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Introduction: Asian America and Racial Feelings

I need an Oriental, he said, because this thing, this Feng Shui, is the province of an Oriental. And I've looked. I've looked and haven't found anyone who can go as low as you've gone. . . . He made this sound like a compliment. You and me, he said. You and me are the right team. With your face and my plans . . .

—HAN ONG, *FIXER CHAO*

William Paulinha in Han Ong's *Fixer Chao* is a destitute Filipino gay immigrant in 1990s Manhattan, wandering the streets and feeling resentful of the city's new wealth. Because he cannot find stable employment in a ruthlessly competitive job market, he resorts to prostituting himself to overweight white businessmen in a toilet at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Drowning his sorrows at a seedy Times Square bar one evening, William meets Shem C., a failed Jewish American writer incensed by his expulsion from New York's literati. Shem recruits William in his revenge plot against the high society that has spurned him. Under Shem's manipulations, William transforms into Master Chao, a revered practitioner of Feng Shui, a Chinese art of harmonizing the human environment that promises its believers a good life with the comforts of wealth, security, and well-being. With his decidedly Asian face, William can easily be perceived as an "Oriental," Shem explains, and can perform as Master Chao, who enters the homes of Manhattan's upper crust to deceive and scam them for money. Such is the route that William's resentment and Shem's indignation take in *Fixer Chao*. They manage their anger by channeling it into their vengeful scheme to exploit the elite's perception of the Asian as an agent of prosperity and happiness.

The anger expressed in *Fixer Chao* is directed against the objectification and containment within capitalism of persons of Asian descent by a racializing perception that arises from capitalism's emotional production of Orientalism and racial typecasting. Perception is by definition an affective process that transmutes a previously unintelligible

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vagueness into an identifiable and representable shape in the present. As a systematic chain of sensory actions whose outcome of signification and detection is influenced by human feeling, perception clearly has much to do with racialization. For both are processes that transform something hitherto unknown and indiscernible into a materialized *form* that becomes recognizable and commonly understood through the senses. For Asian Americans who have been historically materialized into beings that are racially different from European Americans, perception and the emotions that power it are central to the racialization process.¹ Scholars who have examined the formation of Asian Americans as a race group point out that perception is an essential sensory activity that determines racialization.² They've argued that emotionally influenced perception has generated a racial form for Asian Americans that represents them through economic tropes of Western capitalist modernity, defining them as agents of economic profit and loss in US liberal democracy.³ Racialized as economic subjects through perception, then, Asian Americans bear *the* distinction of being one minority group that has been and continues to be construed, represented, and formed through the signs, values, and meanings of capitalist exchange relations.

Seeking to address that distinction, this book examines the emotions generated in US liberal capitalism, analyzing their discursive legibility in the perception of Asians as a racially different people and their function as *feelings* that give rise to Asian American cultural works. The feelings explored in the following chapters—happiness, optimism, comfort, anxiety, fear, ambivalence, and the emotions of remembering and forgetting Asian heritage and immigrant history that I call “feeling in historical memory” and “feeling ancestral”—can be understood as the emotional effects of liberal personhood and individualism. These affectively maintained ideals inform and shape the perception of Asian Americans as a racially different people—a racialized perception through and against which Asian Americans in their cultural works articulate affective elements in consciousness, memory, and criticism important to representing Asian America's collective history. This perception is premised on a mediation between Euro-American subjectivity and individualism through the relations of property ownership and personhood, a logic of proprietary relations traditionally manifested, delegated, and preserved for white male citizens in the US capitalist system.

The perception of Asians both as models of success and as threats to standards of living has been a primary factor in the formation of

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Asian Americans as a race group. In the United States, the perception of Asians both as financial exemplars and as menaces has largely been influenced by sentiments for and against Asian immigration. A history of anti-Asian sentiment and positive reception for Asians in America has affected their being seen, interpreted, and identified by Americans as unassimilable aliens and as economic agents of achievement and opportunity.⁴ Affectively charged perceptions of Asians have informed discourses that have shaped and determined US economic trade activity and policy, immigration exclusion acts, antimiscegenation laws, and discriminatory legislation, which have all constructed Asian Americans as a race group. Sentiments both for and against Asians are *racial feelings* that have influenced how Americans have sensed, experienced, and apprehended people of Asian descent through discursive practices that create and reinforce stereotypes.

Following Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their theory of racial formation, I want to emphasize that stereotypes of Asians as economic agents inform *and* express a racial ideology that has framed a “common identity” for Asian Americans (89). State-based racial projects and initiatives have reinscribed and transformed racial ideology that forms Asian Americans as a race group, and Asian Americans have redefined the meaning of *Asian American* in their own racial projects and movements that reshape racial ideology. In the US capitalist system, racial feelings affect perceptions of Asians as *racialized* economic subjects that the state reinforces and alters as racial ideology and that Asian Americans rearticulate as both accommodation and resistance in their political movements and cultural works. But why are these emotions that play such a critical role in the racialization of Asian Americans specific to economics? And why have they formed Asian Americans as a race group by representing them as agents of finance capital?

Critical analysts of capitalism have noted that this economic system uses, organizes, and generates human subjectivities to structure an emotional life that is consistent with preserving capitalist material interests and social relations. Karl Marx, for example, theorized capitalism as a system that engenders emotions, referring to his thesis that capitalist economics and the relations peculiar to upholding free enterprise are the foundation for all modern human institutions and organizations, including religion, which assembles beliefs, worldviews, and social norms into a culture of “spiritual production” (Marx and Engels, *On Literature* 140). As Marx’s concept of capitalism as “spiritual production” implies, capitalist economics are about the private ownership

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of the means of production and the accumulation of profit through the management and creation of feelings to maintain the capitalist system. Capitalism's emotional production is, according to Marx, hostile to other "branches of spiritual production, for example, art and poetry," which express the humanist ideals that inspire genuine artists (141). In coining the term *spirit of capitalism* to distinguish the attitudes and temperaments that favor the rational pursuit of economic gain and that were based on a Protestant ethics to engage in trade and accumulate wealth, Max Weber argued that religious practice fostered capitalism, and, despite reversing Marx's thesis, his argument further demonstrates the production of emotions (i.e., "spirit") in capitalist economics. As the economist Albert O. Hirschman argued in his classic study of the drives and desires of self-interest that led to the rise of capitalism in eighteenth-century Europe, the pursuit of material interests through a market economy became understood as a social good in the Enlightenment era (63). Economic activities were seen to improve the self while channeling the unruly and destructive passions into "new ideological currents" that bolstered benign interests and developed positive feelings vital to sustaining civil order (63). For our current modern capitalist era, Eva Illouz has devised the term emotional capitalism to describe a contemporary social phenomenon in which emotions and economic practices mutually define and shape each other, producing a culture "in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life—especially that of the middle classes—follows the logic of economic relations and exchange" (5). Illouz's argument that a culture of emotional capitalism saturates today's popular media and determines economic discourses and activities is a compelling demonstration of the way modern capitalism structures human subjectivities and creates new feelings befitting a consumerist lifestyle predominating in liberal capitalist societies.

As these critiques of capitalism and the emotions suggest, capitalist economics has created an enduring culture of feeling that affects racialized perception. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the United States, where Asians have been construed as agents of wealth and property acquisition. They have also been seen as threats to liberal democracy when they attempt to transcend their position as subjects of finance capital for white entitlement and privilege. A capitalist culture of emotion influences the way Americans have understood themselves on the basis of their desires, drives, and interests. It also affects how they've identified other people different from themselves, particularly those

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who come from another country, speak a foreign language, have a different skin color and physiognomy, and thus appear racially dissimilar. To understand why the racialization of Asian Americans has been and continues to be specific to economics, it is important to note that capitalism structures human subjectivities and generates emotional values and cultures that influence perception. If, as Asian Americanist critics have argued, Americans have identified Asians through economic tropes as signs of globalization, this is because the capitalist production of racial feelings has been and continues to be central in reproducing discourses for norms, entitlements, and rights that uphold recognitions of personhood and citizenship in liberal democracy.⁵ These affectively charged discourses structure and maintain perceptions of Asians in America as economic subjects, forming them as a race group that falls *outside* the norms and social values traditionally determined by Euro-Americans.⁶ These norms and values have historically preserved and continue to sustain white entitlements to define subjectivity in liberal democratic capitalism. Two questions, then, guide this book: How do racial feelings in the historical and social contexts of US liberal democracy affect the perception of Asians both as economic exemplars and as threats? And how do Asian Americans in their own cultural works characterize, accommodate, and resist their discursive portrayal as economic subjects in a capitalist culture of emotion?

Asian America in a Culture of Happiness

The pursuit of happiness in prosperity and upward mobility, which are common concepts of the American Dream, is fundamental to the ideals of liberal personhood and individualism. Conventionally, the pursuit of happiness means living the good life with its comforts of wealth and well-being. Capitalism produces aspirations for an everyday life that is normative in terms of one's desire to prosper in liberal democracy. To aspire to the American Dream is thus to desire the good life of material comfort and protection from hardship, loss, and precarity. In this sense, happiness can be thought of as a primary feeling in a liberal capitalist society that is compressed with the cultural meanings and social relationships of *belonging* as both a person and an individual. In America today, happiness may be understood to consist of an emotional culture of liberal personhood expressing the values and temperaments of individuals who take comfort in experiencing the achievements of success and belonging. But also this comfort means knowing that the work of others

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in capitalism's social relations, which maintain structural inequalities and differences, allows and protects the subjectivity—the happiness—of those who are privileged enough to live the good life promised in liberal democracy.

Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotion explores various cultural forms—literature, graphic narratives, film, and advertising—to demonstrate affects such as comfort and unease in racialized perceptions that have constructed Asian Americans as a race group and have also given rise to their cultural works.⁷ By investigating the media's imaging of happiness, optimism, anxiety, and fear in the depiction of Asians as figures of economic opportunity and threat, this book shows Asian America's importance in the making of a capitalist culture of emotions—a culture producing and maintaining the ideals of liberal personhood and individualism. As the phrase *a capitalist culture of emotions* implies, a particular set of affects in the US cultural imaginary has shaped and determined the racialized perception of Asians both as economic exemplars and as threats. Happiness, optimism, fear, and anxiety are the emotions that have structured sentiments for and against people of Asian descent in America. They are affects of liberal capitalism that construe and represent the Asian in a position of containment as a racialized subject of finance capital.

The Korean American writer Don Lee provides a compelling example of this containment. In a recent interview, Lee discusses an upsetting question he was once asked when promoting his novel *Country of Origin*. An interviewer, Lee explains, “asked me why I thought Koreans as an immigrant group seemed to do better economically in the U.S. than other groups. That was bizarre to me. I mean, *Country of Origin* wasn't even set in the U.S.; it takes place in Tokyo in 1980. How, then, did I become a socioeconomist specializing in U.S. immigration? I felt very *uncomfortable* being put in that position, being asked to speak as an expert on all things Asian American” (“Interview,” *italics added*). Lee's discomfort here is striking for the way it situates him affectively *against* the interviewer, who clearly felt at ease placing Lee in the position of an economic subject, a racially stereotyped role of the Asian American as an agent of finance capital. That the interviewer expected Lee to be eminently knowledgeable in the financial matters of Korean immigrants exemplifies the perception of Asians as models of economic efficiency.

This perception is an affective typecasting of Asian Americans as subjects who signify the desired emotionality of liberal personhood, experienced in attaining the American Dream. By identifying Asians through

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an economic trope that generally depicts them as agents of finance capital, and by assuming Lee to rearticulate this trope by explaining it in the case of Korean immigrants, the interviewer's perception is couched in the American Orientalist rhetoric of Asians as figures of capitalist relations. Moreover, both assumption and perception here imply comfort on the part of the interviewer. In supposing Lee was a "socioeconomist specializing in U.S. immigration," the interviewer clearly felt at ease casting him "in a role," to borrow David Palumbo-Liu's words, "that has been worked out and placed into the realm of a *naturalized assumption*" ("Assumed Identities" 767).

The interviewer's comfort is also quite telling for what it implies about occupying a certain symbolic position to perceive Lee as an economic subject and publicly identify him as such. This discursive position of power to identify and render Lee a subject through language—through interpellation in which the Asian American comes into being as a racialized subject—constrains Lee within the realm of a naturalized assumption about how a person of Asian ancestry characterizes capital accumulation.⁸ Through an Orientalist logic that discursively configures "race" for Asians through economic tropes, this position essentializes and contains the Asian as an agent of finance capital. In this manner, the interviewer's perception of Lee as an economic subject brings to mind one of the most salient points in Edward Said's argument that "Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12). Following Said here, we might understand how desirable and seemingly positive affects such as happiness and comfort express one's given position in America's liberal capitalist society. To be comfortable, as Lee's interviewer is, in perceiving an Asian to typify and perform the assumed role of economic subject is to express one's inside position within the realms of representation, autonomy, and authority—a position acquired by embodying the white racial ideals of liberal personhood and individualism.

Comfort and Containment in the Forms of Capital

Traditionally, to be in the comfortable position of having representation and inclusion in a liberal capitalist society signals the privilege of being able to acquire and move readily between various forms of capital, as Pierre Bourdieu maintains in his theory of capital ("Forms").⁹ Bourdieu's concept of the forms of capital, which I can explain here broadly,

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expands the notion of economic capital, defined as one's command over sums of money or assets that are accumulated, exchanged, and put to productive use. Economic capital is different from other forms of capital that may not necessarily reflect a monetary or exchange-value but are in certain conditions convertible into economic capital. These other forms of capital are social, cultural, and symbolic. However, for the purposes of my argument, it is the cultural and symbolic forms of capital, in addition to economic capital, that are important.¹⁰ Cultural capital is the knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that give an individual a higher status in society ("Forms" 47–50). Symbolic capital refers to the resources available to individuals who have acquired honor and prestige widely recognized by the public. As Mark Chiang explains in *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies*, Bourdieu's argument about how individuals convert and interplay or move readily between various forms of capital shows that "objective social relations are reproduced through the struggles of social agents who 'play the game' of capital accumulation" (26–27). The ability to convert and move effortlessly between the forms of capital means, furthermore, being able to achieve and acquire the public recognition of accumulating, possessing, and *producing* capital in its cultural and symbolic forms.

But what does such comfort acquired by playing between these forms mean for the Asian American writer and artist? To address this question, I turn to Sau-ling Wong in her classic book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. In her reading of mobility themes in Asian American literature, Wong makes the important claim that "America is founded on myths of mobility. . . . Yet the idea that the *essence of America* consists in freedom, in both a physical and spiritual sense, has worked itself deep into the national imagination and continues to exert a potent hold on the American imagination. Since its birth as a political and social entity, it is safe to say, America has customarily defined its uniqueness in terms of the enhanced mobility it can offer: the opportunity to go where one wants, do what one wants, shape life anew" (118, italics added). At its heart, America is defined by a national ethos of freedom bequeathed to Americans who are able to employ this freedom to "shape life anew," define a sense of self, and achieve an individualism that attests to having and actualizing a free life in liberal democracy. Yet for early Asian immigrants in America, freedom was traditionally the distinction and preserve of Euro-Americans, who historically perceived Asians as implements for making and accumulating capital, as well as for contributing to their own comfort, security, and contentment,

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which largely make up the subjective experience of freedom. America has traditionally envisioned and maintained its “essence” of freedom by rendering natural the supposed great capacity of Asians for economic activity and development. The naturalizing of Asians as prototypical economic characters has been, as Colleen Lye meticulously demonstrates in *America's Asia*, the primary mode of configuring race for Asians in the US cultural imaginary. Today's perception of Asian Americans as agents of finance capital is a racialized discernment that emerges from America's historical “identification of the Asiatic as a sign of globalization” (9). America's cultural depictions of the Asiatic as a “racial form” of finance capital helps to explain the primarily economic themes of Asian American racial representation (11).

Whether Asians have worked as field hands, miners, food canners, domestic helpers, launderers, service staff, coolies, and indentured servants—positions that demonstrate the significance of early Asian migrant labor in enabling America's transition to industrial capitalism and growth as a global economy—or achieved as doctors, lawyers, bankers, engineers, and business managers—positions that designate model minority status for Asian Americans—the consequence of their performing their putative capacity for hard work and economic efficiency has been their signification in the American mind as implements to make and accumulate money. This signification has effectively ascribed to Asians an economic nature that Americans have construed paradoxically as both exemplary and threatening. This ascription has proceeded, moreover, through racialized perceptions that *contain* Asian Americans within the economic form of capital, disabling their movement into the cultural and symbolic forms that traditionally have fashioned the idea that America's essence consists in freedom.

Containment within finance capital by racialized perception, as is the case for Don Lee in being “put in that position” by his interviewer, *immobilizes* the Asian American artist, provoking his sense of feeling contained when he expresses discomfort, frustration, and ambivalence. The inability to convert finance capital into cultural and symbolic forms denies the comfort acquired in being able to move between and claim representation within these various forms of capital. This is especially the case in our present era of capitalist globalization, whereby the Asian perceived as an exemplar of liberal multiculturalism embodies the economic form of capital that serves the interests of a global market economy, as well as the transnational capitalist class maintaining this economy.¹¹ To be sure, the Asian perceived as a multicultural exemplar of

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the global economy is defined and circumscribed by transnational capital. Yet this restriction enables the accumulation of economic capital for America's wealthy elite and allows them to convert it into the political and symbolic forms, thereby facilitating movement between these forms. For example, American corporations use the media to represent people of Asian descent as figures of *optimism* in liberal multiculturalism for the global economy. This media representation is a racial commercialization of optimism, a feature of commodity happiness, to market corporate consumerism's global services and products. In depicting Asians as figures of optimism for economic processes of globalization, corporations transmute the Asian into a happy object of liberal multiculturalism. Although this racial commercialization of the Asian enables optimism for the global economy and thus capital for America's upper class, it denies critical subjectivity and agency to the Asian American, who is regarded as a mere commodity.

Further elaboration of this book's argument requires some historical context of how people of Asian ancestry have emerged as economic agents in the American imagination. From the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Asians in America were highly visible in advertising, journalism, and the media as racial aliens who both epitomized and endangered the American Dream of freedom, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. At this time, Americans perceived Asians as indispensable for enabling their nation's shift from mercantile to industrial capitalism, but they also identified the Asiatic as an ominous figure of capital's unbridled movement in consequence of America's imperialist expansion into the Asia-Pacific. The increasing presence of Asian immigrants in the United States connoted America's irreversible entrance and advancement into capitalist modernity. Asians were indispensable to the concentration of wealth for US capitalists who hired Asian laborers to work in factories, mines, and railroad construction. For these businessmen, the Asian laborer possessed, to borrow Lye's phrase, an "unusual capacity" for work efficiency and economic development (*America's Asia* 15). But for white working-class men, Asian laborers were threats to their wages and standards of living, perils to their settled way of life and their own pursuit of happiness through individualism.

Individualism's Concept of Happiness

That the media and popular culture have historically depicted Asians both as models and as destroyers of the proverbial American Dream

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evinces that dream as an ideological vision suffused with the affects of modern capitalist societies. The desire for the good life's happiness and comfort that registers the American Dream as a passion-filled fantasy—an emotional culture dynamically influencing day-to-day relations of people with others and with themselves—is, moreover, a normative aspiration that Americans traditionally have wanted to fulfill in the achievements of personhood and individualism.

Capitalism's economics are fundamental to discursive practices that uphold and protect freedom, individualism, and social equality as the defining features of life in liberal democracy. The most significant document in America's founding as a sovereign nation, the Declaration of Independence, characterizes freedom, individualism, and equality in terms of an emotional life that follows the logic of capitalist relations and exchange. Famous for his Poor Richard's maxims on how careful time management and practicality can allow Americans to become wealthy, Benjamin Franklin, along with the Declaration's four other drafters, penned what is the most celebrated sentence in this document:¹² "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." According to Franklin and the fifty-five other signers of the Declaration, the happiness generated and sustained by economic activity is an entitlement of every American. The US capitalist system as the heart and protectorate of liberal democratic government is premised on the production and preservation of happiness attained through material acquisition.

The Declaration's "pursuit of happiness" is covertly linked to the ownership and protection of private property framed by the liberal political theory of possessive individualism. Material possession as the basis for individual rights, freedoms, and self-definition in the United States derives from the language of personhood and autonomy in John Locke's labor theory of self-ownership as individual property rights. Locke's famous statement that "every Man hath a Property in his Person" (*Two Treatises* 287) defines the self as an individual who is able to own; the first thing he owns is himself as well as the materials of "the Earth" he can acquire through "the Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands" (287). A man achieves personhood and becomes an individual by possessing himself through all objects in nature that he labors to acquire and convert into his own property. As C. B. MacPherson argued in his classic reading of possessive individualism, Locke's theory of the self-possessing individual through property ownership has defined liberal

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democratic society as a series of relations among proprietors. In America's emergence as a liberal democracy, these proprietary relations that maintain the self-possessing individual are the basis of the modern liberal-capitalist state, whose function is not only to protect the property rights of individuals but also to preserve the social relations that allow a subjectivity of possessive individualism to flourish. Adopted by the Declaration of Independence and instituted through narratives of citizenship under liberal democracy, Locke's definition of personhood, which he logically extends as the right to "life, liberty, and property" (*Second Treatise* 19), is a proprietary and materialistic right reconfigured as an *affective* right for every man legally recognized as a citizen of the state. The ability to own produces the self-possessing individual's subjectivity and defines it as an affective possession to be protected by the state as a right of citizenship. In the United States, self-possession and its social relations of acquisitive happiness are the premise of not only property rights but also "citizenship rights, as well as the very notion of the liberal individual" (Greeson 919).

It is through capitalism, then, that a person becomes a self-possessing individual by owning both material property and a subjectivity acquired from proprietorship. The state as a liberal democratic polity, which protects the rights of ownership for all legally recognized citizens, exists for the express purpose of capitalism and its complex social network, including the subjectivity—the desires, interests, and drives—of owning property as an affective possession that both maintains and is generated by relations among proprietors. According to Grace Hong, property ownership and the rights of "propertied subjects" became the only justification for the formation of the US nation-state (10). The state is founded upon free market conceptions of property ownership and individual entitlements that are agreeable among citizens through a hypothetical social contract—a contractarian liberalism that defines the rights, duties, and government responsibilities that are to be pursued, fulfilled, and defended as the law for maintaining a liberal capitalist order. Insofar as capitalism is the reason for the liberal democratic state's existence, and liberalism is hegemonic through a conceptual Lockean contract that requires the propertied citizen's contentment to assure the preservation of liberal democracy, American citizenship is premised on the ability to own private property and have such property's protection under the law. This legally codified and contractarian national ethos of liberal individualism delineates, moreover, the citizen's subjectivity as his happiness through material acquisition. In this regard, the language of rights and

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duties in liberalism is a social contract for individualism whose objective is emotional: to protect and preserve the citizen's acquisitive happiness as his rightful possession. Hence, the "pursuit of happiness" in individualism, which is the primary affective achievement and demonstration of citizenship in liberal democracy, not only determines the subjectivity of personhood but renders it the exclusive right of citizenship.

Citizenship in the United States, however, has from the beginning been restricted on the basis of race. American citizenship is defined by a liberalism that has, as Charles Mills puts it, "historically been predominately a racial liberalism" (1381), in which liberal capitalist "conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized. And the contract, correspondingly, has really been a racial one, an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite noncontractors for white benefit" (1381). Mills forcefully shows how the contractarian liberalism that frames the dominant political outlook of modern America and preconditions the discursive practices of US liberal democracy is premised on the limitation of personhood and citizenship rights to white Americans. Traditionally, the propertied subject that is the self-possessing individual whose proprietary subjectivity underwrites a narrative of citizenship under US liberal democracy is white and male. Liberal political theory, as it has been devised and implemented by white men to define personhood and delineate the liberal individual, has articulated citizenship as the domain of white men and has reserved it as their right. The mechanisms of American social and political institutions are founded on European cultural traditions, Western civilizing constructs, and Anglo notions of ethnic superiority and centrism—all of which underpin the workings of the US state and the law to uphold a white status quo, maintain white privilege, and racially codify normative subjectivity as white.

Yet liberalism as it has been realized in the contract form in America is an abstraction from the European experience of modernity. It is a conceptual device for implementing life in a consensual democracy of citizens who are abstract subjects of the state and are assumed to be moral equals without the social particulars of race and racial difference. Liberalism as an abstraction in the metaphorical contract form for the American citizen renders that citizen and his subjectivity implicitly white, male, and normative on the basis of the *forgetting* and *denial* of historical atrocities against nonwhite people: European colonialism, imperialism, white settlement, slavery, apartheid, Native American genocide, indentured labor, immigration exclusion acts, and antimiscegenation laws

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that have all shaped America's modern society. As the US citizen is an idealized abstraction from forces of racism and oppression that have, in large part, historically assumed this citizen to be normative on the basis of his whiteness and male gender, his subjectivity is also an abstraction from Euro-American experiences of modernity.

It can be further claimed, to extend the argument that both personhood and citizenship are racially founded and constructed as white abstractions, that the citizen's happiness through material acquisition is also racial. It is racial feeling. Happiness in its racial liberalism context as the affective possession of the white propertied self fundamentally structures the attitudes and temperaments that Americans have about race and racial difference. The US state has sought to authorize and preserve the subjectivity of American personhood. In the effort to sanction the pursuit of happiness as one of the most basic entitlements and freedoms in liberal democracy, the state has through its courts of law and government institutions undertaken racial projects and initiatives such as exclusion acts, alien land laws, rules of naturalization, wartime relocation and internment of civilians, and legalized discrimination and segregation. These state-based racial projects and initiatives, which were upheld and implemented often on the basis of popular ideology and beliefs about Asians as aliens and Orientals, have maintained the acquisitive happiness that has traditionally structured white male subjectivity as self-possessing individualism.

The Advent of Asiatic Racial Sentiments

If the pursuit of happiness is both a right and an abstraction of proprietary subjectivity, then how might such happiness as the racial feeling of white personhood structure the Asiatic racial sentiments that proliferated among Americans from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century? In particular, how is liberal individualism's happiness evident in nineteenth-century popular depictions of anti-Asian sentiment? Such happiness, I contend, not only conditioned the racial hostilities that led to violence and legalized discrimination against Asian immigrants in nineteenth-century America but also created a culture of anxiety and fear that directly affects perceptions of the Asiatic as the sign of globalization today.

One goal of *Racial Feelings* is to show the way US media and popular culture represent Asians as emotionally charged figures of globalization. Another is to explore how the contentment, security, and comfort that

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are the desired emotionality of US liberal personhood are articulated *over against* Asians. If Asians in the United States are “hypervisible, commodified, assimilated, and excessive” (So 9), it is largely because of their figuration as racialized subjects who embody the logics of economic exchange. Historically perceived by Euro-Americans as figures of capital accumulation and as commodities for labor abstraction, Asians are an objectified means through which US citizens have traditionally attained happiness. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed characterizes the means through which one attempts to acquire happiness as the “happy object” (26). When one becomes desirous and possessive of a particular thing as a means of acquiring happiness, the thing transmutes into a happy object suffused with the possessor’s desire to attain security, contentment, and comfort by using this object as a “container” (30–31). According to Ahmed, “Happiness by providing a container in which we can deposit our wants might also contain those wants” (31). Yet if the container does not deliver what the possessor wants, or if the possessor construes the container as a thing that impedes the means to happiness, then the container as a formerly happy object is perceived to contain loss and thus becomes an obstacle that deprives the possessor of happiness. Following Ahmed’s theory of the happy object as a container for desire or loss, we can see how Asians are a means through which the propertied subject has traditionally pursued the happiness of liberal individualism. We might also see the historical signification and containment of Asians as economic subjects of happiness, optimism, anxiety, and fear. In this racial liberalism context of the individual’s pursuit of happiness—a pursuit achieved by objectifying the Asian as a means or as an impediment to acquiring the desired emotionality of American personhood—the security, contentment, and comfort that are the affective possession of the propertied self are, I further contend, premised on Asiatic racial sentiments, on feelings for and against Asians.

Shaped by liberal capitalism’s processes of production and circulation, American media and popular culture have been primary venues for the perpetuation of racial images that have generated a culture of Asiatic racial sentiments. Film, television, and the Internet are popular forms of visual media that US capitalism maintains as an economic and emotional system of reproduction. These media’s representations of Asiatic racial sentiments underscores how a capitalist emotional culture affects the perception of Asians as a racially different people.

It is, then, important that today’s capitalist emotional culture shaping and determining these sentiments is historically premised on

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Euro-American aspirations for an independent way of life. Contemporary media depictions of the Asiatic as both an optimistic and ominous sign of globalization may be traced to an American emotional culture that, from the 1850s through the 1880s, expressed and maintained the white racial ideals of liberal individualism. In particular, recent media expressions of anti-Asian sentiment emerge from a proliferation of anti-Chinese racism and “yellow peril” fears in nineteenth-century popular culture. The Asiatic racial sentiments from this time affect visual media and popular culture in the twenty-first century, structuring an emotional culture that influences the racialization of Asian Americans and contains them within the form of economic capital.

In the mid-1850s in California, for example, widespread beliefs about Chinese immigrants as agents of economic collapse and social chaos were expressed in music and stories that popularized a nostalgic pastoral image of California for American audiences. Many white Californians, especially of the working class, construed the increasing growth of Chinese immigrant populations as a threat to their small producer economies and independent way of life. As Robert Lee has argued, racialized perceptions of the Chinese as coolies and yellow peril threats were expressed in a nostalgic popular culture that blamed the Chinese for the passing of California’s “golden era” (*Orientalists* 16–17).

The rise of industrial capitalism in the 1850s was not only the cause for anxieties among white Californians about the passing of their state’s golden era. It was *the* basis for their nostalgic popular culture in which they mourned losing the freedom, independence, and autonomy that had once been imaginable to them in a premodern capitalist idyll. Their nostalgia in music and stories articulates this loss and does so in decidedly racial terms with the invocation of the Chinese as impediments to the political aims of the Free Soil and Free Labor movements in California (Robert Lee, *Orientalists* 45). The Free Soil movement was a national political party that opposed the expansion of slavery into US western territories. It argued that free men on “free soil” constituted a morally and economically superior system to slavery. Free Soil Californians saw the arrival of Chinese immigrant workers and coolies (indentured laborers) to represent the Eastern Seaboard’s disruptive capitalist system.¹³ The Free Labor movement subscribed to the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian ideal of *Herrenvolk* democracy, the notion of an “egalitarian republic” that would achieve “happy unity” for white workingmen by acting in agreement with natural law (47).

White racial feeling was, I would argue, evident in Free Labor ideology. That a “happy unity” for white workingmen in California was to

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be achieved in accordance with natural law under a Lockean contract of personhood and individualism underscores how such happiness was contingent upon defining the racial and cultural otherness of Chinese immigrants. By defining the Chinese as racial others, Free Laborers could restrict their movement's sense of freedom to whites only in the racial liberalism context. In doing so, they could racialize meanings of proprietary subjectivity and the pursuit of happiness as experiences reserved for white workingmen. "Chinese labor was not Free Labor in the republican sense," Lee points out, "because it had been decided that the Chinese were not capable of transcending their status as wage labor to become independent producers (notwithstanding the widespread existence of Chinese laundry operators, shopkeepers, masons, carpenters, tailors, etc.), and therefore participants in civic life" (*Orientalists* 59). If, according to Free Labor ideology, the Chinese were not able to transcend their lowly position as wage laborers to become independent producers and, therefore, participants in civic life, then they were not capable of becoming propertied subjects, which was necessary for being self-possessing individuals, as well as acquiring the happiness of such individualism.

A culture of nostalgia for a lost white California was also evident in popular songs that were premised on anxieties about the transition to industrial capitalism. In his analysis of the lyrics to "California As It Was and Is," a popular song by the gold rush-era songwriter Old Put (the pseudonym of John A. Stone), Lee explains how this song's nostalgia for California's small producer economy is premised on Free Soil ideology. "California imagined [by Put] as a small producer economy, free of slavery, free of cash nexus, and free of the Chinese, 'when the Yuba used to Pay, with nothing but a pan and pick, five hundred dollars in a day,' represented the nostalgic heart of Free Soil California" (19). That Free Soil Californians characterized the Chinese as agents of economic decline for free white workingmen, as evoked in Put's song, shows how anxiety and the culture of nostalgia generated by such anxiety influenced their perception of the Chinese as impediments to happiness. In the context of racial liberalism, the happiness of liberal individualism structured the "nostalgic heart" of Free Soil California. For white workingmen who were nostalgic for a sense of autonomy imaginable before the rise of industrial capitalism, the Chinese were collectively a "racial thing" that inhibited the pursuit of happiness. Following Ahmed, we can see how Chinese immigrants became a "container" of Euro-American disappointment and loss—perceived by white Californians to contain

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the ghostly presence of their departed dreams of freedom, and all that this freedom had promised in terms of acquiring independence, individualism, and acquisitive happiness. Figuratively containing lost white freedom as embodiments of this loss, the early Chinese immigrants in California were “racial others” through which Euro-Americans defined themselves as *white* Californians, believing they were living a way of life that was pastoral and unique from the rest of modernizing America. Further, Euro-Americans in California thought they led an idyllic lifestyle that needed to be memorialized, if not protected, because of the irrevocable changes wrought by America’s ambitions to modernize through industrialization.

By blaming the Chinese and thus racially othering them, white Californians were able to interplay psychologically with capitalism’s profound transformations of their way of life. In this sense, an account of racial melancholia would suggest how the nostalgic cultural productions of white Californians expressed their psychical negotiation with industrial capitalism. Through nostalgia they managed their racialized grief for a lost way of life on which the basis of a white racial ideal for Californians was built.

If the nostalgia of white Californians here evidences a melancholic racial form of Euro-American identity in the nineteenth century, then so does happiness. If it can be understood that their nostalgia for a lost idyllic lifestyle was their yearning for the individual’s happiness in the context of racial liberalism, then such happiness would indicate how white Californians sought to protect and memorialize their white identity melancholically. In *Orientalism*, Lee gives a particularly striking example of this racially melancholic happiness. He quotes a broadside printed by the *Marin Journal* in March of 1876. This broadside, Lee explains, “summed up several charges that had been leveled against the Chinese presence in California ‘on behalf of the workingmen of the state and their families’” (61). Of particular interest are the broadside’s last two sentences: “That [the Chinese] are driving the white population from the state, reducing laboring men to despair, laboring women to prostitution, and boys and girls to hoodlums and convicts. That the health, wealth, prosperity and *happiness of our State* demand their expulsion from our shores” (qtd. in Lee, *Orientalism* 62). As indicated in the broadside’s demand that the Chinese be expelled “from our [white] shores,” the anticolonial movement in California sought to protect and memorialize the happiness of white personhood. The movement represented a racial form of white identity that operated melancholically. Its ideals of prosperity, freedom, and

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individualism were to be secured by racially interpellating the Chinese as impediments to the pursuit of happiness. And Chinese expulsion clearly meant their containment as racialized subjects and their exclusion from the realms of political and symbolic forms of capital, because these realms were the preserve of Euro-Americans.