



## After LA

### Los Angeles, 1992

Between April 29 and May 2, 1992, the South Central, Koreatown, and Pico Union neighborhoods of Los Angeles became free-fire zones. Confronted with a massive outburst of rage over the acquittal of the four white Los Angeles police officers whose beating of black motorist Rodney King had been spectacularly broadcast to the nation, the LAPD sealed off the “colored” zones of the city from White LA and let them burn. The LAPD’s strategy of containment was effective in protecting white LA; it brought massive destruction and death to LA’s “Third World.”

The mass violence in Los Angeles has been called a slave rebellion, a bread riot, and an urban uprising.<sup>1</sup> The causes for the urban uprising are multiple and complex; in Los Angeles in 1992, there was plenty to be angry about. The outrage over the not-guilty verdict handed down by the all-white jury to the white police officers who had savagely beaten Rodney King reflected the deep racial and class chasm that split the city. The highly militarized LAPD had a long history of treating nonwhite communities as enemy hamlets requiring pacification and containment. Simi Valley, where the trial took place, is one of those white middle-class suburbs that had been developed in the 1970s and -80s while Watts, Central LA, and Compton were being abandoned; an extraordinary 2,000 LAPD officers and their families lived in Simi Valley. Deep recession and structural changes in the political economy of Los Angeles had left the poor black and Latino communities in the inner city more impoverished and more disempowered than ever before.

The outbreak of mass violence in Los Angeles could, however, also be called a pogrom. Although stores owned by many blacks, whites, Latinos, and other Asian Americans were also wrecked, Korean immigrant merchants sustained fully one half of the \$850 million of property loss in the three days of looting and arson. An estimated 2,300 Korean-owned businesses were destroyed.

The events of Los Angeles between April 29 and May 2, 1992, America’s first multiracial riots, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the crisis of post-Fordism in the economic sphere and the emergence of a racial discourse that constructed Asian Americans as agents of Orientalized capital.<sup>2</sup> In this construction of the Oriental, it is not only the Asian American who is Orientalized; multinational capital itself is imbued with Oriental cultural difference. In Los Angeles’ globalized capitalism, Asian Americans appear ominously everywhere on the urban landscape, from the glittering skyscraper downtown to the corner liquor store in the ghetto.

### Orientalizing Capital: *Rising Sun*

In the 1980s, spurred by the rapid growth of Pacific Rim economies and heavy immigration flows from Asia and Latin America, Los Angeles was transformed into a global city. Los Angeles County became the largest manufacturing metropolitan area in the United States and a financial hub of the Pacific Rim economy. By the late 1980s, Asian and Asian American capital had become a visible presence at every level of Los Angeles life. Most visible were the Japanese banks and trading houses that dotted the LA cityscape. Japanese corporations reinvested much of their huge trade surplus in the American economy. The revaluation of the yen drove down the U.S. trade deficit with Japan from about \$52 billion in 1987 to \$38 billion in 1990. However, more valuable yen made Japanese investment in U.S. real estate and corporations a bargain. In 1989, Japanese corporations made several big purchases, which made headlines and the evening news: Mitsubishi bought Rockefeller Center, Sony bought Columbia Pictures, Matsushita bought MCA. Other, lesser icons of old-stock American culture, like the Pebble Beach Golf Club and Brooks Brothers were also sold to Japanese investors.

By the end of the decade, the shift from trade imbalance to investment touched off a new round of cultural panic, despite the fact that Japanese investments in the United States were only half those of Great Britain and on a par with those of the Netherlands. *Time Magazine* ran a cover with a faceless personification of corporate Japan in Samurai armor. Suddenly the Japanese businessman was not only a Samurai

competitor; he might also be your boss. Japanese management techniques became the rage in the popular business literature and, for a short time, *The Book of Five Rings*, a seventeenth-century book on sword-play, became the “little Red Book” of American business managers.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the decade, a spate of books characterized Japanese economic growth as a distortion of capitalist development. Unlike earlier studies of the 1970s, which had put Japan forward as a model of economic dynamism founded on democratic-institution building, free markets, and conservative politics, the new studies argued that Japanese capitalism was a predatory reflection of a much darker aspect of an essentialized Japanese character. The epitome of this new trend was Karel van Wolfren's *The Japanese Enigma*.<sup>4</sup> Van Wolfren, a Dutch journalist based in Tokyo, saw Japan as a closed society where individual initiative was completely stifled in service of a rigidly hierarchical and monolithic system, “as inescapable as the political system of the Soviet Union.” At the heart of the “Japan Problem” was not capitalism, but the culture that legitimated this totalitarian system. The central failing of Japanese culture was that it was not Western. Van Wolfren contended that Japanese culture was not sufficiently committed to transcendent truths and thus left the Japanese people “less free than they should be.” Japanese culture, in his view, is at odds with the “one single demand that has reverberated throughout Western intellectual development ever since the Greeks: ‘Thou shalt not cherish contradictions.’” The failure of Japanese society to have grasped the central tenet of the European enlightenment had therefore rendered them constitutionally incapable of rationality, logic, and individuality, qualities which defined Western man.

In a 1989 essay, “The Clash of Civilizations,” published in *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship journal of the elite Council on Foreign Relations, Samuel Huntington proposed a new paradigm for understanding international relations in the post-Cold War era. Huntington, a distinguished defense intellectual and director of Harvard University's Center for International Studies, proposed a theory of post-Cold War international relations in which the principal threat to global order is a clash of essentialized cultures—Western civilization confronted by an unholy alliance of militant Islamic and Confucian capitalism. In this scenario, immigration and multiculturalism pose a critical threat to national unity which, Huntington insists, is based on the essential European character of liberal democracy. Within this paradigm, the Asian American can be figured not as the model minority but as a potential agent of disorder, the yellow peril.

Echoing Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*, Huntington argues that “civilization” is the paradigmatic social unit of the twenty-first

century.<sup>5</sup> Huntington's major claim is that “the most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another.”<sup>6</sup> Like Stoddard, Huntington identifies seven or eight civilizations in his mapping of the contemporary world: Western (of which Huntington sees two variants, western European and North American), Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and “possibly” African civilization. However, as in Stoddard's scenario, the principal threat to Western civilization is from the East. Echoing Stoddard's warning about the rising tide of brown and yellow peoples, Huntington argues that the West is threatened by the possible, even likely, alliance between militant Islam and the economic power-houses of Confucian East Asian civilization.

Although Huntington does not mention race, much less genetics, his civilization is no less a category of reduction. Huntington constructs civilization as the defining category of basic, insurmountable difference, impervious to historical change. Huntington defines civilization as “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have, short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.”<sup>7</sup> “[Civilizational] differences,” he asserts “are the product of centuries” (yet are somehow now resistant to change). Cultural differences are “far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes.”<sup>8</sup> In Huntington's view, an individual might or might not choose to be a socialist, a Catholic, a worker, but the individual cannot transcend his or her “essential” Armenianness, Italianness, or Japaneseness. “In the conflicts between civilizations, the question is ‘What are you?’ That is a given that cannot be changed.”<sup>9</sup>

In Huntington's view, the United States is threatened with becoming a “torn society” by a rising tide of multiculturalism. Just as Stoddard saw Asiatic immigration as a threat to the inner dikes of white civilization, Huntington sees immigration from the non-Western world (both Asia and Latin America) as threatening to undermine western civilization. Responding to critics, Huntington asserts that the national unity of the United States has historically rested on “the twin bedrocks of European culture and political democracy,” and he sounds the alarm against the “weakening of the European character of American society and culture through non-European immigration and multiculturalism.”<sup>10</sup> Following Nathan Glazer, Huntington looks nostalgically toward European immigrant assimilation as the master narrative of the nation.

Huntington argues that America is threatened by the demand of non-European Americans for racial equity and social recognition, which he characterizes as “special rights (affirmative action and similar measures) for blacks and other groups.” Such claims, he asserts, undermine “the

principles that have been the basis of American political unity.” Simultaneously, “multiculturalism” insists on “rewriting American political, social, and literary history from the viewpoint of non-European groups,” thereby encouraging “a clash of civilizations within the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

At the heart of Huntington’s conflation of civilization and race is the fear that Western civilization (the North American variant) is threatened by a demographic revolution. The Hispanic and nonwhite populations that Huntington fears will soon be a majority in the United States threaten to “de-Westernize” America.<sup>12</sup> His North American variant of Western civilization apparently includes Canada and the United States, but not Mexico or the Caribbean. Hispanics are part of a Latin American civilization that is not, in his view, part of Western civilization. Neither are African Americans, whose ancestors arrived as early as 1620. Huntington seems to believe that African Americans understand American civilization less well for having experienced it as “non-Westerners” for almost 400 years.

In Huntington’s view, Hispanics and nonwhites have nothing to add to liberal democracy, which is an immutable product of a Western civilization, to which they do not or cannot belong. Huntington sees the call for systematic dismantling of economic and political barriers to racial equality and cultural recognition as a rejection of the western European essence of liberal democracy. Having effectively equated Western civilization with Lothrop Stoddard’s white civilization, Huntington asks rhetorically,

Will the de-Westernization of the United States, if it occurs, also mean its de-Americanization? If it does and Americans cease to adhere to their liberal democratic and European-rooted political ideology, the United States as we have known it will cease to exist and will follow the other ideologically defined superpower [the Soviet Union] on the ash heap of history.<sup>13</sup>

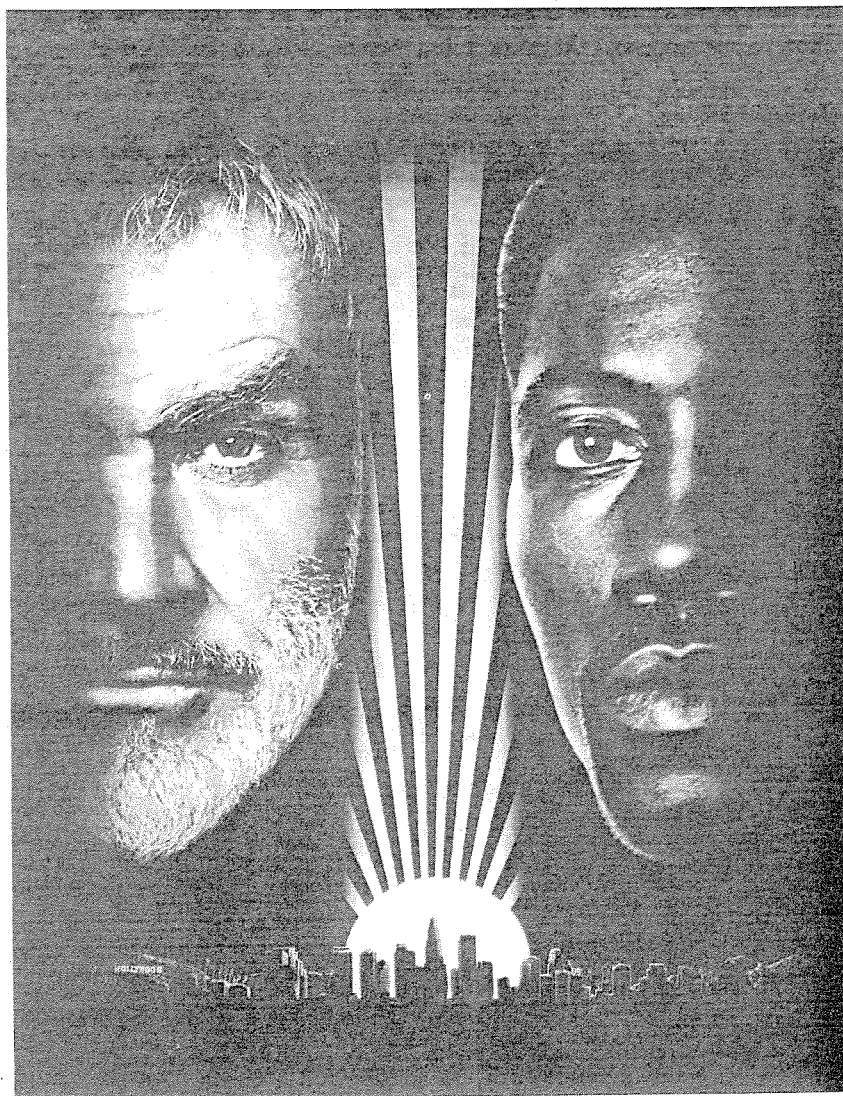
In this world view, essentialized cultural difference—the very cultural difference that marked Asian Americans as role models for Bell and Graubard—defines Asian Americans as inauthentic and the potential agents of a dreaded de-Westernization of American society. Huntington’s essay theorizes the narrative of American vulnerability and the erosion of a national unity by the demands of fake Americans on the traditional social order. In the heated debate over immigration, Huntington thus aligns himself with cultural conservatives (such as William F. Buckley and Allen Brimelow) who have argued against economic conservatives (such as Bill Bennett and Jack Kemp) that regardless of the economic advantages that accrue from immigration, non-European immigrants repre-

sent a threat to the nation’s cultural core.<sup>14</sup> In *Alien Nation: Common Sense About America’s Immigration Disaster*, Allen Brimelow, a senior editor at the *National Review* and himself an immigrant from Britain, echoes Huntington’s linking of non-European immigration and multiculturalism. He attacks the historian Ronald Takaki, an outspoken proponent of a multi-racial interpretation of American history. Brimelow quotes from the preface to Takaki’s text, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, which emphasizes the everyday importance of understanding America as a multiracial society. In Brimelow’s paranoid account, Takaki is transformed into a latter-day Fu Manchu, bent on nothing less than the destruction of white civilization. Brimelow writes, “To the extent that there is any content to Takaki’s complaint, it is that he is Asian in a predominately white society. And there is no cure for that except radically increasing the numbers of minorities and breaking down white America’s sense of identity.”<sup>15</sup>

Michael Crichton’s novel *Rising Sun*, published in 1991 and released as a movie in 1993,<sup>16</sup> identified Japan as the particular threat from the East, whose specter haunted the landscape of late capitalist America. Although it appears to be about unraveling the murder of young (blonde) American woman found dead in the boardroom of a Japanese corporation’s brand-new LA headquarters, *Rising Sun* is less a detective thriller than a jeremiad against an economic and cultural threat from Japan. Crichton attempts to validate his depiction of U.S.-Japan relations by appropriating the work of academic and journalistic Japan watchers, chief among them Karel van Wolfren. At the end of the novel, Crichton appends a three-page bibliography on Japan and its relations with the United States. At the heart of *Rising Sun* is Karel van Wolfren’s dark vision of a predatory and destructive capitalism distorted by a crypto-fascist social system.

In *Rising Sun*, Crichton mobilizes the same narratives of nationhood, cultural identity, and business that are at work in the dominant academic discourse about Japan. Echoing Iacocca’s claim that Japan has launched a silent war on the United States, Crichton claims that the Japanese have invented “a new kind of trade—adversarial trade, trade like war, trade intended to wipe out the competition.”<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the novel we are presented with a narrative of Japanese economic warfare and its unscrupulous strategies and tactics. The homicide is linked to the proposed sale of an American computer equipment company, Microcon, to a subsidiary of the Nakamoto Corporation and “Japan Inc.,” which would give the Japanese a monopoly over the production of computer chips and control over computer manufacturing



The yellow peril and national unity: *Rising Sun* poster showing Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes.

Still courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Archives

in America. The sale is being blocked in Congress by Senator Morton, one of the few Americans who sees the Japanese challenge. It is revealed that the Senator has had an illicit affair with the murder victim, has been tricked into believing that he is guilty of her death, and is being blackmailed by the Japanese into dropping his opposition to the Microcon sale.

*Rising Sun* follows very closely the tropes of the Fu Manchu narrative. The hero is an archetype of Orientalist expertise. The novels narrate both a mystery plot and a parallel political message. The plot of the first Sax Rohmer novel concerns the serial murders of the handful of Orientalist experts who are about to warn the West of the Yellow Peril. There is one significant difference, however. In the Fu Manchu stories, as well as in *The Year of the Dragon*, a single Oriental man bent on world domination embodies Asiatic evil. In *Rising Sun*, it is Japanese culture, with its interchangeable minions, that is the villain. The closest Crichton comes to a Fu Manchu character is Ishiguro, a low-level corporate bureaucrat and nervous bungler who gets mixed up with the murder and its cover-up. Ishiguro's motivations have nothing to do with a desire for world domination, but rather stem solely from a desire to prove himself to his superiors. Behind the buffoonish figure of Ishiguro is the Nakamoto Company, Crichton's real yellow peril and an obscure and shadowy confluence of forces often working to contradictory ends. This image follows Karel van Wolfren's description of Japan as a rudderless society bereft of individual initiative or moral compass. In this view, Japan's orientation toward unscrupulous practices in the international trade arena is less an unfolding of a master plan than the natural outcome of Japanese culture.

*Rising Sun* is infused with the tension and anxiety over the decline of the American hegemony and the dismantling of the Fordist social order. Los Angeles, once the destination of the American dream and now a magnet for labor, a strategic point on the circuit of Pacific Rim capital, is the prime site for such a radical dislocation. Crichton reminds us, with an opening quotation from Phillip Sanders, that "We are entering a world where the old rules no longer apply."<sup>18</sup> Los Angeles is a harrowing, smog-filled site of radical confusion, a society in flux beyond our capacity to understand or change. Crichton writes, "Think back to the fifties, when American workers could own a house, raise a family and send the kids to college, all on a single paycheck. . . . [now p]eople struggle to hold on to what they have. They can't get ahead."<sup>19</sup>

The story's narrator, Peter Smith, a detective newly assigned to the LAPD's Special Services unit, which handles politically sensitive cases, recalls, "I had gone out looking for a house, hoping to get a backyard

for Michelle [his daughter]. But housing prices were just impossible in L.A. . . . I was never going to be able to afford one.”<sup>20</sup>

Middle-class anxiety over the collapse of the single-income household and the impossibility of finding affordable housing for the middle class contrasts with to the opening of the newest edifice of Japanese capital in downtown L.A. This is the Nakamoto Building, all glass, chrome, steel, and marble, with two-way mirrors surrounding the inner office spaces and elevators that speak Japanese. For the Los Angelenos who enter it, the Nakamoto Building, all gleaming surface, is a profound reflection of postmodern anxiety and dislocation.

*Rising Sun* attempts to remap categories of culture and nation in a world “where the old rules no longer apply.” The key narrative at work in *Rising Sun* is the foregrounding of cultural difference as the ultimate determinant of the rules of the game in the late capitalist world order. According to the logic of the novel, the radical dislocation felt in Los Angeles is the result of the radical alienness of Japanese culture and America’s grave misunderstanding of the nature of Japanese competition. In order to explicate otherwise unknowable Japanese difference, Crichton resorts to the tropes of Fu Manchu and Nayland Smith. Just as Sax Rohmer’s narrator, Dr. Petrie, is guided through the sinister underworld of Fu Manchu by the Orientalist expert Nayland Smith, Crichton’s narrator, Peter Smith, is mentored and guided through the mystery by John Connor, a retired Special Services officer and an expert on Japanese culture. Like Nayland Smith, who served the Empire in Burma, Connor knows the Orient from having lived in Japan for some time and becoming fluent in the language and culture of the Japanese. It is intimated that Connor’s retirement is at least partly due to the fact that he has gone native and can no longer be trusted. “There were times when I thought Connor had become Japanese himself. He had that reserve, that secretive manner.”<sup>21</sup> A measure of how far Connor has gone native is his apartment, described as furnished in “the Japanese style: *tatami* mats, *shoji* screens, and paper-and wood-paneled walls. A calligraphy scroll, a black lacquer table, a vase with a single splash of white orchid.”<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the measure of Connor’s trustworthiness is the distance that he can continue to maintain between himself and the Japanese culture that he clearly admires.

It is only by establishing a formal Japanese relation of mentor and pupil that Connor can communicate to Smith his expert insight into Japanese culture, customs, and behavior, reserving judgment in his objective description of a culture-driven Japanese economy that is “fundamentally different” from that of America. Thus Connor occupies the privileged position of the Japanologist, the informed expert whose objec-

tive understanding of Japanese society and culture allows him to authoritatively deploy a particular kind of narrative of Japan.

As a foil to the charge that his essentializing of Japanese society and culture is racist, Crichton, following Rohmer, provides his Orientalist expert with a racist straw man. Connor’s Zen-like equanimity is set in stark contrast to the figure of Tom Graham (Harvey Keitel), the police officer officially in charge of the murder investigation. Graham is a vulgar racist whose open hostility and contempt of the Japanese render him ineffective. His language is rife with slurs and epithets toward the Japanese, and his investigation of the case is thrown off course by his single-minded desire to persecute a Japanese offender. Graham is dismissed by Connor for his misunderstanding of the Japanese: “Graham has no real knowledge, no first-hand experience. He just has a collection of prejudices and media fantasies. . . . He doesn’t know anything about the Japanese—and it never occurs to him to find out.”<sup>23</sup>

Although Graham’s figure of the raving Japan basher is set up as a foil for Connor’s authority, Connor’s “objective” understanding of the Japanese leads him to some of the same conclusions Graham has arrived at through “common-sense” racism. In a conversation with Connor, Smith expresses his confusion as to the motivations behind all the machinations of their Japanese adversaries. Connor, the more sophisticated liberal, who genuinely knows the Japanese and admires their aesthetics, confirms Graham’s opinion that Japan has launched another undeclared war. Smith: “Graham thinks it’s a war.” Connor: “Well, that’s true. We are definitely at war with Japan.”<sup>24</sup>

It becomes clear that at the core of Connor’s expertise on Japanese culture is his clarity about Japan’s adversarial relation with America and his alignment with the project of reestablishing U.S. hegemony. Connor warns that the fundamental and insurmountable difference between Japanese culture and American culture lies in the Japanese belief that “trade [is] intended to wipe out the competition.” Connor tells us that this is not common to capitalist behavior but is peculiar to the Japanese. For Crichton, like Huntington, culture is essential, impervious to change, and determinative of behavior. Even as the discourse of biological race is discredited through the figure of Graham, a reified culture is substituted for genetics; race is reformulated as essentialized cultural difference that keeps Americans and Japanese immutably different. As Connor explains to Smith, “Americans don’t understand . . . because the Japanese system is fundamentally different.”<sup>25</sup>

There are several scenes in the novel in which Connor instructs his student on this immutably different Japanese culture. Having been informed about a Japanese style of business negotiation involving extensive

use of bribes and favors, Smith asks why this is so. Connor's answer: "Why do they eat sushi? It's the way they conduct business." As to why Americans fail to deal adequately with the Japanese style of business: "Why do they eat hamburgers? It's the way they are."<sup>26</sup>

These immutable differences are only one component of Crichton's representation of the new social order. The decline of the United States as world leader has been accompanied by a decay of the domestic social order. Despite the fact that *Rising Sun* purports to expose the Japanese political and economic threat to the United States, the entire history of global capitalism is suppressed in favor of narratives of culture and sex.

In *Rising Sun*, the collapse of the family is central to the collapse of the nation. The decline of the moral order at home is a central reason for the inability of the United States to assert itself in the world. While American men like Senator Morton put themselves and the nation at risk with their sexual peccadilloes, Crichton's Japanese men are obsessed with white women, especially blondes. Much attention is paid to the ways in which Japanese money is used to pay for American sex. Bars that cater to Japanese businessmen and a dormitory of white women reserved for Japanese executives become exhibits in an indictment of Japanese sexuality—and reproduce the opium dens and dives of Fu Manchu's Chinatown. The murder investigation reveals that Cheryl Austin, a once-wholesome girl from the Midwest, has been lured into prostitution and introduced to the pleasures of rough sex by Ishiguro. However, Crichton reserves his greatest scorn for Smith's ex-wife, represented as an amoral, careerist attorney who has abandoned her young daughter to Smith's care as a beleaguered but loving single father. She has gone to work in the district attorney's office, which has prostituted itself to the interests of Japanese capital. Although she has long ago abandoned family in favor of career, she goes so far as to threaten to have Smith's custody of his daughter revoked if he does not back off his investigation of Nakamoto.

The substitution of culture for race is made all the more apparent in the film version of *Rising Sun*. In response to criticism that the novel's polemics trade in racist stereotypes, the producers decided to cast Wesley Snipes as Peter Smith, the narrator and disciple of John Connor, played by Sean Connery. Crichton goes to great pains to point out that Japanese are themselves deeply racist, but nothing is made of this with regard to Smith. There is no clue in the novel to suggest that Smith is black, but the decision to cast a black actor in the narrator's role deflected the charge of racism from the film.

Indeed, the partnership of Snipes and Connery, despite the obvious stereotype that marries black brawn and hip style with white brains and control, allows for new racial alignments in the global city. The principal

poster ad for the movie shows Connery and Snipes on either side of a stylized World War II Imperial Japanese battle flag that looms over an LA skyline [illustration here]. In one scene, the American heroes are chased by a car full of Japanese gangsters through the bleak low-rise urban landscape far from the polished marble, chrome, and glass facades of the Nakamoto tower. Just as it appears that they will be captured by the Japanese, Smith, who until this moment has been marginalized as Connor's sidekick, calls upon a group of black inner-city youths to intervene to save them. Although the scene is played for low humor, the notion of a black and white alliance against an alien threat is resonant. In this bombed-out landscape—devastated by multinational capital, identified in *Rising Sun* with Japanese culture—the crisis of race between white and black can be resolved in a new alliance that restores national unity against the alien. It was precisely in these neighborhoods of the global city that thousands of Asian-owned stores were looted and set ablaze in 1992.

### Orientalizing Capital II: The Mere Gook Rule

In the 1980s, Los Angeles county became the nation's largest manufacturing center. This was due in large measure to the influx of migrant workers and capitalists from Asia and Latin America into the LA basin. Although less visible than the Japanese skyscrapers, the presence of hundreds of thousands of Asian immigrant entrepreneurs was felt at every level of the Los Angeles economy.

Some Asian immigrants have come with enough capital, or are able to borrow enough here, to enter the secondary retail sector abandoned by national chain stores and earlier ethnic retailers. For example, in Los Angeles, Korean liquor store owners often bought their stores from African American entrepreneurs, who had bought the stores from Jewish owners who had been burned out in the Watts riots of 1964. These entrepreneurs—Korean retailers, Indian motel keepers, Thai restaurateurs, Vietnamese garment subcontractors, and others—make up for a low level of capital investment with a high rate of exploited labor, often commandeering the underpaid or unpaid labor of family members.

Asian entrepreneurs have also helped create a new manufacturing sector that responds to the demands of flexible accumulation for small batch production, custom designs, and quick turnover. This demand and the small-scale capital available to many of these immigrant entrepreneurs has resulted in a manufacturing landscape filled with thousands of small subcontractors. In Los Angeles, the garment industry has played a central role in this development. Despite the fact that apparel

manufacturing declined by 20 percent nationally in the 1980s as production was transferred overseas, garment manufacturing in Los Angeles grew by a remarkable 60 percent during that period. Not only has a labor force of Latinos and Asian immigrant workers been mobilized to compete with foreign suppliers; Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese immigrants make up an overwhelming proportion of the subcontractors in the industry. In sum, Asian Americans, particularly immigrant Asian workers, have a highly visible position on both sides of the post-Fordist urban economy.

In the 1992 riots, there were specific local reasons why Asian American businesses were targeted. Antagonisms between African Americans and Korean merchants in Los Angeles were widely publicized. There was anger in the African American community over the killing of Latasha Harlins, a black teenager, by Soon Ja-Du, a Korean female shop owner, over a disputed bottle of orange juice. Although Soon Ja-Du was convicted of manslaughter, the white judge refused to sentence Soon Ja-du to any time in prison, asserting that she represented no threat to the community. This leniency confirmed a persistent belief in the black community that Asian-owned businesses got favored treatment from the government and the banks. There was the broader charge that Korean merchants exploited and did not give back to the communities in which they did business. Most immediately, many blacks and Latinos felt they were rudely treated and singled out for surveillance when they patronized Korean-owned stores.<sup>27</sup>

Korean-American shopkeepers were, however, merely the gook of the moment. The mere gook rule (from the Vietnam War, wherein any dead Vietnamese could be counted as a dead enemy) was in play, and Koreans were the closest and most vulnerable Asian Americans in sight. Koreans were not the only Asians targeted; 300 Chinese-owned stores were destroyed, as were several dozen shops owned by Filipinos and South Asians. In nearby Long Beach, Vietnamese shops were targeted and looted. Despite television and radio characterization of the event as a black riot, the looting was a multicultural affair. To be sure, in areas such as South Central where African Americans made up a majority of the residents, they constituted a majority of the looters. But in such areas as Pico-Union, where Latinos made up a majority of residents, they did the looting, and in still other neighborhoods non-Hispanic whites joined in.

The massive attack on Asian Americans by their fellow Los Angelenos in 1992 was stunning and unsurpassed in its scale but not unpredictable or unprecedented in the focus of its fury. Since the beginning of the 1980s, racially motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans had been

growing in every part of the country. In New York city, hate crimes against Asian Americans rose by an astounding 680 percent between 1985 and 1990. Between 1989 and 1990 alone, hate crime against Asian Americans more than doubled, and subway crime against Asian Americans rose by 206 percent.<sup>28</sup> Although differences in definition, recordkeeping, and monitoring make it difficult to systematically observe the nationwide rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans, several well publicized, racially motivated murders during the 1980s and 1990s are an indicator of an alarming rise in hate crimes and violence against Asian Americans. Asians of every ethnicity have been its victims; Americans of every other race are among the assailants. Most notorious have been the murders of Vincent Chin in Detroit; Navorze Mody, an Indian American, in New Jersey; and Vandy Phornng, a Cambodian American, in Massachusetts in 1987; Jim Loo, a Chinese American, in North Carolina, and five Cambodian and Laotian American children in a Stockton, Calif., schoolyard, in 1989; Hung Trong, a Vietnamese American, in Houston in 1990; and Thien Minh Ly, a Vietnamese American, in Los Angeles in 1996. Not always classified as racially motivated, and therefore less well publicized, are the killings of scores of Asian American shopkeepers and cabdrivers. In Los Angeles in the two years before the riots, twenty-five Korean American shopkeepers were killed by non-Korean assailants.<sup>29</sup>

In several of these cases and in many others, it did not matter that the victim was Chinese, or Korean, or Vietnamese; the mere gook rule overrode ethnicity. Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was taken to be Japanese and killed by two white, furloughed autoworkers in Detroit. Jim Loo, also a Chinese American, was killed by two white men who thought he was Vietnamese. In 1990, Tuan Ana Cao, a Vietnamese American, was beaten and severely injured by a group of black men who thought he was Korean. In January of 1996, Thien Minh Ly, a Vietnamese American, was killed by two White drifters who called him a Jap. In these cases it didn't matter what ethnicity or nationality the victims really were; the only significant issue was that they were the gook.

While *Rising Sun's* glittering Japanese skyscrapers symbolized the yellow peril to corporate America in the 1980s, Korean shopkeepers embodied Oriental capital in the decaying neighborhoods of the inner city. Two films that were released just before and after the LA riots exemplify this new construction of the Oriental. *Falling Down* (1992, Warner Bros., directed by Alan Schumacher) and *Menace II Society* (1993, New Line Cinema, directed by Allen and Albert Hughes) supply their audiences with brutal, dystopian visions of Los Angeles. Both films mobilize frustration and anger against the political economy of late capitalist Los Angeles into narratives of beset manhood and rage against the Oriental alien.

Both films present a vision of Los Angeles that is made up of Asian-immigrant capitalists, black and Latino gangbangers, skinheads, rude motorists, and impersonal fast-food joints. *Falling Down* and *Menace II Society* map—by foot, bus, and automobile—the city as a multiracial nightmare in which civil society, both public society and the family, has collapsed.

At the surface, these two films seem worlds apart; *Falling Down* is about beset whiteness, while *Menace II Society* is about beset blackness. What draws the two films together is their treatment of the gook. Both films open with an act of retributive violence against the alien. In both films, the alien is the Korean merchant. In *Falling Down*, a laid-off white defense worker (Michael Douglas), known by the vanity license plates on his car (“D-FENS”), enters a corner convenience store in a desolate corner of Los Angeles looking for change with which to phone home. The Korean shopkeeper points to a “No change will be given without a purchase” sign and then charges what D-fens takes to be an exorbitant amount for a soda. In a rage, D-fens takes a baseball bat and destroys the interior of the store. *Menace II Society* opens with the murder of two Korean shopkeepers. Two young black men, Caine (Tyryn Turner) and O-Dog (Laurenz Tate), enter a neighborhood store to buy malt liquor. The “boyz” are kept under close surveillance by the shopkeeper. They return his suspicion with hostility and begin to leave without paying for the beer. As they approach the door, the shopkeeper mutters that he feels sorry for their mothers. O-Dog turns, walks back to the shopkeeper, and shoots him point blank in the head. Mugging at the surveillance video camera, O-Dog goes into the back of the store where he shoots and kills the shopkeeper’s cowering wife and grabs the videotape from the camera.

*Falling Down* takes up the nostalgic banner of the angry white male, identifying the frustrations of urban life with “multiculturalism” and articulating white populist rage as a restorationist revolt against the erosion of urban civility. Following the convention of Clint Eastwood’s “man with no name,” the antihero of the film, a white Everyman, is known only as D-fens. He is one of the heroes of the Cold War, now abandoned by the society he has helped to defend, a victim of the triumph over communism. In fact, the military sector continued to enjoy a privileged position in the economy in the 1980s, thanks to huge increases in spending on military hardware in the Carter and Reagan administrations. In the Los Angeles basin, white suburbs like Irvine grew at lightning speed thanks to high-tech industry, much of it fueled by military spending. It was largely the older black working-class neighborhoods like Watts, Compton, and South Central that lost heavy industry and were abandoned like Vietnam. Ironically in *Falling Down*, the only person with whom D-fens

identifies is an out-of-work black veteran who stages a one-man picket line in front of a bank and whose sardonic picket sign reads “Not Financially Viable.” Despite this rapport, D-fens is fearful and resentful of the multicultural city. Getting off the freeway, perhaps for the first time, he is armed only with his anger. Honed by thirty years of conservative attacks on affirmative action, this sense of victimization empowers the angry white male with a deep resentment at the challenge to his privilege presented by minorities and women. In *Falling Down*, as in *Rising Sun*, the rage of the angry white male and the dispossessed African American male show black and white men as equal victims of Orientalized capitalism.

*Menace II Society* is a film of raw brutality about the struggle for survival among young black men in Watts. Made in response to the sentimentality of *Boyz 'n the Hood*, the Hughes brothers’ film paints a bleak picture, focusing not on the potentially good boyz but on the already bad ones. When Caine, a young drug dealer who is the film’s narrator, is asked by the grandfather who has raised him, “Do you want to live or die?” Caine can only reply, “I don’t know.” The deadly encounters in these movies between Asian American grocers and their assailants are the product of a global political economy that has a direct effect on race relations in contemporary LA. The history of this new world order and its local effect are elided as historical meaning is stripped from the category of race, and race as performance becomes the focal point.

Despite or because of its new multiracial constituency, nowhere in this dystopian Los Angeles does a public sphere—a space where different positions, identities, and histories can be negotiated—survive. In *Falling Down* and in *Menace II Society*, as in *Rising Sun*, the possibility of national rebirth is embedded in a narrative of family. The state, represented here only by the police, is largely absent from both films. In *Menace II Society* Caine mainly fears rival street “gangstas,” not the police, despite being savagely beaten by police officers. In the end, even though they have been sent the video from the convenience store, the police never arrest O-Dog or Caine. When Caine finally prepares to leave LA to rebuild his life with a new family in Georgia, it is not the police who kill him but rival gangstas in a drive-by shooting. In *Falling Down*, the state appears not only to have abandoned its faithful servant but to have turned on him. The state has interfered with his right to control his family, the source of his private identity. In both these films, the state’s abandonment of the black family on the one hand, and its interference with the white family on the other, have led to social collapse.

The immediate cause for rage in both films is the breakdown of family in the post-Fordist crisis. D-fens’s wife, fearing his deepening insanity, has

gotten a court restraining order keeping him from the home and their child. D-fens suffers a psychological breakdown when he is prohibited from attending his daughter's birthday party. In *Menace II Society*, the Korean storekeeper's remark reminds O-Dog of his drug-addicted mother's abandonment of him and sends him on a murderous rampage.

On the mean streets of Los Angeles, Asian immigrant store owners are the tethered goat of post-Fordist capitalism. D-fens's victim is the operator of a small neighborhood convenience store. The Korean shopkeeper, seemingly petty and hard, represents alienated capitalism, capital literally given into the hands of the alien. *Falling Down* invokes the mere gook rule when Pendergast (Robert Duvall), a detective who is tracking D-fens, simply assumes his Japanese American partner can communicate with the Korean store owner.

In *Menace II Society*, the encounter between the black youths and Asian merchants in the 'hood is even more brutal and ends in murder. The Asian store clerk and his wife are made to bear the full price of the post-Fordist capitalist transformation. Their murders delineate the ideological roles of Asian and black. By commenting that he pities the mothers of the black youths, the Asian shopkeeper enacts the model minority stereotype and indirectly invokes the accusation that black poverty is due to the failure of the black family. Bringing mothers into the verbal exchange crosses a boundary in black street culture from which the outsider is forbidden. The alien is executed for his inadvertent trespass; there was a widespread resentment of perceived rude treatment on the part of many patrons of transgression.

*Falling Down* mobilizes white middle-class resentment through the comedic strategy of excessive violence. The audience is prompted to laugh at the excessiveness of D-fens's response to each encounter with urban dystopia. Since the context—of D-fens's encounter with the Asian American shopkeeper, or any stereotypes that represent the victimization of the white middle-class—goes unexamined, the audience is given to understand and sympathize with D-fens's perspective that the new world is, by turns, threatening and incomprehensible. It is the excessiveness of D-fens's reactions to these encounters—smashing up the convenience store with a baseball bat, shooting up a McDonald's with a sub-machine gun, blowing up a truck that is blocking traffic with a Stinger missile—and not his rage, that is inappropriate and therefore comedic. Only when D-fens's rage turns against his own family, in particular his daughter, is the audience cued to a more anxious reading. As D-fens's mental collapse becomes increasingly acute, the audience is distanced from his violence and relieved of the burden of guilt by association. The

audience can simultaneously cheer him on and cluck at his violent excess, excusing it as mental illness.

In *Menace II Society*, it is the surveillance video of the event and its replay that are excessive; they divert our attention from an interrogation of the murders as a product of the brutal political economy of Watts, LA, and the Pacific Rim, and redirect it to the poverty of black culture and the pathology of the black underclass. At first, the naive viewer might think that O-Dog's taking the video is simply a strategy of survival, a matter of hiding the evidence of the crime and the identity of the killer. However, the audience is soon made aware of other uses of the video. Almost immediately, O-Dog begins to show the video to his friends as evidence, not of his crime, but of his hypermasculinized selfhood. O-Dog himself becomes absorbed in watching the video, replaying it and reliving the homicide as a supremely masculinizing moment.

O-Dog's fetishization of the murder video mimics the televised fetishization of racial violence in the mainstream mass media. It mimics the plethora of "real life" cop shows, which invariably show the mainly white police stopping, chasing, and bringing to ground mainly black criminals. O-Dog's continuous replay of the murder video mimics precisely what network television has done with the videotaped recordings of the murder of Latasha Harlins, the beatings of Rodney King and Reginald Denny, the burning of Koreatown, the actions of black looters and shotgun-toting Korean merchants. Lauren Berlant has noted that "it is now commonplace in television criticism to say that the structure of televisual experience promotes the annihilation of memory and in particular, of historical knowledge and political self-awareness."<sup>30</sup> These scenes of racial violence were endlessly replayed, constantly fragmented, and spliced into a thousand different shows. Constant repetition decontextualized the events and detached the violence from the class and racial crises of LA. Racial and class violence is thus stripped of historical meaning and aestheticized and, whether for the news or entertainment divisions of the multimedia corporation, transformed into performance. In a recent essay, David Palumbo-Liu brilliantly deconstructs a news photo of a young Korean-American man holding a handgun and wearing a Malcolm X t-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "by any means necessary." In the background is a burning store. Palumbo-Liu points out that the photo of the armed Korean (one of many similar images that flooded the nation in the wake of the riots) now poses the Asian immigrant as a stand-in for white property rights.<sup>31</sup> Such fragmented and decontextualized images of race are central to a narrative that treats the urban violence of Los Angeles not as a material result of the global restructuring

of capital that has polarized the city between the rich and poor (in which Asian Americans are posed in the middle), but as a black and white clash of civilizations, transformed into a war of black against yellow.

*Rising Sun*, *Falling Down*, and *Menace II Society*, despite their quite different vantage points, share a narrative of beset nationhood and a post-modern anxiety about the harsh and unforgiving new world of global capitalism, transnational culture, and multiracial communities. All three films attempt to restore national unity by creating nostalgic narratives of revived patriarchy. The enormous contempt mobilized against the careerist (feminist) mother who has abandoned her child and husband in *Rising Sun* is transformed in *Falling Down* into sympathy for D-fens, abandoned by his spouse in his hour of need and then denied the right to see his daughter on her birthday (at least until he himself becomes a threat to the family). In *Menace II Society*, sympathy shifts to the sentimental role of the young mother who, struggling to raise her five-year-old son while his father is in jail, is Caine's only counsel. Her plan to leave LA to take a job in Atlanta, a plan that Caine shares until he is shot dead at the moment of departure, may be read as a nostalgic and utopian attempt to reconstruct a patriarchal and pastoral life. In none of the films do we see the patriarchy actually restored; this is the task to be accomplished.



## Disobedient Citizenship: Deconstructing the Oriental

In contemporary narratives of American collapse and national revival, capital itself is Orientalized. In the contemporary labor market, globalized capital is the new yellow peril that threatens to reduce the American worker to the wage levels of Third World workers. The new identification of capital with foreign cultures, from the Indonesian banking conglomerates to the Korean greengrocer, enables the U.S. to camouflage its own leading role in the reorganization of a globalized capitalist economy. The Oriental is, once again, constructed as the alien agent.

The 1990s embodiment of the Asian American as agent of foreign capital is, of course, John Huang. To be sure, it was only with the blessing of his mentors at both the multinational Lippo Group and the Democratic National Committee that he attempted to arrange the marriage between Democratic party politics and the interests of global capital. This marriage had after all had long been a dream of the business-oriented Democratic Leadership Council, which has dominated the Democratic party since the election of the DNC's founding father, Bill Clinton, as president. The payoff for the Asian American matchmakers was supposed to be a greater voice in the public sphere—in particular, a voice in the debates on policy issues of critical concern to Asian American communities (such as immigration). This attempt to buy into American politics as a special-interest group demonstrates how limited is the liberal multiculturalist approach in establishing a place for Asian Americans in the body politic. The

attempt to transform Asian American concerns into simple interest-group politics relied on a theory of ethnic assimilation. It ran aground because it ignored the historical construction of Asian Americans as an alien race. As Thomas Oliphant's cartoon and the *National Review's* cover both make painfully clear, without challenging the Orientalist representation and the structure of racial ideology on which it is built, Asian Americans are always vulnerable to being seen as the alien minion of a foreign power.

In 1943, the same year that Gunnar Myrdal published *An American Dilemma*, Carlos Bulosan published *America Is in the Heart*. Bulosan, a Filipino immigrant, chronicled the struggle of the Pinoy, the approximately 45,000 Filipino migrant workers in the fields, orchards, and canneries of California, Oregon, and Washington. Bulosan gave witness to the degrading living conditions, exploitative wage system, corrupt labor practices, racist brutality, and moral despair that faced the Pinoy.

Like Myrdal, Bulosan also believed in an American creed, but he understood it differently. While Myrdal saw the American creed as a set of ideals that had already shaped the course of American history, Bulosan understood America as a contradiction between the promise of justice and the historical reality of oppression. For Bulosan, the American creed could only be realized through a fierce class struggle for democracy. Such a struggle required understanding of the deep connections between colonialism and capital, between power and privilege. As a writer, Bulosan understood the necessity of creating a powerful counter-narrative as a critique and strategy for resistance.

It is for the workers that we must write. . . . We must interpret their hopes as a people desiring their fullest fulfillment of their potentialities. We must be strong of voice, objective of criticism, protest and challenge. There is no other way to combat any attempt to suppress individual liberty.<sup>1</sup>

A half century later, we are left asking, "How can Asian American culture assert itself against a popular culture that constructs the Asian American as a stand-in for Orientalized capital?" Mira Nair's 1995 film *Mississippi Masala* suggests precisely such a critique and an alternative imaginary. *Mississippi Masala* tells the story of cross-racial romance between Mina, a young Indian-American woman (Sarita Choudhury) and Demetrius, a young African-American man (Denzel Washington). Nair explores the different and conflicting racial trajectories of Asian, black and white that come together in contemporary Mississippi. The film maps the contradictions within and between political economies structured by race, class, sex, and immigration status. *Mississippi Masala* illustrates the diasporic character of the contemporary Indian-American

community and elaborates the transnational histories of Asians as middleman minorities in racially stratified colonial and capitalist societies. Finally, *Mississippi Masala* works as a meditation on the problem of political consciousness and resistance at the intersection of the global and the local.

The film begins in 1972, on the eve of the expulsion of the Indian community from Uganda. Okelo, a black Ugandan, urges his best friend Jay, an Indian Ugandan, to leave the country. Jay asks, "Why should I go? Uganda is my home." Okelo answers with a pained expression, "Africa is for Africans now—black Africans." Coming from his closest friend, someone who has just saved his life from dictator Idi Amin's police, Okelo's answer forces Jay to see that the Indian diaspora in Uganda has come to an end. This recognition is so bitter that despite Okelo's continued devotion and his great affection for Jay's wife Kinnu (Sarmila Tagore) and daughter Mina (Sarita Choudhury), Jay can not bring himself to speak to his friend again.

While the departure scene generates great sympathy for the uprooted Indian families, Nair takes pains to emphasize that the Indian community in Uganda, although now politically vulnerable, has enjoyed a century of economic privilege under British colonialism. Jay's home in the hills above Kampala is a large comfortable bungalow built in classic British colonial style. The serene comfort of the home stands in sharp contrast to the heat and dust of Kampala. In a scene that reveals the distance between the Indian and black communities in Uganda, soldiers force Kinnu off the bus carrying Indians to the airport. The first thing that falls out of her suitcase is a cherished photo of Jay in his barrister's robes and powdered wig, an obvious reminder of the complicity of the Indian community in British colonial rule. A soldier tosses the photo into the mud. Another soldier pulls out a cassette tape player, which plays a Hindi pop tune whose lyrics include the refrain, "my perfume may be French and my hat may be Russian, but my heart is Hindi, Hindi, Hindi." After being stripped of her gold necklace, a humiliated Kinnu is allowed back on the bus full of terrified Indians. The scene reveals not only the present helplessness of the disenfranchised Indian community but also the political privilege (the photo) it had been granted, the cultural isolation (the Hindi tape) it had cultivated, and the wealth (the necklace) it had accumulated.

The film's contemporary plot opens in the parking lot of a Piggly Wiggly supermarket in the small town of Greenwood, Miss., in 1990. The new racial and class dynamics of contemporary Mississippi are suggested when Mina smashes her cousin's car into a van driven by Demetrius, which in turn rear-ends a truck driven by a white redneck. The heated

arguments—which in an earlier day would have either been unthinkable or have resulted in violence—are mediated here in the New South by a black police officer.

In a story of downward mobility familiar to hundreds of thousands of other Asian immigrants whose training has not fit the U.S. labor market or its licensing requirements, Jay is unemployed and spends his time petitioning the Ugandan government for the return of his property; Kinnu runs a small and clearly marginal liquor store in the black part of town; and Mina cleans rooms and works the desk at the Monte Cristo motel owned by her uncle. Underscoring the poverty of their now transient and much-reduced lives, the family lives at the Monte Cristo at the sufferance of their relatives.

The garish and somewhat sleazy Monte Cristo Motel is at once quintessentially American and symbolically Indian. It joins the myth of American mobility to the rootlessness of diaspora. The motel industry, which requires little capital but intensive labor, is heavily staffed by immigrant entrepreneurs. The Monte Cristo is the site of struggles of class, ethnicity, sex, and generation in the Indian community of Greenwood.

In an American community where the divide between white and black defines virtually all social relations, skin color is revealed to be a central concern in the diasporic Indian community. Although it resembles the concern over skin color among African Americans, color consciousness in the diasporic Indian community is historically linked both to caste hierarchies in the old homeland and to racial hierarchies in the new homeland. Mina's mother hopes that Mina will attract the favorable attention of Harry Patel, the community's most eligible bachelor. In response, Mina tells her, "Face it, ma, you got a darkie daughter. Harry Patel's mother doesn't like darkies." At a wedding reception, the mothers of two other girls articulate the traditional calculus of color and class, dismissing Mina's chances with young Harry. "You can be dark and have money, or be fair and have no money, but you can't be dark and have no money and still expect to get Harry Patel." The formulation simultaneously exposes the status anxiety of the community and reveals their tacit recognition that race is a social construct.

The romantic relationship between Mina and Demetrius, which drives the plot of *Mississippi Masala* is set in a complex dynamic of Asian, black, and white relations of class and race configured by different but converging histories of slavery, colonialism, and immigration. The presence of Asian Americans disrupts the black and white racial narrative. When Demetrius' partner, Tyrone, meets Mina for the first time, he is attracted to her "exotic" sex appeal. First, he mistakes her for Mexican; then, when she explains that she is Indian, he mistakes her for an American Indian.

In a later scene, a white motel owner has to explain to another who wants to send the Indians "back to the reservation" that "they aren't that kind of Indian."

Mina's transnational history is mapped when she is invited to Sunday supper at Demetrius's house. The brief conversation over supper sketches out the commonalities and differences of the black and Asian diasporas. In response to the curiosity of Demetrius's younger brother, Dexter (Tico Wells), Mina explains that she was born and lived in Africa but, just as he has never been to Africa, she has never been to India. When Mina explains the Indians had been brought to Uganda to build the railroads, Dexter responds, "like slaves." To which Mina, recalling the privileges that the Indian community had come to enjoy, answers weakly, "Not exactly." The history of Indian labor in Uganda, with its origins in the railroads, their transformation into a commercial class, and status as a middleman minority in a racially stratified society is immediately recognizable to us as resembling the racial trajectory of other Asians, notably the Chinese, in the United States.

The inclusion of Indian Americans and other south Asians in the category of Asian American is by no means a foregone conclusion, the *Third* ruling notwithstanding. Nair establishes a direct link between the new Asian immigrant community and an older Asian community in Mississippi with the introduction of an elderly local Chinese man, a regular customer at the Monte Cristo motel. In the 1870s, Chinese workers were brought to the Mississippi Delta as contract labor to replace the newly free African Americans in the cotton fields. After their contracts ended, most left the plantations, and many managed to become grocers or run small businesses. They intermarried with both black and white and became a third, intermediate community in the black and white race relations of the post-reconstruction South.<sup>2</sup>

In a reversal of the stereotype, it is Demetrius, the owner of his own carpet cleaning business, who is cast as the model minority in this film. Demetrius, not Jay, embodies the Protestant work ethic. While Mina refuses to go to college out of pride since her parents are poor, Demetrius has chosen not to go to college out of a sense of familial obligation; he has decided to look after his elderly widowed father. Demetrius takes great pride in his status as a business owner, which defines his self-identity. It is the first thing that Demetrius tells Mina about himself. Entrepreneurship is not without its cost. Demetrius understands his success to be built on his hard work alone, and this leads him to take a reproachful and self-righteous attitude toward his younger brother, who is an easy-going dreamer, prone to blaming others—particularly whites and "the system"—for his chronic unemployment. Dexter is less a fool than a foil

for showing Demetrius as rigid and constrained. Demetrius's identity as a petty capitalist is as much an iron cage as it is for Mina's uncles and cousins, the motel owners.

Demetrius's status as entrepreneur is also contrasted to his elderly father (Seneca Wells), who works long past retirement age as a waiter in the rundown local hotel. He works for a demanding and patronizing white woman, a holdover from the Old South. When Demetrius picks up his father at the hotel, she remarks to a friend, "He's the good one." She takes credit for Demetrius's success, saying that is she who has "vouched for him with the bank." Even as we can see the contrast between Demetrius and his father, we are reminded that it is the whites who control the political economy of Greenwood.

When Demetrius and Mina are discovered sleeping together in the nearby town of Biloxi, the carefully skirted contradictions of race, class, and sex explode into the public sphere. In "new" Mississippi as in Uganda, the power relationships between racialized communities have been rendered invisible; in this case the civility of an official but shallow multiculturalism has allowed the citizens to avoid referring to race or power. No racial slurs were exchanged during the auto accident involving Demetrius and the white working-class truck driver. In the fistcuffs that ensue when Mina's cousins attack Demetrius, claiming sovereignty over "our women," there are no racial taunts (although it is Demetrius and Mina who are arrested). When Mina expresses her anger at racial bigotry, Demetrius observes "racism—only now it's called tradition."

In the wake of Mina's and Demetrius' transgression, a cross-racial network of gossip-mongering becomes the public sphere. Each community interprets this private relationship of desire across races to be a public offense that has disrupted the carefully plotted narrative of multicultural but racially separate harmony. Each racialized community is revealed to have a stake in the racial status quo.

Like Korean groceries, Chinese restaurants, and many other middleman minority enterprises, the Monte Cristo is only a marginally successful business. Despite their ostentation and great pride of ownership in their aging Lincoln, Mina's motel-owning relatives are not wealthy. The car that is the pride and joy of her cousins is big and shiny but hardly new. The motel owner and his sons are thus constantly worried about money. They panic when one cousin warns that "here [in America] everybody sues."

In a scene reminiscent of Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, where the Korean storekeeper saves his store with a sign saying "Asians are black too," Mina's uncle tries to persuade Demetrius not to sue over the accident that Mina has caused. "Black, brown, yellow, Mexican, Puerto

Rican, all the same. As long as you are not white, means you are colored. . . . United we stand, divided we fall."<sup>3</sup> This self-serving appeal to racial unity is exposed as the empty rhetoric of a liberal multiculturalism that papers over the real and conflicting relations of power that are present in the exchange. The transparency of the ploy becomes patently evident when the Indian community later punishes Demetrius by canceling their contracts with him.

The conflict between the Asian and black communities reveals the historical continuity of white control over the economy. The white motel owners play off one minority against the other. One white motel owner calls an Indian counterpart to ask rhetorically, "I hear you're having nigger problems now." The white hotel owner withdraws her endorsement of Demetrius, and the loan on his van is called. The white banker asserts that calling the loan is only a matter of business. He disingenuously insists that the successful loan applicant must demonstrate "character, capital, and collateral." Leaving the bank, Demetrius knowingly adds "color" to the qualifications.

It is only through confrontation with the nostalgic myths of diaspora that these contradictions can be resolved. Pressing Mina to end her relationship with Demetrius, Jay asserts that he is not a racist and that he wants only to protect Mina from racism and the pain that he has experienced. "In the end," he says, "after thirty-four years, it came down to the color of my skin." Mina challenges her father's narrative of "why we left Uganda," reminding him, "Okelo risked his life to save yours, I don't know what more proof you need of his love. I remember when he came to say good-bye, you would not even look at him."

Mina identifies with the black community when she declares herself a "darkie," and she takes Harry Patel to the Leopard Lounge, a black club where she feels at home. Her rejection of Harry at the Leopard Lounge consciously demolishes her mother's dream of a "good marriage." In rejecting the socially desirable Harry Patel even before she begins the relationship with Demetrius, she has taken a radical step in asserting control over her body with respect to future marriage. (This is contrasted to the sexually dysfunctional arranged marriage of her cousin.) Mina is conscious that achieving historical agency requires a self-awareness not only in terms of race and sex but of class as well. When Mina offers to join Demetrius, it is to share his economic as well as his romantic life. She tells Demetrius, "I can be your partner—I know how to clean rooms."

The second confrontation is between Jay and Demetrius. When Jay tries to refer to his own experience as victim of racism, Demetrius explodes. "Struggle, struggle" he mimics, "Look, I'm a black man born and raised in Mississippi, not a damn thing you can tell me about struggle." He

continues with a scathing indictment of the Indian community in Greenwood, telling the other side to the diasporic story.

You and your folks can come down here from God knows where and be about as black as the ace of spades and as soon as you get here, you start acting white and treating us like your our doormats. I know that you and your daughter ain't but a few shades from this right here [pointing to his own face], *that* I know.

This confrontation forces Jay to recognize that in constructing his nostalgic narrative of diaspora, “after thirty-four years, it came down to the color of my skin,” he has reproduced the same reductionist logic of race that he so bitterly assigns to Idi Amin. This racial narrative has repressed his own political consciousness, his own understanding of the complicity of Indians in Uganda’s exploitation and its subsequent dictatorship. In a flashback to his final evening in a Kampala bar, Jay recalls that he had admonished his Indian drinking partners, “We helped create Idi Amin. Most people are born with five senses. We are left with only one—sense of property.”

After Mina and Demetrius leave Greenwood, Jay finally returns to Uganda alone. Kinnu will not return with him. On his return, Jay discovers his house in ruins, and worse, that Okelo had been killed shortly after the Indians had left. Jay realizes that years of nostalgic mythmaking about his homeland have been an illusion. Jay writes to Kinnu in Greenwood, “Home is where the heart is, and my heart is with you,” a declaration that is trite except in the context of diaspora. In the final scene of the film, Jay returns to the Kampala marketplace, the scene of his family’s departure from their “homeland.” It is now filled with color and vibrancy. There, he watches young Ugandans dancing, and he picks up and tenderly holds an African baby, a child who symbolizes both a global future and his own future grandchild. He can only hold on to this future after he has jettisoned his nostalgic past.

On its surface, *Mississippi Masala*’s utopian ending may seem sentimental, even to the point of being maudlin, but it would be a mistake to let such a reading distract us from the radical potential of Nair’s work. *Mississippi Masala*’s utopian resolution can only be imagined on the basis of a class struggle through a materialist engagement with history. Such a utopian vision is resonant of another Asian American narrative of struggle, Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in The Heart*. Bulosan understood America’s promise in terms of the legacies of colonialism, the violence of race, the inequities of sex, and class exploitation. He also understood that political consciousness—the consciousness of the histories of peoples in struggle—was the necessary first step to realizing the promise of freedom.

A half century ago, Bulosan wrote:

America is not a land of one race or one class of men. We are all Americans that have toiled and suffered and known oppression and defeat, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea pickers. America is not bound by geographical latitudes. America is not merely a land or an institution. America is in the hearts of men that died for freedom, it is also in the eyes of men that are building a new world. America is a prophecy of a new society. . . . The old world is dying but a new world is being born. It generates inspiration from the chaos that beats upon us all.<sup>4</sup>