." While an apprentice in North Carolina, he had embezzled several hundred dollars from his employer, but he voluntarily paid off this "debt" after he settled in New York. In 1850, he quit the city for the gold fields.

Failing to find gold or any other financial success in California, Helper

left California five years later to embark on a career as a writer. Hinton Helper would become infamous for his white supremacist antislavery tract, *The Impending Crisis of the South*. Published in 1857, the massive volume was an argument in favor of abolition as a solution to a greater problem than slavery—"miscegenation." *The Crisis* became the center of heated debate on the floor of an already deeply divided U.S. Congress and is credited as much as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with bringing about the Civil War.³¹

After his stint in the mining country, Helper failed to find suitable employment in San Francisco; before leaving he wrote *Land of Gold*, a book intended to lay bare the myth of California as paradise regained.³² Helper excoriated California, from the weather to the land itself, as barren and unproductive. But what most appalled him was the abandonment of moral rectitude in the feverish search for gold. Helper wrote obsessively about the scarcity of proper white middle-class women in California; without these natural bearers of moral order, righteous young men like himself could not survive, let alone prosper. Hinton Helper left California frustrated and angry, unable to realize its golden promise of redemption.

Put's song "The California Ball" gave a somewhat humorous voice to the feeling of social and moral dislocation that many men like Helper experienced in the rapidly expanding capitalist economy of California. In a parody of California society at play, it relied on the trope of the ball common to popular music, especially minstrelsy. As a signifier of race and class, the ball suggested the formality and hierarchy of the social elite and alluded to the minstrel songs that poked fun at elite rituals for the benefit of working-class audiences. In minstrelsy, the ball was most familiarly brought into song as the "Negro Ball." This juxtaposition of the subordinated racial Other and elite culture was calculated to strike its audiences as incongruous, unnatural, and hilarious.

In much the same way that Helper had described the collapse of a moral system as a result of gold fever, Put saw the distinctions rooted in social class washed away in California.

T'would make our eastern people cave to see the great and small,
The old, with one foot in the grave, all "splurging" at a ball.

In California even women were unmoored; so much so that their "natural" instincts for motherhood itself seemed to be lost to the feverish pleasures of the Ball:

A dozen babies on the bed and all begin to squall;
The mothers wish the brats were dead for crying at the ball.

Similarly, sexual prohibitions based on age seemed also to have dissolved.

Old women in their Bloomer tights
Are fond of "balance all!"
And "weighty" when it comes to jigs
And so on at the ball!

A yearling miss fills out the set
Although not very tall;
"I'm anxious now" she says, "you bet,
To proceed with the ball!"

Just as Hinton Helper was horrified that marriage relationship was degraded in California, Put saw marriage vows abandoned in the "California Ball."

A married woman—gentle dove—
With nary tooth at all,
Sits in the corner making love
To some "pimp" at the ball!

In Put's California, sexual license, naked aggression, and disregard for "proper" ethnic distinctions are openly displayed and condoned.

A drunken loafer at the dance,
Informs them one and all
With bowie knife stuck in his pants,
"The best man at the ball! . . .

The Spanish hags of ill repute,
For brandy loudly call:
And no one dares their right dispute,
To freedom at the ball!³³

For Hinton Rowan Helper, the fevered race for gold had led to a disastrously uncontrolled, willy-nilly settlement of California by a "motley crowd" of nations and peoples, so that "the tattooed [sic] islander, the solemn Chinaman, and the slovenly Chilian [sic] mingled with the more decidedly white and black from Europe and Africa" and now were "thronging in the streets."³⁴

Helper wrote with bitter irony that gold, capitalism's "mighty talisman, had transformed a wilderness into a busy place of industry, a barren peninsula into a blooming city." The incessant and unrelenting search for gold had battered down the Chinese Wall between nations, "harmonizing the antagonistic elements of this strange brotherhood." By this Helper did not mean a universal brotherhood of man but an unnatural admixture of races that deterred the immigration of True [white] Womanhood to the moral wilderness that was California.³⁵

In one respect Helper's observation was correct; a motley crew had settled in San Francisco. Between 1850 and 1870 San Francisco experienced a dizzying rate of population growth. By then only nine cities in the country were larger. When the opening shots of the Civil War were fired, there were more than 3,000 Chinese and almost 2,000 African Americans among the 57,000 residents of San Francisco. There were even more European immigrants in the city, principally from the British Isles and Germany. By the end of the war the city's population had doubled, to more than 100,000; and by the end of the decade, one out of every three San Franciscans had been born in Ireland, Germany, China, or Italy.³⁶

The well-known minstrel performer Billy Rice evoked this diversity in his song "The Chinese Ball," published in his *Ethiopian Comic Songster*.

I'll tell you something that happened
Going to 'Frisco o'er the plain;
May I be clubbed in three different languages
If ever I go there again.
I met a jolly Irishman,
An ambassador from France,
Who invited me to go down to a hall
And take in a Chinese dance.

When we arrived down the hall
They were dancing the jigglewig,
their hair hung down three feet behind
Like the tail of an Irish pig.
They were dancing society polka
All round the room,
Until one great big fat Japanese
Fell into a swoon.

I started to dance at the Chinese ball,
Along with a Chinese rough,
Her front name it was Hannah
and her back name it was Snuff
I tried to take her on the pinch,
But found she couldn't be bluffed.
And when we sat down at the dinner table
You'd swear to yourself she was stuffed.³⁷

Orientalism and Race: From Chinese to Chinaman

Edward Said has argued that Orientalism is an imaginative geography and history which "helps the mind to intensify its own sense of self by dramatizing the difference and distance between what is close to it and

what is far away."³⁸ In this respect, Orientalism reifies the relationship of power between the West and Asia by constructing the Occident and Orient as cultural polarities defined by (real or imagined) distance. Although scores of Chinese had settled in the United States, mainly on the Eastern seaboard, in the decades before the California gold rush, these early settlers, scattered among the waves of European immigrants coming to the United States, were viewed primarily as curiosities embodying the exotic difference of the Orient. The arrival of thousands of Chinese settlers in California, however, undermined the definition of Oriental difference, which relied on distance. This construction of racial difference as distant and exotic was displaced (but not completely replaced) by a construction of racial difference as present and threatening. Once thousands of Chinese lived in the United States, they could no longer be imagined as simply foreign, made strange by their distance. Chinese in America were now alien and threatening through their very presence.

Before the arrival of Chinese immigrants in substantial numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, the representation of China had enjoyed a long career in American popular culture. In 1784, Peale's Museum in Philadelphia opened a display of Chinese curiosities among its collections of objects from Africa and India.³⁹ Peale's Chinese collection opened in the same year that the New York clipper *Empress of China* docked in Canton, opening the fabled "China Market" to American merchants. The Peale Museum displayed Chinese items of trade, everyday utensils, weapons, and bric-a-brac, but what attracted the greatest curiosity was the collection of wrappings used to bind the feet of Chinese women and the tiny shoes and slippers that fit bound feet. In 1799, the East India Marine Society opened its museum in Salem, displaying many artifacts from the China, India, and Pacific trade circuit. In addition to curios and other items of trade, the Salem museum featured life-size clay models of Chinese officials and the Cantonese Hong merchant Yamqua, in effect putting Chinese people on display.⁴⁰ By 1805 Peale's, which had been renamed the Philadelphia Museum, had introduced life-size figures in "life group" dioramas as a way of displaying its Chinese collections. In the Philadelphia Museum, Chinese artifacts were displayed on wax models, side-by-side with models of Native Americans and other "exotic" peoples

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drest in their real and peculiar habiliments, viz.—Chinese laborer and Gentleman; Inhabitants of Oonalaska; a Kamaskadle; an African [sic]; a Sandwich Islander; an Otaheitan; a South American; and Blue Jacket and Red-pole, celebrated Sachems of North America.⁴¹

Public interest in such displays inspired Nathan Dunn to open the Chinese Museum in conjunction with Peale's Philadelphia Museum in

1838. Dunn had been a merchant in Canton, where he had amassed a huge collection of Chinese clothes, everyday utensils, and tools, as well as prints and *objets d'art*. Peale, a Quaker, had also been a merchant in Canton for many years. Peale particularly wanted to use his collection of memorabilia to refute negative portrayals of the Chinese as barbaric heathens—being circulated by frustrated Christian missionaries—and instead to promote a positive image of the Chinese as potential trading partners. In the Chinese Museum, well over a thousand Chinese items were on display, but the central attraction were the eleven dioramas or "life groups." These groups of life-size clay figures dressed in Chinese costumes represented the hierarchy of Chinese society: high- and low-ranking mandarins, literati, ladies of rank, actors, teachers of the main Chinese religions, itinerant craftsmen, a man being carried in his sedan chair, visitors to a wealthy residence, and farmers. According to the museum's catalogue,

The visitor finds himself, as it were, transported to a new world. It is China in miniature. The view is imposing in the highest degree. The rich screen-work at the two ends of the saloon, the many-shaped and many-colored lamps suspended from the ceiling; the native paintings which cover the walls; the Chinese maxims adorning the columns and entablatures; the choice silks, gay with a hundred colors, and tastefully displayed over the cases along the north side, and the multitude of cases crowded with rare and interesting sights, form a *tout ensemble*, possessing a beauty entirely its own, and which must be seen before it can be appreciated.⁴²

The Chinese museum was a huge attraction. An estimated 100,000 people visited it between its opening in December 1838 and the summer of 1841, when the collection was moved to London. Fifty thousand copies of *Ten Thousand Chinese Things*, one of the two catalogues of the Chinese museum, were sold. However, the Chinese museum was a financial failure, and in 1849 it was sold along with the Philadelphia Museum to Phineas T. Barnum, who had opened his own American Museum in New York.

In 1834, Barnum's American Museum had introduced a live Chinese woman, one Ah Fong Moy, to its audience. Although not an actress in the theatrical sense of the word, Ah Fong Moy was far from the ethnologically "correct" but inanimate clay figures of the Chinese museum dioramas. Unlike the invasive and dehumanizing treatment of Sarah Bartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, who had been exhibited naked to a scandalized and fascinated Paris and London two decades earlier, Ah Fong Moy was presented as a "Chinese Lady," always robed in resplendent silks and often seated among luxurious Chinese furnishings."

"The Chinese Lady" was displayed against a backdrop of various

dioramas and was featured in a wide variety of narratives as far from China as the Battle of Waterloo. By the time Ah Fong Moy returned to China in 1837, she had performed "Chineseness" at the American Museum, the Brooklyn Institute, and the City Saloon in New York, and in Peale's Philadelphia Museum.⁴³

By far, Barnum's most intriguing display of the Oriental had been Chang and Eng, the "Siamese Twins," who combined the exotic with a rare physical anomaly. Chang and Eng joined Barnum in 1860, late in their stage careers, having originally had been brought to the United States in 1829 by Robert Hunter, a British merchant who had "discovered" the ethnically Chinese twins in Siam (now Thailand). After touring the United States and England for a decade with great success, the twins retired to Wilkesboro, a county seat in western North Carolina, where they established themselves as landed Southern gentry by purchasing two farms, building two separate residences, and becoming slaveholders. In 1843 Chang and Eng married the Yates sisters, Sarah and Adelaide, and between them fathered twenty-two children. Although an 1849 return to the touring circuit in the company of two of their daughters was not successful, Chang and Eng had better results from an 1853 tour of Canada and Nova Scotia along with a son and a daughter. During their stint with Barnum, the twins and two of Eng's sons performed in October 1860 at the American Museum in New York. Although they embarked on a profitable tour of California, the Civil War brought a hiatus to their tours and ruin to their plantations. After the Civil War, Chang and Eng again took to the stage circuit with their children. After Chang suffered a stroke in 1870, the twins retired permanently, and in 1874 they died. The twins' forty-year career established them as international celebrities; indeed, their fame gave their physical condition the popular name of Siamese twins.⁴⁴ Chang and Eng are among the best-remembered humans to be displayed in the nineteenth century, an era in which collections and curiosities (human and otherwise) fascinated the public in the U.S. and Europe.

The relationship among the categorical imperative of the natural sciences, ethnology, and imperialism has already been well established.⁴⁵ Although the United States had yet to expand its political jurisdiction overseas, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century it had extended its reach across the continent and developed commercial interests around the globe. This expansion demanded the cataloguing—the identification, description, and above all creation of a hierarchy—of peoples and things within the national inventory. The dioramic museum display of the Oriental categorized and naturalized cultural difference for a predominantly middle-class audience for whom a new visual expe-

rience of the nation and the world had been made possible by scientific, military, and commercial expeditions.

While the museum diorama might locate China as a distant exotic object (simultaneously desirable and repulsive in its difference) in the geographic imagery of a middle-class eager to expand its commercial horizons, the immigration of "ordinary" Chinese people to the United States had an altogether different significance. The principally working-class (formerly small producer) American settlers in California experienced the large-scale settlement of Chinese in the United States as a boundary crisis. In the minds of white immigrants from the East, Chinese who settled California from the West were anomalous; they broke the chain of westward historical progress. Immigration from China changed the meaning both of China and of California for white Americans. China could no longer be imagined simply as a distant destination to which Americans ventured to seek their fortunes in trade. It now had to be taken into account as a place from which workers came to America in search of gold and wages. The presence of Asian immigrant workers in the West meant that California could no longer be seen as a stop in a one-way trade between America and Asia. The vision of California as a place for restoration of the White Republic now had to accommodate another California, not only a point on the circuit of trade relations but also a center of capitalist production.

Not all foreign people or objects are pollutants, only those whose presence disrupts the narrative structure of the community. Pollutants are anomalies in the symbolic structure of society, things that are out of place and create a sense of disorder. A mere presence in the wrong place, the intentional or unintended crossing of a boundary, gives offense.⁴⁶ Douglas' observations about pollution help clarify the distinction between ethnicity and race. In ethnicity, boundaries of difference are constructed as permeable, and therefore ethnic differences are conceived as assimilable and nonpolluting; in race, boundaries are constructed as impermeable, and therefore racial difference is conceived as unassimilable and polluting.

Much as the "anomalous" condition of "free" persons of color in New England at the beginning of the nineteenth century constituted for whites the negative meaning of their blackness, the idea of Chinese "settlers" in California was an equally impossible anomaly, and the Chinese were constructed as pollutants.⁴⁷ Identified with the entering wedge of industrial capitalism, the Chinese came to embody all of the dislocations of Western settlement. The coming of the Chinese became a symbol for the break between a pastoral past and the commercial future that Bancroft had written about in his description of furious "steamer days" and

that Helper had mourned as the collapse of moral order. Chinese immigration became a metonym for the collapse of time and space produced by the transition to industrial capitalism, a collapse that constituted a boundary crisis within the symbolic or ideological structure of American society. This boundary crisis demanded the transformation of Chinese cultural difference from exotic to pollutant. Unlike the Chinese visitor, the Chinese settler could not be contained within the category of the Oriental in the order of commerce and empire but had to be assigned a new position as a person of color in the racial state.

The forty-year career of Chang and Eng suggests both the shift in the signification of the Chinese from object of curiosity to symbol of racial crisis and the shift in the popular sites of that signification from museum to minstrel show. Chang and Eng were first exhibited in 1829, at the peak of the popularity of Peale's Philadelphia Museum. By 1860, when Chang and Eng played Barnum's gaudy and theatrical American museum and left on their tour of California, the twins were widely identified with the minstrel show. Many minstrel shows had made "Siamese twins" part of their comedy routines; the accompanying illustration from Charley Fox's *Minstrel Songster* shows the well-known minstrels Charley Fox and Frank Dumont playing "Siamese Twins."

Human bodies, their parts and functions, are always culturally constructed. Mary Douglas has argued that as a cultural construction endowed with social meaning, the body can be read as a representation or map of the social system. She observes that the body becomes a particularly salient symbolic referent in the context of boundary crises, the physical body mirroring the boundaries of the social body. In this regard, Chang and Eng, conjoined at the chest by a five-inch fleshy mass, signified nature's failure to properly define the boundary between two individuals. In addition, Chang and Eng's marriage to the Yates sisters was a *cause celebre*, as was their fathering of twenty-two children. Both facts occasioned reports in the national newspapers. Indeed, acknowledging the public interest in their progeny, the twins in their tours of the 1850s and 1860s always included several of their children. In Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins who had become Southern slaveholding gentlemen touring with their Eurasian children, East and West had indeed met. As an embodiment of boundary crisis, symbolic of the collapse of racial, class, and sexual order, the Siamese twins were mind-boggling.

Minstrelsy was a powerful vehicle for constructing the Chinaman as a polluting racial Other in the popular imagination.⁴⁸ From the 1850s onward, the character of John Chinaman and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Japanese characters were played in yellowface on the minstrel stage. Dozens of songs, comedy skits, and stump speeches (monologues



SIAMESE TWINS.

(As performed by CHARLEY FOX and FRANK B. CONVERSE.)

31

Charley Fox Minstrel Show cover.

that featured caricatured languages and "dialects," including spurious Chinese, Irish, Dutch, Hebrew, and African American) featured "John Chinaman." So prominent was the Chinese theme in comedy theater and minstrelsy that the famed Buckley Family minstrels (originally the Buckley Ethiopian Melodists) made their home stage in New York at the Chinese Theater.

In 1849, only a year after the discovery of gold at Sutter's mill, minstrel theater arrived in San Francisco, where it met immediate success. By the mid-1850s San Francisco had become a destination for all the major minstrel companies in the country. It was such a center for minstrelsy that E. P. Christie's already famous Christie Minstrels changed their name to Christie's San Francisco Minstrels to add to their luster when traveling around the country.

Unlike the museums, which catered to an emergent middle-class audience, the minstrel show began as an entertainment for the new urban working class. Blackface minstrelsy made a place for itself on the American stage in the 1820s and -30s when production was shifting from workshop to factory and proletarianization of labor was in full swing. These were decades of deep economic and social insecurity for small producers and a new class of wage earners, both in the cities and on the farm. Blackface minstrelsy attended to the class anxieties and animosities of this nascent and stratified working class, unsure of its position and prospects. Alexander Saxton has shown that most of the major minstrel performers had come from artisan or petty bourgeois families in the urban Northeast. Reflecting their own class background as well as an affinity for the class interests of their audience, many of the most prominent minstrel performers—Daniel Emmett, E. P. Christie, Stephen Foster—were all prominent in the Northern wing of the Democratic Party.⁴⁹

In San Francisco, minstrel theater was closely identified with its principal impresario, Thomas McGuire. An Irish immigrant, McGuire had been a saloonkeeper and entertainment promoter in New York, where he had joined a volunteer fire company, at that time a base for urban working-class politics, and was a strong supporter of the Democratic party machine at Tammany Hall. One of McGuire's closest colleagues, Mike Walsh, another Irish American Democratic Party leader, was an outspoken proponent of class radicalism and white supremacy.⁵⁰

For its audience of urban workers who were being shaped into a working class, the minstrel show constructed and displayed a line-up of racial and ethnic characters. Blacks, Jim Crow, and Zip Coon, Indians and John Chinaman were compared and contrasted with European Americans, Tommy the English sailor, Mose the Irish fireman, Siegal the German. Even as these characters interacted on the stage, the minstrel show drew

sharp boundaries around racial difference and made clear the unacceptability of racial amalgamation. By distinguishing between funny but acceptable behavior among various white characters and ridiculous and punishable behavior among colored characters, these minstrel shows enacted the bounds of acceptable working-class behavior and resistance. In this regard, minstrelsy can be understood as a ritual response to boundary crisis. As such, minstrelsy was called upon to distinguish a category of anomalous and polluting (hence non-assimilable) racial difference from a category of normal and nonpolluting (and hence amalgamable) ethnic difference.

The power of the minstrel show as a ritual of race-making lay in the ambiguity of laughing with and laughing at Zip Coon, Jim Crow, and John Chinaman. Although in the 1850s blackface minstrelsy would mount a nostalgic defense of slavery in the face of the abolition movement, in its beginning decades of the 1830s and -40s, it made the urban free person of color, in the caricatures of Zip Coon and Jim Crow, its principal object of ridicule. Constructed as a trickster, the citified dandy Zip Coon represented freedom without the self-control needed for republican virtue. The tricks that Zip Coon played on his always pompous oppressors could be appreciated for their spirit of resistance by the "b'hoy boy," the epitome of a newly emergent white working-class urban youth culture whose brash behavior and style in many ways mirrored the dandified, urban, free black. At the same time, the white journeyman turned factory worker might be nostalgic for the sense of freedom from restraint that Jim Crow was depicted as enjoying. While Zip Coon's or Jim Crow's antics could be applauded, their ambitions to move outside the boundaries of their black world had to be sharply thwarted through ridicule.

The ideological effect of the blackface minstrel show lay in its dual message to a nascent working class consolidating its own white racial identity. The minstrel show featured Zip Coon's stump speeches, parodies of political campaign speeches, academic lectures, or sermons, replete with exaggerated elocution and littered with malapropisms to emphasize that, however "free," the African American could only masquerade as a citizen. While the malapropism of the hilarious stump speech warned that the anomalous freedom of persons of color represented a danger to the republic, it served to remind its working-class and immigrant audiences of the utter seriousness and responsibilities of citizenship.

The minstrel representation of the Chinese immigrant as a racial Other relied on a trope of insurmountable cultural difference. Unlike the minstrel characterization of free blacks, who were represented as fraudulent citizens because they were supposed to lack culture, the

Chinese were seen as having an excess of culture. This excess had led them into a state of degradation and cultural degeneration. Excess and degeneration, of course, carried with them connotations of disease, contagion, and pollution. In a culture dominated by virtuous republicanism, which held self-control in highest esteem, excess was also closely identified with moral sloth. Mary Douglas has observed that when external boundaries of the social system are perceived to be threatened, attention is paid to the orifices of the body and the bodily functions of ingestion, digestion, and excretion as symbols of entry and exit into and out of the social system. The minstrel construction of Chinese racial difference around cultural excess focused on three such natural symbolic systems, each closely related to boundary crises: language, food, and hair.⁵¹

Chinese "pidgin" fascinated white Americans and was widely imitated on the minstrel stage. For fifteen cents, DeWitt Publishers offered "*Bones*" *His Gags and Stump Speeches: Nigger and Dutch Stories and Dialogues*; "*Broken Chinees*" *Dialect Pieces and Queer Conundrums*. The "dimester" booklet was advertised as a must "For the Professional Burnt Cork Man; Every Amateur Dabbler in Darkey Doings; Everybody that Likes Genuine Fun" featuring the "best hits of the Ethiopian Stage."⁵²

Canton English was only one of many languages spoken in nineteenth century California. This pidgin English attributed to Chinese speakers in California was in actuality a trade language, with its own linguistic and symbolic codes, syntax and vocabulary rules. The origin of this language dates back to early English-Chinese trade relations in the late seventeenth century; some of its vocabulary had even earlier antecedents in Arab, Portuguese, and Spanish trade relations with China from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, Zayton, the Arab name for Yangzhou (an earlier Chinese name for Guangzhou) lends itself to the English name "Canton." "Joss" meaning "god" is derived from the Spanish "dios"; the English term "mandarin" is derived from the Portuguese "mandarim" to rule; the Canton English term "Yankee" is derived from the Dutch "Jan Kees," and so forth.

John Dillard has argued that a variety of pidgins and creoles were in widespread use throughout the nineteenth-century American West, where speakers of Native American languages, French, Spanish, English, American creoles, and Canton English all came into contact.⁵³ The common use of pidgins and creoles threatened to subvert the hegemony of Anglo-American English-language-based culture and undermine its teleological myth of nationhood.

Minstrelsy's response to such a crisis was to reinforce the hegemonic power of standard English, setting the linguistic standard for participation in citizenship. Comedic skits centered around miscommunication based on ethnic accents, dialects, and creoles. Malapropism and the ex-

aggerated elocution of the "Nigger stump speech or gag" were commonly used to ridicule the ambitions of African Americans for full participation in social or political life. On the minstrel stage, Canton English and nonsense words were often deployed together in the construction of John Chinaman. The collapsing of linguistic difference between pidgin and nonsense dislocated language and collapsed meaning, echoing the collapse of time and space in the secular world of capitalist social relations. The conjoining of pidgin with nonsense simultaneously diminished the status of Canton English as an important commercial language and infantilized its speakers.

This effect is immediately apparent in the song "Hong Kong" as it appeared in Nick Gardner's *Two Ring Circus Songster*. Both the first stanza and the refrain make extensive use of pidgin and pidginized English, and the meaning of the lyric can still be understood.

My Name is Sin Sin, come from China
In a bigee large shipee, commee long here;
Wind blow welly muchee, Kick upee blubelly
Ship makee Chinaman feelee wellee queer.
Me fetchee longee a lillee gal nicee
She com longee to be my wife
Makee bigee swear to it all her life.

Me likee bow wow, wellee goodee chow-chow,
Me likee lillee gal, she likee me
Me fetchee Hong-Kong, whitee man comee long,
Takee lillee gal from a poor Chinees.⁵⁴

In the same song sung by Charles A. Mason under the simple title "Chinese Song" and published in Charles A. Loder's *Hilarity Songster*, the chorus is heavily inflected with nonsense words, making the meaning of the song itself incomprehensible.

Ki, Ki, Ki, Ching, Ching, Ching,
Hung a rung, a chickel neckey
Suppe, fatte hung
Eno Posa keno Posey, keno John,
Chinese manee goode manee from Hong Kong.⁵⁵

In the refrain to "The Heathen Chinees," sung by the famous minstrel performer Luke Schoolcraft, nonsense words combined with pidgin to present the yellowface singer of the song as childlike.

Hi! hi! hi! Ching! ching! ching!
Chow, chow, wellie good, me likie him.
Makie plentie sing song, savie by and bye.
China man a willie man, laugh hi! hi!⁵⁶

Minstrel songs paid great attention to Chinese foodways; indeed it is uncommon not to find some reference to Chinese eating habits in a minstrel song. Food habits, customs, and rules are central symbolic structures through which societies articulate identity; you are, symbolically at least, what you eat. In her study of regionalism in antebellum political culture, Anne Norton argues that eating was the primary metaphor of the West. She writes,

Eating provides an archetypal expression of the mythic process of regeneration through violence. . . . Prominent features of Western politics—the importance of charismatic authority, the significance of territorial expansion, and the legitimacy of authority obtained through conquest—also become more intelligible in the context of the Western preoccupation with consumption, digestion and elimination.⁵⁷

In her analysis of the construction of Davy Crockett as a mythic hero of the Jacksonian frontier, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg observes that Crockett is credited with killing and eating every sort of wild animal. This includes, in at least one tale of cannibalism, killing two Indians, “smashing number one into Injun gravy with my foot, spreading it on number two and made a dinner for me and my dog. It was superlicious.”⁵⁸ The eating of taboo food endows Crockett, who could claim to be half-man, half-alligator, with preternatural power: “I’m a horse . . . I can walk like an ox, run like a fox, swim like an eel, yell like an Indian, fight like a devil, and spout like an earthquake, make love like a mad bull, and swallow a nigger whole without choking if you butter his head and pin his ears back.”⁵⁹

While the eating of “wild” animals and “wild” people might endow the young frontiersman with savage strength, the Chinese are identified with eating dogs and cats, animals that are domesticated but not raised for food. The consumption of dogs and cats is the most common image of Chinese foodways; typical of these images are these stanzas from Luke Schoolcraft’s “Heathen Chinees.”

Lady she am vellie good, make plenty chow chow
She live way up top side house,
Take a little pussy cat and a little bow bow
Boil em in a pot of stew wi a little mouse
Hi! hi! hi!

Some say pig meat make good chow chow
Too much largie, no muchie small
Up sky, down sky, down come chow chow
Down come a pussy cat, bow bow and all
Hi! hi! hi!⁶⁰

The Chinese are also identified as eating mice and rats, animals considered filthy and disease-carrying and therefore dangerous and polluting. In the last stanza of Billy Rice’s “Chinese Ball,” the visitor recounts an imagined Chinese supper.

For supper we had red-eyed cats
And boot-legs stuffed with fleas.
We had fish boiled in castor oil,
Fried clams and elephant knees,
We had sauer-kraut and pickled meuse,
And oysters on the half-shell.
We had Japanese tea in the key of G,
Which made us feel quite well.⁶¹

A third focus of minstrel attention was the braided plait of hair or queue worn by Chinese men. The length and manner in which hair is cut and groomed has been a central marker of gender, age, and class in many cultures. In Judeo-Christian culture, hair has been symbolically identified with sexual power since at least Samson and Delilah. Since the establishment of the Qing dynasty in 1644, Han Chinese men were required to shave their foreheads and wear their hair in a braided plait as a sign of fealty to their Manchu conquerors. Failure to wear the queue was a sign of rebellion and punishable by death. In California, however, the queue presented a cultural anomaly and a source of ambiguity. In an age when middle-class white men had shorn their hair, and among so-called civilized people only women wore their hair long (although Native American men also often wore their hair long and in a braids), the Chinese males’ practice of wearing their hair long and in a braid was perceived as sexually and racially ambiguous, and therefore dangerous.

The Chinaman’s queue thus became a principal target for the victimization of the Chinese by every bigot, old and young. Bret Harte reported in a letter to the *Springfield Republican* on March 30, 1867,

Even legislation only tolerated [the Chinese], and while they were busy in developing the resources of the state, taxed them roundly for the gracious privilege. Regularly every year they were driven out of the mining camps, except when the enlightened Caucasian found it more convenient to rob them—a proceeding which the old statutes in regard to the inadmissibility of their evidence in the courts rendered quite safe and honorable. They furnished innocent amusement to the honest miner, when gambling, horse racing or debauchery palled on his civilized taste, and their Chinese tails, particularly when tied together, cut off or pulled out, were more enjoyable than the Arabian nights entertainments. Nature seemed to have furnished them with that peculiar appendage for the benefit of the Anglo-Saxon.⁶²

Assaulting the Chinaman and cutting off his queue was by no means an activity limited to the street thug or rowdy. Charles DeLong, who became a prominent lawyer and Democratic Party leader, had also taken Chinese queues as he began his California professional career as a collector of the Foreign Miner's tax. The law imposing this tax, which was largely aimed at driving the Chinese from the mining districts, provided for deputized tax collectors who would be paid a percentage of the revenue they had collected. As a result, Chinese miners would often be taxed two or three times over or simply robbed by freebooting tax collectors. On numerous occasions, tax collectors were reported to have murdered Chinese miners in the course of collecting their taxes. In a nonchalant journal entry dated October 23, 1855, DeLong wrote, "Started with Dick Wade and Bob Moulthrop collecting : supper at Hesse's Crossing went down the river in the night collected all the way had a great time, Chinamen tails cut off."⁶³

The cutting of the Chinaman's pigtail allowed white men in the mid- and late nineteenth century to reenact, at least at a symbolic level, an earlier savage eighteenth-century American ritual—scalping.⁶⁴ Indeed, the cutting of queues in conjunction with the collection of taxes is reminiscent of the taking of Indian scalps for bounty, a popular practice among English colonists on the old frontier. The taking of "scalps" enabled white workingmen to relive an imagined earlier pre-industrial past. It enabled them to reenact their economic anxiety and social frustration in the symbolic castration and disempowerment of a potentially dangerous pollutant. While the display of cut-off queues was not a common public practice, the similarity between scalp-taking and the taking of the queue is not limited to the level of the symbolic. Hundreds of Chinamen were murdered before, during, or after their queues were removed.

The nemesis of John Chinaman was most likely to be a white man in search of foreign miners' taxes or simple loot. Just as the taking of Indian scalps by their colonial forebears was lost to historical amnesia and laid at the doorstep of the savage red man, the practice of cutting off the Chinaman's queue was an opportunity to bring the specter of the "savage" Indian back into the narrative of race relations. In a narrative that confronts the Chinese immigrant, the Native American is not characterized as an obstacle to European settlement or progress, but rather is welcomed as the tormentor of an equally superfluous presence in the social structure. "Big Long John" by the minstrel songwriter Luke Schoolcraft illustrates this relationship.

Big Long John was a Chinaman,
and he lived in the land of the free. . . .

He wore a long tail from the top of his head
Which hung way down to his heels. . . .
He went to San Francisco for Chinees gal to see,
Feeling tired, he laid down to rest,
Beneath the shade of huckleberry tree,
He feeling very warm soon fell asleep,
And he laid his head on a plank,
Along came an Indian with his big tomahawk.
And chopped off a piece of his scalp

Now when he awoke, he felt so bad
That he hollered with all his might,
Put his hand to his head and it made him so sick,
That he died that very night.
He was found the next day a bout 12 midnight
By the captain of a Hong Kong crew;
He wrote to his sweetheart, Chum, Chum, Foo
That he died from loss of his queue.⁶⁵

The queue may have been the most public target of the attack on the Chinaman, but it was not the cause of his victimization. In fact, there was little that the Chinaman did to occasion such an assault on his person, and there was little the Chinese could do to deter such attacks. The presence of the Chinese, as anomalous, ambiguous, and hence representative of a dangerous pollution, was itself sufficient to require punishment. Although physical attacks, robbery, and murder were a frequent occurrence, the mode of punishment most celebrated in the song was the cuckolding of the Chinese.

Typical of this theme is Nick Gardner's song "Hong Kong," wherein John Chinaman laments that he has lost his "lillie gal" to minstrelsy's archetypal white working-class hero, Mose. John Chinaman settles in Chinaman Lane and is a friend of Mose, with whom he sells gin.

Me stopee long me lillie gal nicee
Wellee happee Chinaman, me no care,
Me smokee, smokee, lillie gal talkee,
Chinaman and lillie gal wellee jollie pair.

When John Chinaman goes for a walk he returns to find Mose has seduced his girl.

Me catchee white manee lillie gal talkee
Kiss-kiss lillie gal, give her lots of smack.

In the chorus, John Chinaman's transgression of eating taboo canine flesh is directly tied to losing his "lillie gal" to the white man.

Me likee bow wow, wellee goodee chow-chow,
 me likee lillee gal, she likee me
 Me fetchee Hong-Kong, whitee man comee long,
 Takee lillee gal from a poor Chinese.⁶⁶

Although Hinton Rowan Helper launched scurrilous denigrations of Latin Americans, Mexicans, and Negroes who had settled in California, and particularly vicious attacks on California Indians, he regarded these "lesser" peoples as dying out. Their presence was less threatening to him than the entry of the Chinese into the social body of California. Helper's abolitionist magnum opus, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, is driven by an obsessive fear of "miscegenation" between black and white. His *Land of Gold* is similarly obsessed with the presence of the Chinese as a deterrent to the immigration of respectable white women and thus a barrier to "normal" family development. No direct evidence links Helper's anxiety about Chinese immigration and interracial amalgamation to the fact that the family home in which he grew up was only one county distant from the farms on which Chang and Eng were raising their families. Nevertheless, Hinton Helper was ten years old when the twins settled in nearby Wilkes County, and the widespread attention paid to the marriage and later fatherhood of the twins in both the local and national press is not likely to have escaped Helper's notice. We might well imagine that the young Hinton Helper, in addition to sharing the salacious but almost universal fascination with the imagined sexual practice of the twins and their wives, resented the fact that the Siamese twins were land owners of substance and slaveholders to boot, while Helper's own family found itself in reduced financial circumstances on its small farm as the result of his father's early death.

In *Land of Gold*, Helper finds everything about the Chinese disturbing and objectionable. Their mere appearance and their habit of dress is "uncouth" and offensive.

[John Chinaman's] feet enclosed in rude wooden shoes, his legs bare, his breeches loosely flapping against his knees, his skirtless, long-sleeved, big-bodied pea-jacket, hanging in large folds around his waist, his broad-brimmed chapeau rocking carelessly on his head, and his cue [sic] suspended and gently sweeping about his back! I can compare him to nothing so appropriately as to a tadpole walking upon stilts.⁶⁷

The arrival in California of Chinese women "among [whom] good morals are unknown, [and who] have no regard whatever for chastity or virtue," was no solace to Helper, for whom only the presence of true (white) womanhood could provide the moral nurturing required by a new republic of virtue in California. Indeed, the fashion among Chinese

women of wearing trousered suits of cotton or silk caused Helper to become confused about the gender difference between Chinese immigrants. "The only apparent difference is, that they are of smaller stature and have smother features."⁶⁸ Nevertheless, lest his audience become curious about Chinese women as objects of desire, Helper is quick to report that "Chinese women are not generally neat in their outward habit. Those who are from the extreme Northern parts of the Chinese empire, are the ugliest and most rugged featured human beings I ever saw."⁶⁹

For Helper, the "national habits and traits of the Chinese character . . . are strikingly anomalous and distinct from those of all other nations." In Helper's view, the totality of this cultural difference defined the Chinese and positioned them as a dangerous pollutant in the already precarious moral order of gold-rush California. Pollution required containment of the Chinese in a racialized body. Helper describes the Chinese body thus:

There is a marked identity about their features, person, manners, and costume, so unmistakable that it betrays their nationality in a moment. So stereotyped are even the features and form of this singular people, that we cannot fail in their identity in the rudest cut that pretends to represent them.⁷⁰

Yellowface minstrelsy also contained and displayed the racialized Chinese body. To the extent that the moral ambiguities and anomalies signified by the Chinese body posed a danger of moral contamination, the yellowface minstrel provided the sanctioned space through which to view the unknowable. Writing about actual Chinese Californians, Hinton Helper summarized the yellowface difference: "The similarity of their garb, features, physical proportions and deportment is so great that one Chinaman looks almost exactly like another, but very unlike any body else."⁷¹

"Yellowskins Get Out!"

Put's song "National Miner," sung to the air of the blackface minstrel song "Massa's in de Cold Cold Ground," painted the hardworking American miner in the California gold fields as a victim of alien interlopers, "Those who had fought at Palo Alto, were driven off by nations they had tanned." Put exaggerated the number of Chinese in the mines to make them equal to the total number of people in the entire state.

Here we're working like a swarm of bees,
 Scarcely making enough to live,
 And two hundred thousand Chinese
 Are taking home the gold we ought to have.⁷²

For Hinton Helper and others, the perceived failure to adopt American costume and foodways and to engage in trade with white Californians was a sign of Chinese arrogance, parasitic nature, and intention to exploit California's resources so that the Chinese could return home wealthy men.

"John Chinaman," a song published in the *California Songster* in 1855, the same year Helper's *Land of Gold* appeared, simply represented the white Californian as disappointed by Chinese aloofness and as victimized by Chinese greed.

I thought you'd open wide your ports,
And let our merchants in,
To barter for their crapes and teas,
Their wares of wood and tin.

I thought you'd cut your queue off, John,
And don a Yankee coat.
And a collar high you'd raise, John,
Around your dusky throat.

Imagined that the truth, John,
You'd speak when under oath,
But I find you'll lie and steal too—
Yes, John, you're up to both.

I thought of rats and puppies, John,
You'd eaten your last fill,
But on such slimy pot-pies,
John, I'm told you dinner still.

Oh, John, I've been deceived in you
And all your thieving clan,
For our gold is all you're after, John,
To get it as you can.⁷³

But in making these complaints, Helper and his ilk by no means conceded that the Chinese showed a superior degree of industriousness or intellect. Failure or refusal to adapt to American customs proved to Helper and his ilk the inherent moral and intellectual weakness of the Chinese.

[The Chinese] have neither the strength of body nor the power of mind to cope with us in the common affairs of life; and as it seems to be a universal law that the stronger shall rule the weaker, it will be required of them, ere long, to do one of two things, namely—either to succumb, to serve us, or to quit the country.⁷⁴

Central to the image of California as God's free soil was the vision of California as a space in which free labor might be created anew. Indeed, the exclusion of racial slavery from California made it possible to imagine the "resurrection" of an exclusively white Mechanic's Republic in which artisan labor might flourish. For many of its white "sons of toil," making California into God's free soil meant not only keeping the state free of slavery but also keeping California free of nonwhites. However, the Californian *Herrenvolk* republic would not be built on the wage labor of a multiracial proletariat but on the artisan labor of free white republicans. Free Labor ideology rested on the Jacksonian conviction that most laborers could achieve ownership of capital and escape permanent "wage slavery," becoming "free" to participate in civic life.⁷⁵ Free labor therefore resided only in those who could become eligible for civic participation, white men.

The idea of a white republic, free from both slavery and racial difference, was hardly new in the 1840s. Jefferson had warned that slavery would destroy republicanism, by leading whites to become tyrannical and blacks to become alienated and enraged. Jefferson's view was that whites' "natural" superiority made it impossible for the two races to live side by side in equality and would result in white domination. Comparing the problem of slavery to holding a "wolf by its ears," Jefferson concluded that slavery could only be eradicated in conjunction with a plan to eject Africans, once emancipated, from the republic.⁷⁶

New England—the region in which Free Soil and Free Labor ideology was strongest—was also the arena for the ideology and practice of creating a white republic. Legislation and constitutional interpretation had provided for the gradual emancipation of African slaves in the New England states beginning around 1780. Over the course of the next several decades, New Englanders erased virtually all historical memory of the region's history as a slaveholding society and through disenfranchisement, "warning out," and not infrequent mob violence against black neighborhoods and places where the races intermingled attempted to eliminate Africans' physical presence as well. In the 1820s, many of the abolitionist movement's leading luminaries, including Harriet Beecher Stowe and even William Lloyd Garrison, favored colonization as the answer to the problem that the presence of free people of color presented for the republic. (Only later would Garrison break with the colonizationist position in favor of integration.) During the 1840s and -50s, colonization was widely popular, as evidenced by the burgeoning membership of the American Colonization Society, which sought to relocate freed Blacks to Africa. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a champion of abolition, revealed his expectation of an exclusively white republic when he asserted

that "soon the negro will only be seen in museums, like the Dodo," Emerson envisioned a renewed republic free of slavery and of blacks, an extension of New England "from Canada to the Gulf and to the Pacific."⁷⁷

In 1848, even as the gold rush had begun, *The Californian*, one of two papers published in San Francisco at the time, unequivocally stated its Free Soil position against slavery and its commitment to a white California.

We desire only a white population in California; even the Indians among us, as far as we have seen, are more of a nuisance than a benefit to the country; we would like to get rid of them. . . . In conclusion, we dearly love the Union, but declare our positive preference for an independent condition of California to the establishment of any degree of slavery, or even the importation of free blacks.⁷⁸

The editorialist for the *California Star*, the *Californian's* Republican counterpart, echoed that opinion:

Though slavery could not be generally introduced, . . . its recognition would blast the prospects of the country. It would make it disreputable for the white man to labor for his bread, and it would thus drive off to other homes the only class of emigrants California wishes to see; the sober and industrious middle class of society.⁷⁹

The idea of California entering the Union as a land free of slavery was a broadly popular one, not only among Free Soilers outside the territory but among white settlers in California. At its 1849 constitutional convention in preparation for its petition to statehood, the unanimous assembly passed without debate the provision that "Neither slavery, nor involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated in this State."

While Free Soil was widely supported, race matters were hotly contested. The same Monterey convention that unanimously ratified the antislavery provision fragmented over the rights of free persons of color to settle in California. McCarver, the representative of Sacramento, a district in which 200 of the fewer than 1,000 African Americans in California resided, proposed to create legislation that would prohibit free black settlement as well as bringing slaves into California in order to free them there.⁸⁰

At the convention, Representative Wozencraft, who had immigrated to California from Louisiana, argued that for democracy to thrive "the low, vicious and depraved" must be excluded.⁸¹ Representative Tefft, a

settler from New York, argued that the labor of people of color, "negros, peons of Mexico, or any class of that kind," regardless of its legal status, degraded white labor.⁸² Taken together, the arguments of Wozencraft and Tefft laid out the ideology of *Herrenvolk* California as a nostalgic reading of Jeffersonian notions of an egalitarian republic based upon natural law. Wozencraft identified equilibrium as the state of nature in which "happy unity" can be produced by acting in accordance with natural law. The laws of nature dictate a "harmonious whole" in which each member is "on a level with the mass" and "able to perform his appropriate duty." "Incongruities in the structure," slavery and industrial capitalism, have "fettered society elsewhere"; the construction of California is the opportunity to start anew. In order to restore this state of nature, however, as Tefft argued, "negroes, peons of Mexico, or any class of that kind" who might constitute "discordant particles" or the "low, vicious and depraved" must be excluded lest "incongruities in the structure" emerge.

Over two days of debate, the arguments put forward at the convention in favor of the excluding of free persons of color from California can be grouped into five broad positions: the racial inferiority of persons of color made assimilation on the grounds of equality impossible; their exploitation would result in social inequalities: their presence would degrade white labor and discourage "more desirable classes" of immigrants; they constituted a vicious and disorderly element; and, as a result, the expenses of governing and supporting them would increase the tax burden.⁸³ The McCarver Amendment was narrowly adopted even though it met strong opposition on the political grounds that its adoption into the territory's constitution would alienate Free Soil and Abolitionist members of Congress whose support for California statehood was critical. Although the McCarver Amendment was rescinded soon after legal and political challenges, the status of blacks in Free Soil California remained a politically salient issue through the 1850s.

Although the debate over race in California was first framed in terms of Negro slavery and (white) free labor, and Negro slavery and its abolition dominated national politics, *Herrenvolk* republicanism in California continued to be shaped by immigration. In California, the terms of the racial debate shifted to the "Chinese Problem." By the end of the 1850s, the 4,000 black residents of the state seemed a lesser threat, to the apostles of a white Mechanics' Republic, than the 47,000 Chinese residents of California.

The threat of the Chinese as anomalous free persons of color coincided with a crisis in the gold fields. In the mid-1850s, the production

process in the California gold fields began to be transformed by the introduction of capital-intensive hydraulic mining and soon put tremendous pressure on the independent miners, the small producers who stood at the heart of *Herrenvolk* republicanism.⁸⁴ On the one hand, *Herrenvolk* republicanism was useless as an ideological weapon with which the workingman could resist the accumulation of capital and technology and the rise of a capitalist class; on the other, its appeal to race offered a powerful rationale for whites who failed as small producers.

Although the Chinese primarily worked tailings (i.e., abandoned claims) in small groups of two or three with simple "long tom" placer frames, the fact that they could survive, even thrive, on a small margins of profit caused resentment among white miners.⁸⁵

The crude ditty "Get Out Yellowskins!", one of the few genuine "folk songs" surviving from the gold rush oral tradition, delivers a straightforward message and an unmistakable threat of violence. Unlike its popular music counterpart, however, it lacks any of the aesthetic pathos through which to construct a nostalgic imaginary of California.

The Yellow-skins here in these hills
Now know how it appears
To have their gold by others stole
As we have suffered for years.

Get out, Yellowskins, get out!
Get out, Yellowskins get out!
We'll do it again if you don't go,
Get out, Yellow-skins, get out!⁸⁶

As early as 1851, well before the end of surface mining, white miners on the Yuba River passed a resolution to prohibit Chinese from mining in the district. In the previous year, the state legislature had required a license fee from all who were not native-born American citizens or who had not acquired citizenship through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. While the tax was initially aimed at all foreign miners, in 1853 a second act provided for the translation of the act into Chinese and its widespread publication. Amendments to the act in 1854 and 1855 exempted naturalized citizens and those who had declared their intention to apply for citizenship. The first naturalization act, passed in 1790, had established that only "free white persons" were eligible for naturalization; the assumption that the category of "free white persons" did not include persons from China is suggested by the introduction into the California legislature in 1855 of a bill titled "An Act to Discourage the Immigration to This State of Persons Who Cannot Become Citizens." Few Chinese in the 1850s appear to have challenged that requirement for citizenship.⁸⁷

In 1854, the California Supreme Court threw out the murder conviction of George Hall on the grounds that it depended on the testimony of two Chinese witnesses. The California Civil Practice Act stipulated "that no Indian or Negro shall be allowed to testify as a witness in any action in which a white person is a party." Chief Justice Murray argued that such terms as Negro and Indian were generic in nature, and when broadly construed should include Chinese.⁸⁸ Justice Murray concluded, "The same rule that would admit them to testify, would admit them to all the equal rights of citizenship, and we might soon see them at the polls, in the jury box, upon the bench and in our legislative halls." In California, for the next decade and a half, until a year after the passage of the Federal Civil Rights Bill in 1868, a Chinaman had no rights that a white man was bound to respect.

In 1855, Hinton Helper's bitter critique of California as a cesspool of motley races, while more virulent and desperate than others, was well within the logic of a restorationist white republic. Indeed, Hinton Helper's generalized statement of white supremacy, while it brought up to date the racial hierarchies in America, replicated the racial logic of Thomas Jefferson.

No inferior race of men can exist in these United States without becoming subordinate to the will of the Anglo-Americans, or foregoing many of the necessities and comforts of life. They must either be our equals or our dependents. It is so with the negroes in the South; it is so with the Irish in the North; it was so with the Indians in New England; and it will be so with the Chinese in California. . . . Certain it is, that the greater the diversity of colors and qualities of men, the greater will be the strife and conflict of feeling. One party will gain the ascendancy, and dominate over the other. Our population was already too heterogeneous before the Chinese came; but now another adventitious ingredient has been added; and I should not wonder at all, if the copper of the Pacific yet becomes as great a subject of discord and dissension as the ebony of the Atlantic.⁸⁹

In the 1870s, California's fragmented working class coalesced around the demand to remove the Chinese from the white Mechanics' Republic by barring them from entering the country and by driving them from the workplace. The great majority of those who harangued, sang, marched, and rioted against the Chinese in the 1870s were new to California. While their anti-Chinese movement scapegoated Chinese Californians for immediate economic problems, it could draw on a dense set of symbols already in play in the ideological imagination of the state.

California as God's Free Soil envisioned a restored republic of virtue, free of the "fetters" of both slavery and people of color, whose very presence as natural inferiors would lead to the "degradation" of white labor.

God's Free Soil did not have space for the Chinese, whose presence disrupted the mission into the wilderness. The fact of John Chinaman's arrival from the East, his language, food, dress and labor, his very body polluted the Eden that California represented. The victim of this fall from grace was the white miner, the lost hero seeking to restore his identity as an independent producer.

"The Days of '49," a song published by E. Zimmer in 1876, lamented the late pioneers of the gold rush days. Its narrator, one Tom More, is a "relic of by-gone days" who like the "miner" in "California As It Was and Is," "often grieve[s] and pine[s]/For the days of old, the days of gold, The days of forty nine" Old Tom More mourns the loss of camaraderie of heroic miners, "rough . . . But staunch and brave, and true as steel, like hunters from the west." The death by misadventure of these colorful quintessential "American" figures had left Tom More a lonesome figure. But far worse than the disappearance of the heroic California miner was the arrival of the racial Others. The last stanza mourns the "loss" of the white republic.

Since that time how things have changed In this land of liberty,
Darkies didn't vote nor plead in court, Nor rule this country,
But the Chinese question, the worst of all In those days did not shine,
For the country was right and the boys all white,
In the days of '49.⁹⁰

The Coolie and the Making of the White Working Class

Coolie—1. By some considered to be originally Tamil, and identical with the word *kuli* 'hire, payment for occasional menial work' . . . [a] hireling, labourer, man who does odd jobs. . . . A variant of *Kuli* or *Koli*, name of a numerous aboriginal tribe of Gujarat, formerly noted as robbers, but now settling down as respectable labourers and cultivators. . . .
2. a. The name given by Europeans in India and China to a native hired labourer or burden-carrier; also used in other countries where these men are employed as cheap labourers.

The Oxford English Dictionary

In November 1885, *The Wasp*, an illustrated weekly, published a lithograph titled "The Consequences of Coolieism," bearing a detailed caption.¹ The picture, together with its caption, densely encapsulates the racialization of proletarian labor through the creation of the category of coolie labor. Coolie labor is identified as cheap Chinese labor, while its opposite, Free Labor, is identified with the white workingman's family. In the *Wasp*'s view, the problem of "coolieism" is not narrowly economic but extends to every member of the workingman's family. The caption calls for the old animosities between Saxon (English) and Celt (Irish) to be put aside in favor of the common cause of a "white" struggle in opposition to Chinese labor.