
Introduction

Clasped Hands and Clenched Fists

It is May 10, 1869, and the mood is jubilant in Promontory Point, Utah, where workers have just finished joining two lines of the transcontinental railway that link the East with the West. To mark this momentous event, wine bottles are uncorked and hats are doffed. Strangers exchange smiles; hands clasp together. Photographers, commissioned by the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroad companies, join the celebrations, but the photographs they take are not merely illustrations. Instead, like the railways they depict, the photographs participate in the act of nation building, contributing to the project of visual unification that Alan Trachtenberg has called the “American album.”¹ The most iconic, taken by A. J. Russell, and often called *Meeting of the Tracks* or *The Joining of the Rails*, stands out for its attempt to bridge division² (Figure I.1). If the transcontinental railroad constructs the nation, then this photograph suggests that those who helped build it are the nation’s citizens, deserving through their labor of that status and the recognition it entails. Yet as Asian American writers, critics, and historians have observed, in spite of Russell’s effort to take account of the many bodies that contributed to this monumental feat, the photograph erases Chinese coolies from the historical record.³ Rather than serving the ends of visual unification, the camera often functions, Anna Pegler-Gordon notes, as “a graphic metaphor” of exclusion.⁴

This emphasis on exclusion, familiar in Asian American studies, is only part of the photograph’s story, however. By spotlighting the handshake, the official title of the photograph, *East Shakes Hands with West*, offers a clue to its other, equally important story. Significantly, this grasp of hands between the civil engineers marks a civil gesture that symbolically, if incompletely, closes the



Figure I.1 *East Shakes Hands with West*. (Photo by A. J. Russell. Courtesy of Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum, © 2011, CPRR.org.)

potential split symbolized by the blank space in the foreground. Within Russell's photograph, the gentlemanly gesture of the handshake marks a moment of national belonging for the ideal subjects tactilely enfolded within its reach. At the same time, the handshake invokes the poignant limits of its grasp, those who are not symbolically incorporated within this gesture. Although a cultural history of the handshake has yet to be written, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty remind us of the gesture's significance for constituting community; in their writings on ethics and intersubjectivity, the handshake is a privileged symbol of touching otherness.⁵ If this photograph enacts a long-standing practice of exclusion, it does so through a differentiating discourse of civility, compensating for the absence marked by this foreground blank space (and the exclusions that this space marks) with the fullness of the bodies crowding the space. Civility mediates presence and absence, subject and object, exclusion and unification, civility and citizenship. This book explores the cultural implications of this complex mediation.

The civil engineers' handshake in Russell's photograph is only one of many gestures extended at moments when the parameters of citizenship are most vexed and contested. More than merely an accidental detail in Russell's iconic photograph, civility is a trope that surfaces in signal moments when

the civil rights associated with citizenship are under greatest threat. Perhaps the most notorious use of photographs as a popular means of constructing national identity occurred during World War II, as a means of protecting the “good” citizen, then the law-abiding Chinese American, against his “bad” counterpart, the enemy alien, the Japanese American, who, in the wake of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, was stripped of civil liberties. A brief primer in *Life* offered what the magazine described as the “handbook for Americans,” relying on photographs to provide guidance on “how to tell Japs from the Chinese.”⁶ In this primer, photographs, cursive script, and typescript intersect to parallel the triangulation between the groups that the feature describes as “U.S. citizens”; “U.S. Chinese,” who are victims of undeserved “emotional outburst[s],”⁷ and the true culprits, the Japanese, who are “enemy aliens.”⁸ According to this formulation, the citizen evaluates noncitizens, suggesting that the category of citizenship is constructed through encounters with photography in addition to more familiar sites of engagement such as the law. At the same time, citizens are advised, however indirectly, to comport themselves civilly—that is, to exercise judgment about their behavior, by judging first that the offending subjects deserve their wrath.

Civility triangulates the unmarked but obviously white “citizen,” the “bad” enemy alien, and the “good” U.S. Chinese, within a constantly contested continuum of citizenship that obscures the arbitrariness of these categories by normalizing them. Sociologist Claire Jean Kim proposes the concept of “racial triangulation” to explain the complex constituencies of Asian America, which are formed in relation to the racialization of whiteness and blackness.⁹ Although the Afro-Asian nuances of this process, which are explored in a number of important studies, are not my primary concern here, my approach to varied racial encounters within this book upholds while unsettling Yen Le Espiritu’s notion of Asian American “panethnicity” (or strategic alliances between disparate groups) by drawing inspiration from the dynamic dimensions of the concept of triangulation.¹⁰ Indeed, embodied forms of civility are often posed as answers to such troubling questions about citizenship as: Who is a citizen? What are the rights of citizenship, and who may claim these rights? This book also argues that at still other times, civility serves as a strategic resistance to these provisional answers, which can be as troubling as the questions that they address. Civility, in other words, “frames” or shapes the meanings of citizenship. In so doing, civility also articulates and disarticulates the parameters of Asian America. *Picturing Model Citizens: Civility in Asian American Visual Culture* explores civility’s critical role in defining and redefining citizenship.

Civility is so central to the formation of Asian America that it lies at the heart of one of the community’s most familiar and controversial figures, the model minority. A figure that debuted in 1966 with the publication of William

Petersen's infamous *New York Times Magazine* article, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style,"¹¹ but was anticipated decades earlier, the model minority casts a long shadow that continues to influence debates on citizenship today. Described as "deeply ambivalent,"¹² the model minority inspires commentary about the figure's varied ideological functions: as evidence of success to be emulated by other minorities;¹³ as an inspiring touchstone for the rejuvenation of white Americans who, to their chagrin, find themselves questioning their formerly certain moral, intellectual, and economic superiority;¹⁴ as an equivocal discourse embraced by some as an affirmative mode of self-identification;¹⁵ as no less injurious a stereotype as the Yellow Peril specters that it ostensibly replaced and for that reason, to be disparaged; or, even more complexly, as a double-edged means of generating cultural and social capital through an exploitative "system of signification."¹⁶

Despite Victor Bascara's astute observation that the model minority is unmatched as "a visible priority for Asian American mobilization,"¹⁷ however, these extensive debates are surprisingly consistent in their focus on productivity and self-sufficiency.¹⁸ Notably, proponents of the model minority myth focus on labor as the basis for achievement of full citizenship and its attendant rights of political representation and social recognition, aligning the efforts of the indentured laborer and his industrious descendants within the Horatio Alger fantasy of bootstrap gumption, obscuring the fact that, as Colleen Lye has convincingly shown, labor was the basis for exploitation and exclusion.¹⁹ Addressing a later moment, Robert G. Lee likewise notes that this aspect of what Frank Chin has elsewhere termed "racist love"²⁰ (in contrast to the "racist hate" projected at other minorities) is produced within a Cold War context, in which "stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement was a critically important narrative of ethnic liberalism that simultaneously promoted racial equality and sought to contain demands for social transformation."²¹ If the ideological battle waged abroad required "containing" enemies of capitalism, containment on the domestic front served a no less urgent function, as Lee also points out, of rewarding accommodation and assimilation while punishing militancy, as part of a carefully crafted policy to thwart communist propagandists eager to pounce on any signs of internal dissension. The model minority's assimilability handily serves the ends of containment in a process that links, as Mary Dudziak persuasively argues, foreign and domestic policies within a framework of "Cold War Civil Rights."²²

On the one hand, the model minority myth seeks to remedy injurious exclusions from the full rights of political and social citizenship, dangling accommodation and assimilation as compensation for a history of exclusion and alienation. On the other hand, the remedy, premised on the Protestant work ethic of self-sufficiency, is at best partial, for it shifts the duties of

Americanization and uplift to the shoulders of the aspiring immigrant and absolves the state from participation in, not to mention responsibility for, this process. At the same time, this aspect of the model minority myth retains a residue of foreignness: the very qualities that make the model minority a congenial subject for American accommodation and assimilation—silence, discipline, obedience—cause worry when they are construed as an inhuman penchant for deceptiveness and robotic hyperefficiency. Vilified as part of the Yellow Peril menace, the inscrutable Asian is thus, as Lye incisively points out, the obverse of the beneficent model minority, “two aspects of the same, long-running racial form, a form whose most salient feature, whether it has been made the basis for exclusion or assimilation, is the trope of economic self-sufficiency.”²³

Despite the familiarity of this figure, or perhaps because of it, the model minority’s civility has gone unnoticed. Such an oversight is unremarkable, insofar as it is in keeping with a general tendency among scholars to overlook civility altogether. Indeed, this tendency is evident even within citizenship studies, where civility remains undertheorized. In fact, on the rare occasions that civility surfaces in discussions, the concept and such cognates as the civil and the civic are often collapsed within idealized characterizations of citizenship. Tellingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists as its first definition of *civility* “the status of a citizen; citizenship.” When civility is addressed, critics take this concept for granted as a requirement of citizenship or as a virtue integral to American citizenship.²⁴

Even when critics seem to acknowledge the myth’s civil dimensions, this partial recognition is subsumed within the narrative of success. Consider, for instance, Daniel Okimoto’s musings in the pioneering anthology *Roots: An Asian American Reader*. “The successes of the Japanese in mainland America have been predicated on a thoroughgoing accommodation to white-class norms,” Okimoto writes; “the high degree of conformity is evident in the general behavioral patterns of Nisei students: in the classroom they are extremely well-behaved, seldom make noise, never talk back to teachers, faithfully finish their school assignments on time. Neatly dressed, cleanly scrubbed, polite and deferential, Nisei on the whole would be among the last to join hippie communes or participate in avant-garde movements.”²⁵ Naively loyal to the myth that marks their subjection, the Nisei—and other Asian Americans—accommodate the state’s implicit demands for obedience. By focusing on success and accommodation, Okimoto takes up the dominant themes of labor and industry, staples in debates on the model minority. And yet the characteristics of intelligence, thriftiness, and industry are not just associated with the Protestant work ethic. Considered along with attributes such as politeness and uncomplaining perseverance in the face of adversities such as racism, they are

also hallmarks of civility. Through an implicit opposition between the civility of the model minority and the rudeness of the counterculture, Okimoto hints at the significance of civility at this crucial historical juncture—which marks the very inception of the Asian American movement—even though he and many other critics do not consciously recognize it as a defining feature of the model minority. More troublingly, he effectively dismisses the political potential of civility.

Rather than amounting to a retreat from politics, as Okimoto seems to suggest, civility can be deployed, according to Susan Herbst, as “an asset or tool, a mechanism, or even a technology”²⁶ for the purposes of political struggle. To highlight the profoundly political function of civility, Étienne Balibar even offers an idiosyncratic definition of the concept, which for him “designate[s] the speculative idea of a politics of politics.”²⁷ Indeed, Okimoto’s association of quiescent conduct with discipline confirms Norbert Elias’s landmark analysis of civility’s primary role in the “civilizing process,”²⁸ in which comportment of the body, increasingly fashioned according to norms favoring delicacy and restraint, helps govern appetite and subdue violence. Although Elias’s history of this process focuses on the shift from feudal courtesy to modern civility in the West, his theory of self-regulation as a means of efficient social control not only confirms Michel Foucault’s argument about the pervasiveness of surveillance; it is also pivotal in accounting for the contradictions of the ideal of civil society under colonial rule, in which civil conduct masks and defuses the violence that is this ideal’s disavowed origin. This self-control thesis inspires a range of theories, including Daniel Coleman’s study of white settler colonialism, which maintains that “civility operates as a mode of internal management”;²⁹ Achille Mbembe’s analysis of colonial administration in Africa, where “the transformation of behavior, respect for binding agreements, and control of conduct . . . cannot be separated from the notion of civil society”;³⁰ David Theo Goldberg’s critique of U.S. race relations, which similarly contends that “civil society and its attendant modes of civility are the spaces of accommodation to existing relations of social domination and order, racially inscribed”;³¹ and Lisa Lowe’s contention that the figure of the sexualized, laboring Asian body helps establish a spectrum of freedom and unfreedom through its role in shoring up humanism’s cherished ideals, the “modern constructions of freedom, civility, and justice.”³²

This technique functions more subtly, however, than Elias’s focus on regulatory efficiency would suggest. As Coleman puts it, in the course of qualifying his analysis of settler colonialism, civility is “structurally ambivalent”;³³ strategic comportment, the performative parodies that comprise practices of “wry” civility (a concept he develops in response to Homi Bhabha’s theorization of “sly civility”³⁴), can be the basis for contesting the discipline that it ostensibly

guarantees. Rather than functioning simply as a tool for domination and subordination, and for defining civil society solely as a project dependent on its disavowal of violence, civility helps construct civil society and the citizenship that legitimizes and delegitimizes the subjects of this society. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz perhaps best capture civility's malleability in their description of etiquette (their term for *civility*) as “the field of multifarious prescriptions governing comportment in life’s interactions”³⁵ that elucidates the vital stakes of the process they cleverly call “being becoming,” the “profound sense in which manners, mere gestures, can provide an armature for living ethically.”³⁶

The significance of the model minority’s distinctively civil comportment may accordingly be understood by taking account of other, contemporaneous civilities that guided the struggling civil rights movement at home; the escalating Cold War, which was flashing hot in proxy engagements abroad; and the political movements, focused on “power,” that emerged in solidarity with third world anticolonial resistance. As many cultural critics have observed, the introduction of the model minority in 1966—in the wake of the overturning of race-based limitations on immigration in 1965 and, particularly, during a pivotal moment of civil rights struggle—is hardly coincidental. Rather, its disciplinary civility can be seen as a calculated alternative to these other civilities.

Perhaps most notably, during the civil rights movement—with which the Asian American movement was aligned and from which it drew inspiration—the exercise of civility, historian William Henry Chafe insists,³⁷ sought to actualize the promises of political citizenship extended by the Fourteenth Amendment.³⁸ For evidence of civility’s importance for the movement, consider Figure I.2, a famous photograph illustrating the solidarity and strength of protesters whose clasped hands forge a human chain. In her brilliant analysis of the vexed identifications enabled through civil rights photographs, Elizabeth Abel suggests that this intertwining of protesters’ hands not only offers a compelling symbol of the civil rights movement’s embrace of a politics of civility but also functions as an apt icon for Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity, in illustrating his insistence, in “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” that community is predicated on the hand that touches and simultaneously feels itself being touched.³⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, the handshake’s “reversibility,”⁴⁰ its chiasmic crossing of flesh, actualizes the self’s inextricable connection with the other and marks the irreducible distance between these bodies. In intuitive recognition, perhaps, of the limitations of the handshake (which signaled, as we have seen, a foreclosure of community in the earlier icon of railway nation building), the protesters acknowledge this distance while seeking to overcome it. The human chain forged through the actual and metaphoric intertwining of hands dramatically transforms the vexed singularity of Merleau-Ponty’s handshake, which could at best only offer a grudging dualism. The power of



Figure I.2 *Civil Rights Demonstrators in Selma, Alabama 1965.* (© Bettmann/Corbis.)

the intertwining of protesters' hands, Abel suggests, lies in its durable commitment and potential for endless multiplication through the movement's implicit yet unmistakable invitation to spectators to join the struggle.⁴¹ In addition to this direct engagement with the white gaze courted by such photographs, the civil rights movement attracted the attention of Asian Americans, whose own quickening political consciousness, as historians including Helen Zia and William Wei point out, was fueled through recognition of and identification with the struggle for equality.⁴²

Even if they were rarely, if ever, photographed doing so, narratives of the emergence of the Asian American movement emphasize the inspirational example set by the civil rights struggle for integration, a struggle in which many Asian American leaders had cut their teeth through active participation. In this sense, the intertwined hands function as a symbol of unity, not only as a literal picture of unified bodies. Similarly, the image of intertwining suggests that the opposition between earnest and "wry" civilities is, as Pauline Wakeham perceptively cautions, an inadequately polarized structure for accounting for the subtleties and complexities of racial civilities within the United States.⁴³ The other major source of inspiration for the Asian American movement—Black Power radicalism, with its spectacular guerrilla uniforms and striking gestures of outraged defiance, in particular the upraised fist—seems to offer a resounding contrast to the intertwined hands, however. The

symbols of opposition taken up by proponents of yellow power, who were on the vanguard of the Asian American movement, further complicate the role of civility in the mid- to late 1960s, when the model minority emerged. What is the relationship between the outstretched hands of the civil rights movement and the upraised fists of radical empowerment?

Some historians contend that the revolutionary gestures of the late 1960s are a rejoinder to the failures of the civil rights movement, as evident in the persistence of systemic inequalities despite the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act, as well as in the perceived inadequacies of civil disobedience for responding to the violence that increasingly stained watershed moments.⁴⁴ In this context, the clenched fists of black and yellow power revolutionaries mark an emphatic rejection of the clasped hands associated with civil disobedience. As part of a strategy that Trent H. Hamann calls “impolitics,”⁴⁵ these fists appear to repudiate the clasped hands’ attendant civilities.

And yet, rather than breaking from the human chain’s intertwining, the trope of the fist retains the civil rights movement’s commitment to community coalitions. Confirmation of the clenched fists’ similar allegiances can be found in the fact that this gesture of resistance—which art historian Lincoln Cushing traces to agitprop posters distributed in 1917⁴⁶—is a staple in the rhetorical arsenal of many socialist, revolutionary groups (and not limited to black revolutionaries), who sought solidarity and found commonalities in the course of their anticolonial struggles. The unexpected meeting of the outstretched hands and upraised fists in this way illustrates the overlapping of apparently competing civilities, suggesting in turn that the civil rights and radical power movements were in greater agreement than even their participants were willing to admit. The Asian American movement formed in their wake likewise embraced these forms of civility.

During this tumultuous period, then, the model minority’s civility is not simply its defining feature; it also serves as a means of ideologically combating competing civilities. Against this backdrop, the model minority’s comportment not only drives a stake through the civil rights movement’s human chain but also is an affront to the upraised fists and the symbolic alliances that both gestures offered. Just as important, the model minority accomplished this through not a rejection but rather a redefinition of civility. Petersen’s article helpfully illustrates this alternative civility in its inclusion of photographs of Japanese Americans at work cultivating the land. These illustrations offer an oblique demonstration of a different approach to civility through an emphasis on cultivation—a discourse that, as I show in Chapter 2, can be traced at least as far back as the internment period. Cultivation emerges as a twentieth-century extension of the nineteenth-century handshake, where the laboring hand need not necessarily extend to grasp and enfold the other in a gesture of

national belonging. Its extension toward the land and its promise of patient cultivation of this land suffices as a synecdoche for nation building, which is rooted in a naturalizing mythology. At a time when minority groups fiercely laid claim to these rights, and when political citizenship potentially was being extended toward groups previously denied immigration, the emergence of civility in the form of cultivation aimed to curtail these unprecedented developments.

Okimoto's musings on the model minority can best be understood in light of this fraught historical backdrop. In his reflections on the civil conduct of compliant students, Okimoto contrasts their apolitical acquiescence with the political rebellion (or civil disobedience) of the fractious counterculture and its unsettling incivility. The civil conduct he singles out, by contrast, acts as a safety valve against the potential rupture posed by these groups. While the civility associated with the model minority myth is the basis for the belated dispensation of social citizenship, its exemplarity as a mode of apolitical conduct, or at the very least conduct that does not question the legitimacy of systemic injustices, defuses the direct action associated with these other forms of resistance, the civil rights and yellow power movements. As *model citizen*, the model minority stands opposed to *civil subjects* with their troublesome demands for the rights of citizenship. The discourse of civility, as articulated in the figure of the model minority, is the means by which countercultural rebellion is rendered "uncivil." Civility is thus an important means by which citizenship is articulated and disarticulated.

Picturing Model Citizens reveals that civility plays a crucial role in the construction of citizenship, and the book argues that this profoundly embodied process, which significantly plays out in visual culture, forms "Asian American" subjects variously in contrast and affinity with other national subjects. The book explores the wide range of forms in which civility appears: intimacy's sentimental project of molding proper deportment in the early twentieth century; the discourse of cultivation as a means of rhetorically managing the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and as a strategy for redress in the aftermath of this decision to suspend civil rights; the equivocal manner that attends efforts to extend informal apologies in response to American violence within the Pacific theater of war; and the etiquette of hygiene that emerges as a biopolitical means of securing borders in the wake of the war on terror. Tracking civility within Asian American visual culture, *Picturing Model Citizens* uncovers the varied manifestations of this remarkably resilient trope and assesses its implications for the making and unmaking of national citizenship.

Although the law may appear to be an obvious site for investigating the construction of citizenship, visual culture—as a means of serving the varied