

Atomic Hospitality: Asian Migrant Scientists Meet the U.S. South

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## **Dedication**

For Darren, my phial of Galadriel,

and

for my parents, my dream-makers.

## Abstract

This multidisciplinary project concerns the racialization of Asian Americans in the U.S. South, especially in the wake of the 1965 immigration act that recruited scientists to the U.S. nation-state. Specifically, the Asian American presence in east Tennessee involves regional, national, and international discourses surrounding two primary sites of tension: the constructs of national security and of spoken accent.

Now home of the U.S. Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), the "secret city" of Oak Ridge was created in the 1940s to aid the construction of the atomic bomb detonated in Hiroshima. Drawing from interviews with over thirty individuals, I argue that the post-1965 Asian migrant scientists at ORNL are part of what I call "national security migration," which involves individuals recruited to work on projects of interest to the national security of a nation-state not of their birth. *Asian* national security migrants inherit a particular history in which race, migration, citizenship, and science are inextricably tied, reproducing and complicating the narrative of Asians as perpetual foreigners particularly in the context of the U.S. national security state.

This project also features an historical analysis of a controversy in east Tennessee about a public monument, the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. Revolving around memory and the bomb, the debate was highly racialized, with anti-Asian (particularly anti-Japanese) sentiment front and center. Thus, I contend that discourses of "yellow peril" and national security are historically perpetuated and infused in the South.

The second site of tension involves language and accent. If Asian migrants are often perceived to be speaking with a foreign accent, then southerners are marked by their southern accents, too: analyzing the interplay of these accents reveals the way Asian Americans disrupt traditional understandings of the South as a region. This disruption emerges in the experiences of Asian migrant scientists (at work and in the surrounding community) and also in the experiences of the U.S.-born second generation, as seen through my close reading of a performance by comedian Henry Cho, a Korean American Tennessean.

Finally, questions around language emerge methodologically as well. Interrupting the organizational writing structure of this project, I insert an extended discussion of the possibility of a feminist, Asian Americanist transcription methodology to be employed when researching multilingual Asian migrant communities in the U.S. nation-state. Taken together, these sites of tension speak to the nuances of the contemporary Asian American South.

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## Chapter 1

### The Asian American South

#### Two Stories

*“Could You Have Been Wen Ho Lee?”*

In 1999, the imprisonment of Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwan-born PhD migrant scientist accused of spying for China, brought the notion of national security to the forefront of public discourse and called into question the presence of non-U.S.-born scientists working in Department of Energy national laboratories like Los Alamos. Perhaps making Lee's case even more famous in the end was that after nine months of solitary confinement, he was charged with mishandling classified data, a far cry from accusations of espionage and sharing secrets about a nuclear warhead.

My father bears a remarkable physical resemblance to Wen Ho Lee: they are both slender Asian men with square jaws and similar complexions --- this in addition to the fact that they are both Chinese migrants, are of the same generation, and have worked at DOE national laboratories. This uncanny physical resemblance and other similarities provoke a strong emotion in me: the Wen Ho Lee case cannot simply be an abstraction, another news story. I wonder, what prevented my dad from becoming another Wen Ho Lee? As a nuclear scientist, Dad was employed at a sister DOE laboratory — Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. Apparently, years ago, he decisively chose not to apply for classified Q clearance, unlike Lee. Notably, it was only after my father gained citizenship that the possibility of working in Q clearance was open to him. Thus, the counterfactual that lingers in my mind is not only, “what if Dad had worked in classified

materials?” but also, “what if Dad or Wen Ho Lee had not sought U.S. citizenship?” In other words, Lee’s successful application for U.S. citizenship eventually placed him in a position to later be accused as a traitor to his ‘new’ country. In the Asian migrant scientist for U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) institutions, then, we see a glimpse of a paradox that lies at the convergence of national security, immigration, race, and citizenship.

*“What’m I Gon’ Do?”*

When people meet my mother, they will see a petite, sixty-something-year-old Chinese woman, but what they will *hear* is another story, for when she opens her mouth to speak, the person she’s talking to may be in for a surprise. “What’m I gon’ do?,” she once rhetorically asked, throwing me off with her southernness. My mother, a Hong Konger who ended up in the U.S. South in the 1970s, has traces of a southern drawl interlaced with her Cantonese accent.<sup>1</sup> The distinctiveness of an east Tennessee accent and a Hong Kong Cantonese accent combine to produce a subtle sound that is difficult to place at any given moment: each one surfaces in different ways, and often at the same time. Her accent, the sound of her voice, carries an unusual unexpectedness, an aural convergence of Asia and the U.S. South, of Hong Kong and Tennessee.

Coming from an impulse to *know* and to explain my childhood and adolescence, this project began with a simple question: What does it mean to be Asian in the South? After I left the South and eventually lived on both the west and east coasts and later settled in the Midwest, the idea of regional particularity became something more than a

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<sup>1</sup> Dorrill discusses two interpretations of the “southern drawl”: “the common or folk notion” versus the “linguistic definition.” My use here involves this common notion, where it is “a synonym for southern accent or southern speech and refers to the putative slowness of southern speech.” But unlike Dorrill’s further characterizations, I do not employ this term in a condescending way that points to “the laziness of its speakers.” Dorrill, “Sounding Southern,” 124.



curiosity. It would no longer only be about the idiomatic expressions in my vocabulary ("I'm fixin' to go to the cafeteria. Want anything?" I asked my befuddled Seattle-raised college roommate once<sup>2</sup>), but I also wondered about how my sense of "normal" was different from my west-coast-raised Asian American college friends. I also thought about the lack of awareness I had of the possibility of Asian American identity in the land of my upbringing: racial isolation, being one of the only Chinese families in the school district during the 1980s and 90s, was my normal.

In time, the question of "what it means to be Asian in the South" also became theoretically loaded, too, as my academic training directed me away from essentialist or positivist conclusions about identity. In my adulthood, I started to reflect on how, within the handful of Asian kids in the Knoxville-Oak Ridge areas in the 1980s, it wasn't unusual for our parents (more often, our fathers) to be PhD-holding scientists and engineers. In such reflections, the local particularity of east Tennessee emerged, specifically regarding the existence of what we locals called "the Lab," a DOE institution that we, the kids of PhDs, took for granted as our only reality. It apparently was not commonplace. And upon further examination, the existence of this lab, of "atoms in Appalachia," is inextricable from the developing, growing history of Asians in Tennessee.<sup>3</sup>

In his study of U.S. southern memory, W. Fitzhugh Brundage notes how master narratives of southern whiteness prevail in the region's public history; despite a troubled

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<sup>2</sup> "Fixin to," a term I grew up with, is apparently one of many "grammatical features that are associated with southern speech." Bernstein, "Grammatical Features of Southern Speech," 117.

<sup>3</sup> "Atoms in Appalachia," 5.

past of racial discrimination, “Many pressing concerns about personal and regional identity, social interaction, and the exercise of power in the American South depend on an understanding of how the recalled past has been woven into southern life and institutions.”<sup>4</sup> Suddenly it seems clear that my grade school music classes in the 1980s, with their reification of southern tropes, were part of a bigger picture of southern regionalism. As schoolchildren, how were our regional and national identities being constructed and shaped by our enthusiastic renditions of “Dixie,” as we unwittingly sang the “acknowledged anthem of the Confederacy” (one that was performed in Blackface at minstrel shows of the past)?<sup>5</sup>

“The End of the South: How Obama vs. McCain is Unsettling the Old Confederacy” was the cover story of *Newsweek* magazine for its August 11, 2008, issue. That summer (ten years after I left the South), I began heading back to Tennessee for research trips, with this magazine reminding me of what a project about the South could be working within, revealing that the idea of the “Old Confederacy” is alive and well not only *in* the South but also *outside* of it. This lingering investment in the “Old South” – by southerners *and* non-southerners alike – does not escape east Tennessee. Just miles away from Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Tommy DeFoe made national headlines with his lawsuit in 2008 against his high school, which suspended him for having Confederate flag images on his clothing. As DeFoe stated, “I am fighting for my heritage and my

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<sup>4</sup> Brundage, *Southern Past*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

rights as a Southerner and an American.”<sup>6</sup> James Cobb characterizes this investment in the Confederate past as a "Lost Cause ethos," one that is embraced and fetishized among some white southerners.<sup>7</sup> In the U.S. cultural imaginary, this ethos is distinctly exclusive to the region: the South is imagined as trapped in time, bound by the ghosts of Dixie. In short, the U.S. South is “a south of ‘defeat,’” signaling an “essentialized South,” according to Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn.<sup>8</sup> While this is a powerful construction, my project shifts the referent frame to the next century: a focus on Oak Ridge and on post-1965 Asian migration disrupts traditional readings of the U.S. South, taking after Smith and Cohn’s refusal of the “nostalgic and decline narratives” attached to the U.S. South.

This multidisciplinary project centers the racialization of post-1965 Asian American communities in east Tennessee, as seen through three overlapping analytical frames, that of the regional, the national, and the international. I look to a landscape that includes Oak Ridge, home of one of three "secret city" sites of the Manhattan Project and now home of the Department of Energy’s Oak Ridge National Laboratory, a “58-square-

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan Mansfield, “Teen Battles School’s Confederate Flag Ban,” *Boston.com*. August 14, 2008, [http://www.boston.com/news/education/k\\_12/articles/2008/08/14/teen\\_battles\\_schools\\_confederate\\_flag\\_ban/](http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2008/08/14/teen_battles_schools_confederate_flag_ban/). DeFoe eventually lost his lawsuit. “Student’s Confederate Flag Suit Thrown Out,” *CBSNews.com*, August 13, 2009, [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-201\\_162-5238441.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-201_162-5238441.html).

<sup>7</sup> The “white southern fetishization of the Lost Cause” is also discussed in Smith and Cohn, “Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities,” 3. The memory of the Civil War eventually changed from being rooted in a pro-slavery stance to being seen as a pursuit “to secure nothing more than the individual and state rights granted by the Constitution.” Historical memory and this switch became part of the fabric that constituted the Lost Cause, which involved a “celebration of an idyllic antebellum plantation kingdom.” Cobb, *Away Down South*, 62, 67. For more on southern white identity see also Steed, Moreland, and Baker, *The Disappearing South*.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Cohn, “Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities,” 11.

mile reservation.”<sup>9</sup> Moving through three sites involving ethnography, popular culture, and public memory, I argue that the Asian migrant scientists and engineers at the Lab are part of what I call “national security migration,” which includes individuals recruited to work on projects of interest to the national security of a nation-state not of their birth. I situate the regional, local specificity of *Asian* national security migration to east Tennessee by also analyzing a controversy that developed in 1990s Oak Ridge about memory and the atomic bomb, a deeply racialized controversy with Asians at the center – especially the Japanese both in the United States and in Japan. I then continue a deployment of the three frames by examining another site of tension: Asian migrant scientists’ reflections on language and accent. I conclude by placing this in conversation with another articulation of Asian southerner identity found in performance. Taken together, these sites of tension speak to the nuances of the contemporary Asian American South.

East Tennessee presents a particularly compelling site of study on regional, national, and international levels. Because Oak Ridge was exclusively created to build the atomic bomb,<sup>10</sup> it has been the focus of numerous publications.<sup>11</sup> To date, no studies of Oak Ridge, however, have featured or particularly involved the Asian American scientists and engineers who are employed there and who are estimated to make up about

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Under “power of eminent domain,” one thousand families displaced from 59,000 acres of land for the construction of Oak Ridge in 1942; “some families had only a few weeks to move off their properties.” Yates, “Coincidence of Ed Westcott and Oak Ridge, Tennessee,” 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Olwell, *At Work in the Atomic City*; Johnson and Jackson *City Behind a Fence*; Hales, *Atomic Spaces*.

10-15% of the scientific staff.<sup>12</sup> In terms of research on science, national security, and/or national laboratories, aside from case studies of Chinese American weapons scientist Wen Ho Lee, the scholarship does not particularly involve the post-1965 Asian migrants who work at DOE national laboratories.<sup>13</sup> East Tennessee also remains a geographically understudied site of Asian immigration, for the historiography is as limited as it could be. This is unsurprising because the Asian American population in Tennessee is quite small and statistically insignificant: in 1960, Asians finally came close to making up 0.1% of the population.<sup>14</sup> The numbers since then have risen but not by much: by the turn of the twenty-first century, Asians amounted to about 1% of the 5.7 million inhabitants of Tennessee.<sup>15</sup> The importance of this project therefore does not lie in numbers or representative claims. Rather, this project's contributions involve both regional particularities of racialization and the relationship of race and migration to the U.S. national security state. Thus, the heart of this project lies at convergences: to revisit my mother's and father's stories, my interest is to explore the nuanced circumstances of the racialization of Asian Americans in the U.S. South – circumstances that move beyond the region and on to the national and international stage.

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<sup>12</sup> This is an estimate by an Asian migrant scientist. ORNL would not release this data to me as a member of the public.

<sup>13</sup> Gusterson, *Nuclear Rites*; Masco, *Nuclear Borderlands*.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *U.S. Census of Population, 1960*, 44-31.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *Tennessee: 2000 Summary*, 46. Only in the 1970 census do non-whites and non-Blacks (i.e., American Indians and “other races”) begin to make up 0.2% of the population. U.S. Department of Commerce, *U.S. Census of Population, 1980*, 44-23. Further, in 1990, Asians comprised 0.6% of the population, which was otherwise 83% white and 16% Black. U.S. Department of Commerce, *1990 Census of the Population*, 11.

## **"It's Just the Research Work I Was Interested In. I Didn't Really Think about the South": A Regional, National, and International Approach**

What does it mean to study and claim a region of a nation-state? Furthermore, when examining a geographically defined community, how does one talk about regional particularity without employing essentialist frameworks? Claiming the U.S. South is a tricky business. For example, Moon-Ho Jung, whose work involves Asian Americans in the South, did not approach his study with a regional frame and was not looking “to redeem the South in Asian American studies.”<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, *I am invested in the South*. To appropriate Mary Helen Washington,<sup>17</sup> I want to consider, “What happens to Asian American studies if you put the U.S. South at the center?” To be clear, focusing on the South challenges understandings of Asian America in ways beyond geography and region. That is, if we look squarely at Asian migration to the South, the results are scattered, held together only by geography.<sup>18</sup> This section discusses what a regional approach can look like, making the case that a study of the racialization of Asian Americans in the U.S. South necessarily engages regional, national, and international frames. For one, Asian Americans in Tennessee are part of larger phenomena and discourses beyond the South, beyond region. And second, there is *also* a local and

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<sup>16</sup> Jung, “Beyond Loyalties,” 289-291. Jung is referring to his book, *Coolies and Cane*.

<sup>17</sup> Washington, “Disturbing the Peace,” 1-23.

<sup>18</sup> For example, in Reimers's survey of Asian migration to the U.S. South, we learn of the Manilamen in 1760s Louisiana; the Mississippi Chinese arriving in the 1800s; the Japanese Yamato Colony of 1920s Florida; and the Uganda Indians of the 1970s and 1980s. Asian migration to the South has been numerically unspectacular: “Overall, as the twenty-first century dawned, one fifth of Asian immigrants told the INS that the South was their intended destination, a figure similar to that reported in 1990.” Reimers, “Asian Immigrants in the South,” 107.

regional context to their experiences as racialized subjects. Thus, this project employs an approach that moves within and among frames.<sup>19</sup>

To clarify, I borrow from Richard White, in which “frame” (what White calls “scale”) involves the spatial lens through which we analyze a subject, built on the recognition that space is “socially produced.”<sup>20</sup> Henri Lefebvre’s metaphor of a house is helpful in White’s explanation of scale: what happens inside a house is influenced by – and deeply connected to – the goings-on outside the house. Thus, if we think “from house to street to neighborhood to city,” then

To understand the nexus of spatial relations produced in the house, it is necessary to understand regional, national, even global relationships because each interpenetrates the house... It may be impossible to study everything at once, but it is possible to recognize that a historical study, even on the level of a single house, presents the historian with choices of scale.<sup>21</sup>

This project looks squarely at Asian American communities in east Tennessee as they are connected to the South, the U.S. nation-state, and beyond. Within the field of Asian American studies, the nation-state is often at the center and is traditionally employed, although this has been productively challenged by the “transnational turn” that has

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<sup>19</sup> For a compelling discussion on the formation of U.S. sectionalism and regionalism, see Onuf, who argues that “sectional conflict was... integral to the original conception and construction of the federal system.” “American Sectionalism,” 12. See also O’Brien, *Placing the South*, 3-25.

<sup>20</sup> White, “Nationalization of Nature,” 977. White draws from Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Nicholson-Smith, 28-31.

<sup>21</sup> White, “Nationalization of Nature,” 978. White’s invocation of Lefebvre is based on *The Production of Space*, trans. Nicholson-Smith, 93. Also, I employ the term “frame” in place of “scale” in part because this is a multidisciplinary project where I think of region, nation, and beyond as analytic frames.

affected much of the scholarship today.<sup>22</sup> This dissertation looks to give equal emphasis on regionalism without ignoring the significance of the two other frames.

One may then ask, what does it mean to employ a regional frame, and what does this allow? Patricia Nelson Limerick asserts, “With region as one of our principal categories of historical investigation, the basic narrative of American history gains a new flexibility and range.”<sup>23</sup> A regional frame makes way for a critique of dominant national narratives: White suggests that through regionalism, we can see that the history of the northeast United States is often metonymic, taken to be representative of the whole of U.S. history.<sup>24</sup> This project heeds White's call to consider the necessity of employing different scales, for the scale (of region) is always interacting with others (the national and international). Lefebvre “points the way to a history that does not have to choose between the local, regional, national, and transnational but can establish *shifting relationships* between them.”<sup>25</sup> Michael O'Brien pushes this further, too, emphasizing that “these spheres [read: frames] – the local and the national, even the international – ought to be coequal.”<sup>26</sup>

When looking at a region, it is easy to fall into the trap of conflating geography and discourse: after all, as O'Brien points out, “Though Southern identity is an outgrowth

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<sup>22</sup> Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures,” 17-57.

<sup>23</sup> Limerick, “Region and Reason,” 96.

<sup>24</sup> The U.S. South can also be perceived as representative of the nation in the eyes of those *outside* the United States: “Rather than the exception, the South becomes mostly American.” Ayers, “What We Talk About,” 73.

<sup>25</sup> White, “Nationalization of Nature,” 979 (italics mine).

<sup>26</sup> O'Brien, *Placing the South*, 119.



of the discourses of nationalism, the South is not a nation-state, has no fixed boundaries, issues no passports, collects no taxes."<sup>27</sup> Thus, when centering the region, it is important to recognize that the U.S. South is *both* geographic *and* discursive. It is *both* real *and* imagined. Geographically speaking, socio-cultural and economic changes in the mid-twentieth century made the region more welcoming than before, according to David Reimers. For one, the 1960s saw the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), in addition to the fact that "the federal government began enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment" and also "extended equal protection of the law to Asians and Latinos."<sup>28</sup> Coupled with a growing economy, these changes in law for the welfare of people of color in the South "made the South attractive to Asian immigrants," who "could answer the needs of the new global economy in southern cities and towns."<sup>29</sup>

For most of the highly trained and specialized Asian migrants of my study, the draw to Tennessee was unequivocally the Lab, in which the prospect of living in Tennessee (or, for that matter, the South) was a non-issue. In this way, my interviewees present a methodological challenge: how is the study *regional*, if the region doesn't seem to matter? Gabriela Dumbrava talks about writers who write of or in the South, either locating a story in southern cultures or not mentioning the South at all, demonstrating that there is a way to situate a study (or a story) in the U.S. South without necessarily

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>28</sup> Reimers, "Asian Immigrants in the South," 109.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

engaging regional specificity.<sup>30</sup> For instance, when looking for jobs, the idea of living in the U.S. South, for most all of my interviewees, was not a factor: "Geography, it wasn't really in the thinking. It's just the research work I was interested in. I didn't really think about the South or wherever." For another scientist, too, there is no reason to leave and every reason to stay: "I really like my job. This is the best in the world," he responded when asked about the possibility of leaving Tennessee. "I had a mission: to build my instrument [a ten-year project]... My genuine love is to build an instrument, to be able to pursue my own science." As in the case for many scientists, the focus was on whether the workplace could support their research. As a top-tier research institution, Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) could easily meet that demand. Still, the fact remains that regional specificity in the end has influenced the experiences of Asian migrants as racialized subjects in the United States. This and the fact that Asian American Tennessee communities are part of a larger historical context secure the need to employ more than one frame.

To continue considering what it means to analyze a region, Anthony Sczcesniul's study of southern hospitality demonstrates the productiveness of reading the U.S. South through discourse. That is, the idea of "southern hospitality" operates discursively and has changed over time. If southern hospitality is a characteristic of southern regional identity, it is also a myth, an idea that "may have first existed as a narrowly defined body of social practices among the antebellum planter classes"; accordingly, these "mythic

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<sup>30</sup> Dumbrava, "From Archetype to Stereotype," 2-9. Limerick discusses the challenges of using regionalist frames in historical work: though unpopular, "Without the regional level of meaning, the more general levels are unrooted, ungrounded, abstract, and unconvincing." "Region and Reason," 93. The implications of studying regionalism and regions is also discussed by Ayers, Limerick, Nissenbaum, and Onuf, *All Over the Map*.

dimensions of southern hospitality eventually outran its practices.”<sup>31</sup> Szczesiul's study demonstrates that, while the idea of southern hospitality may have come out of real practices in the U.S. South, it then became discursively passed down over time, taking on a life of its own and becoming part of the South. This *imagined* South is alive and well and also involves the idea that the South is seen not as “an aberration to the nation but a site where the implications of racial classification played out in heightened relief,” to borrow from Leslie Bow.<sup>32</sup> My interest is in what it socially, culturally, and racially means to live in the South. Asian migrant scientists find themselves in a region perceived to be “behind” (or, more pejoratively, as “backwards”), and the pairing of science and the South does not fit traditional conceptions of the region, either.<sup>33</sup> Thus, particular discourses are attached to the South: my approach in using a regional lenses rests on the idea that regional specificity is constructed and, to appropriate Szczesiul and Richard Gray, is “fictive,” *not* “fake.”<sup>34</sup> Such a distinction reminds us that when employing a regional frame, it is critical to acknowledge that the South exists geographically and discursively.

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<sup>31</sup> Szczesiul, “Re-mapping Southern Hospitality,” 128. Referring to the idea of southern hospitality keeps the idea in existence: “it is the *expression* of ‘southern hospitality’ that *creates* southern hospitality.” Furthermore, the discourse of southern hospitality was highly racialized from the start. Argued by some as practices “of conspicuous consumption and competition among wealthy planters” during the antebellum era, practices of southern hospitality were built on the backs of African Americans: despite how the discourse has morphed and changed over time, there is always an excluded “other.” Ibid., 130, 133.

<sup>32</sup> Bow, *Partly Colored*, 20. Bow is also drawing from Gray, *Southern Aberrations*.

<sup>33</sup> O'Brien observes, “Northerners... have been inclined to view Southerners as backward and unintelligent and hence to see Southern intellectuality as an oxymoron.” *Placing the South*, 105.

<sup>34</sup> Gray, “Inventing Communities, Imagining Places,” xviii, quoted in Szczesiul, “Re-mapping Southern Hospitality,” 129.

Omitting a regional frame can lose the nuances of how the U.S. South complicates and challenges dominant narratives in Asian America. In this way, the field of Asian American studies may also fall victim to overlooking what region can offer. Stephen Sumida talks about the dominant "Californic paradigm" in Asian American studies where the history of Asian migration to California is a metonymic one for Asian migration to the United States.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the notion of "East of California" developed as a caucus of the Association for Asian American Studies and pointed to the need to study non-traditional sites of Asian American migration and community, including the South. Studies that lie at the intersection of Asian America and the U.S. South are not only limited in number, but they can also push the field to think differently in innovative ways.<sup>36</sup>

A regional, national, *and* international approach is vital to this study: White discusses the use of "global, transnational, national, and local... matters of scale,"<sup>37</sup> and

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<sup>35</sup> In problematizing the Californic Paradigm, Sumida shows the connection between the immigration dichotomy of traditional/nontraditional sites and the justification of the existence of Asian American studies (AAS) in higher education: "the demographic strength of Asian Americans along the West Coast generally and in higher education particularly was and has been one of the bases for arguing for the establishment of Asian American studies in certain institutions." 181-202. Sumida, "East of California," 97. As Chang, Chen, Davé, Ho, and Lai discuss, the fact that the U.S. South has historically lower numbers of Asian Americans poses a challenge to the rationale of the critical mass model, which has been used to make a case for the development of AAS in higher education. Chang, Chen, Davé, Ho, and Lai, "Teaching Texts."

Also, here and in other instances, in the case of both in-text signal phrases and footnoted citations of multiple authors of one publication, I cite *all* authors and refrain from using the traditional "et al" to represent non-first-authors. Though this may look stylistically unwieldy and clunky, I hope this move acknowledges the contributions of all authors of a single publication.

<sup>36</sup> Joshi and Desai's multidisciplinary anthology, for example, involves "a consideration of how the South as a transnational space raises its own questions, concerns, histories, and arguments for Asian American studies." Joshi and Desai, "Introduction: Discrepancies in Dixie: Asian Americans and the South," 23.

<sup>37</sup> White, "Nationalization of Nature," 977.

how "each scale reveals some things while masking others."<sup>38</sup> Donna Gabaccia also suggests that U.S. immigration studies can benefit from looking beyond the nation-state, for "American campaigns for immigration restriction, and the sharp drop in U.S. immigration that followed..., unfolded against a backdrop of domestic political struggles over the *global* role of the United States."<sup>39</sup> Thus, the 1965 immigration act (which I take up in Chapter Two) needs to be read through an international lens: Gabaccia sees post-1965 migration to the United States as one that "mirrored the geography and history of American empire-building in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia."<sup>40</sup> Such a lens can reveal the "tyranny of the national," and still, in the study of Asian Americans in the United States, deployment of the international is quite fraught because of the historical perception and construction of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.<sup>41</sup> To be clear, my use of the "international" here involves "relations maintained between governments (or their agencies) which invoke the nation-states they are supposed to represent in the mutually supportive so-called international system."<sup>42</sup> This is distinctly not a study about the effects of "globalization" or "globalism." Recent works involving globalization and the U.S. South seem to build a narrative of linearity, progress, and multiculturalism,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 978.

<sup>39</sup> Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations*, 8-9 (italics mine).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>41</sup> Borrowing this term from Noiriel, Gabaccia "quer[ies] the tyranny of the national appears in the discipline of history." Noiriel, *La Tyrannie du National*; quoted in Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere?," 1116.

<sup>42</sup> Mato, "On Global and Local Agents," 171, quoted in Lee and Shibusawa, "What is Transnational Asian American History?," ix. For the field of Asian American studies, the scale has perhaps moved outward from the nation-state -- transnational, not so much regional. See C. Lee, "Diaspora, Transnationalism, and Asian American Studies."

featuring demographic and anecdotal observations that lend themselves to narratives of Asian American success through assimilation.<sup>43</sup> Instead, invoking the international calls attention to a broader set of circumstances that inform the lived experiences of Asian Americans in east Tennessee. This research reflects the overlapping, “interlocking” nature of these three scales, which are all “social and [are] historically produced.”<sup>44</sup> Due to this interlocking nature, messiness abounds, and scales rupture. My analysis will move in and out of, between, and among frames by taking a hard look at two constructs reflected in the two stories that began this discussion: the first involves national security, and the second concerns language and accent.

### **Construct #1: National Security**

Viewing my research subjects as national security migrants allows another way to read what lies at the nexus of immigration, notions of belonging, and American identity. But first, what do I mean by national security? The idea of national security exists in legislation and in the cultural imaginary in complicated ways and layers. It has become a powerful term, one that is accepted as the rationale for many things. As Daniel Yergin notes, “At certain moments, unfamiliar phrases suddenly become common articles of political discourse, and the concepts they represent become so embedded in the national consciousness that they seem always to have been with us. So it was for the phrase

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<sup>43</sup> See for example, Cobb and Stueck, *Globalization and the American South*; Peacock, *Grounded Globalism*. “Globalization” also arguably has a generic quality, as “a shorthand explanation for just about any change -- positive, negative, economic, social, or cultural -- underway anywhere in the world.” Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations*, 176.

<sup>44</sup> White, “Nationalization of Nature,” 979.

‘national security.’”<sup>45</sup> The narrative of national security is a construction that often goes unchallenged in mainstream discourse.

To be sure, national security has been the subject of much scholarly attention, particularly in the field of international relations and security studies, which often looks at "the security of states against other states."<sup>46</sup> The discursive links between national security and immigration have also been examined in different capacities. For example, Michael LeMay characterizes the 1965 act as a form of immigration policy that is less regulated but is still restricted, with “legislation allowing special assistance and therefore privilege to selected groups who ‘come-in’ at the top... of the immigration flow, largely motivated by foreign policy and *national security concerns*.”<sup>47</sup> That is, the Hart-Celler Act engages in a discourse of national security specifically through refugee migration or through politically-allied countries that pressured the United States to enact less restrictive policies. Christopher Rudolph also proposes a positivistic model that explains and predicts state behavior, accounting for how immigration “policy is crafted to *balance* national economic interests with security interests.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, viewing migration through a “national security paradigm” explains changes in U.S. immigration policy in

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<sup>45</sup> Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, 195, quoted in D. Stuart, *Creating the National Security State*, 287. For a discussion on the many ways “national security” is invoked, see also Rosenberg, “Commentary.”

<sup>46</sup> Terriff, Croft, James, and Morgan, *Security Studies Today*, 9. The authors discuss the convergences and divergences within this subfield, such as its relatively recent positivist and post-positivist divide. For more on security studies and immigration, see Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*.

<sup>47</sup> LeMay, *Guarding the Gates*, 154 (italics mine).

<sup>48</sup> Rudolph further argues that security is not merely about sovereignty, but should be understood as a three-part idea involving military, material, and societal security, where immigration policy falls under the latter. Christopher Rudolph, *National Security and Immigration*, 84.

the twentieth century.<sup>49</sup> My focus is less on how the U.S. nation-state can better practice security, and more on the social and political implications of invoking national security as a justification - or instrument - of social control. I aim to implicitly destabilize the narrative of national security while revealing its reach, including how it plays out in the daily work lives of Asian migrant scientists at ORNL.

What happens if we center the Asian subject when considering the origins of national security? The literature suggests that this would not be a huge conceptual stretch. The formation of the U.S. national security state is historically linked to Asian migration. Jung locates this relationship in the early 1900s in which “the national security state – the heart and soul of the modern U.S. empire – emerged in large measure through efforts to contain and repress movements across the Pacific.”<sup>50</sup> The Chinese Exclusion Act also implicitly invoked national security,<sup>51</sup> and Indian migrants during that time period were also subjected to surveillance and persecution at the hands of the U.S. national security state.<sup>52</sup> Contemporary understandings of the origins of national security are located in World War II – specifically, the attack on Pearl Harbor that instigated U.S. involvement

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<sup>49</sup> Rudolph explains, “Why did the U.S. implement ethno-nationalist policy in 1924, abolish it for a more civic-oriented policy in 1965, and then adopt policy that reflected a return to concerns about demographic change in the 1990s? The national security paradigm provides an answer... The presence of external enemies creates an Other that is conducive to national cohesiveness, whereas the absence of such an Other tends to foster perceptions of difference within societies. *Internal ‘enemies’ replace external enemies.*” (83, (italics mine)

<sup>50</sup> M. Jung, “Beyond Loyalties,” 290-291.

<sup>51</sup> E. Lee, *At America’s Gates*, 224.

<sup>52</sup> Sohi looks especially at the monitoring, persecution, and immigration restrictions targeting Indians suspected of organizing against the British empire in the 1910s, in which “U.S. officials relied on correspondence and shared surveillance with British authorities and the transnational circulation of anti-Asian rhetoric to articulate a national security discourse.” “Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism,” 423.



in World War II. It is widely understood that up to this point, the United States had maintained a “tradition of isolationism.” Douglas Stuart explains how the attack prompted a shift from a view of American “national interest” to that of American “national security,” an ideological shift in foreign policy that was linked to Asian nation-states.<sup>53</sup> While the fact that *Japan* attacked the United States cannot be missed, Japan’s 1937 invasion of China prompted Roosevelt to consider more measures of military preparedness, a significant departure from the norm at the time. Accordingly, a “Pearl Harbor system” of national security developed, one that was also very much infused in the discourses and conversations that ultimately led to the 1947 National Security Act.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the modern concept of national security initially began as one rooted in deterrence, addressing the question, how could the United States avoid another Pearl Harbor? National security came to encompass the possibility of a “kind of institutionalized professional military staff as part of the U.S. foreign policy machinery” adapting a “posture of gladiators.”<sup>55</sup> If the attack on Pearl Harbor was such a huge influence (the central, singular event) on how the United States came to center, value, and define national security, then from its inception, the modern concept of national security was linked to an Asian nation-state. National security has always been built on questions of belonging, even given the shifting historical terrain of U.S. relations with Asian nation-

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<sup>53</sup> D. Stuart, *Creating the National Security State*, 1-42.

<sup>54</sup> Stuart summarizes, “the 1947 National Security Act, the single omnibus bill that created all of the leading institutions of the US national security bureaucracy, except for the Department of State.” This list includes the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, and what became the Department of Defense. *Ibid.*, 1, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 28.

states over time (e.g., U.S. military dictatorship in postwar Japan, or China as a World War II ally of the United States).

If the attack on Pearl Harbor elicited (or, perhaps, further drew from) national security discourses constructed around Asians, so, too, did the Manhattan Project. Joseph Masco suggests that the atomic bomb not only embodied one way of looking at national security, but also dramatically shaped the way national security came to be conceived in the American consciousness.<sup>56</sup> National security became infused within "relationships between citizens and the state," and this is exacerbated at physical sites of the Manhattan Project such as Los Alamos or Oak Ridge; as Russell Olwell notes, "in Oak Ridge the identification of the city with national security was more direct than in other parts of the nation, as military necessity had given birth to the city itself."<sup>57</sup> I would further contend that ORNL employees inhabit and inherit the platial history of Oak Ridge as a secret city of the Manhattan Project: that is, the bomb haunts the Lab discursively and physically through the different levels of security on the Oak Ridge campus.<sup>58</sup> Thus, national security appears in heightened, visible forms as imposed on the body and through the place itself.

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<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, "radioactive nation-building" involves how the cultural impact of the bomb and the "nuclear weapons complex" "colonized national imaginaries and changed relationships between citizens and the state." Masco, *Nuclear Borderlands*, 25.

<sup>57</sup> Olwell, *At Work in the Atomic City*, 5. This notion of "military necessity," was of course used to justify Japanese American incarceration, speaking to the power (and problematic) of this term.

<sup>58</sup> I adopt Aguilar-San Juan's use of "platial": "Place shapes and influences community... I also insist that social relations of power and inequality in turn influence space. Places affect people, and people also do things to affect place... To capture the idea that place, not space, does things, I use the word 'platial.'" Aguilar-San Juan. *Little Saigons*, 136.

In the context of analytical frames, the importance of examining the construct of national security through the region is not immediately obvious: according to White, “the real choice is not finding the single historical scale that reflects the world in which we now live, but instead understanding the multiple scales upon which... lives have been lived and how such scales have merged and intersected.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, the U.S. South has been and always will be a part of the empire-building projects of the U.S. nation-state. That is, I insist that to be “southern” is to also be part of the U.S. national security apparatus. Oak Ridge’s origins as a Manhattan Project secret city speak most clearly to viewing the United States on the world stage *through* the southern landscape. The Manhattan Project was a national project with fatal consequences that reverberated across the Pacific, obliterating the Japanese.

### **Construct #2: Accent**

While the U.S. national security state is ever present in the lives of Asian migrant scientists of my study, taking a hard look at language –particularly that of accent– reveals important threads about their racialization in the South and in the U.S. nation-state. In short, accent is a way to interrogate social identity. Embracing definitions from multiple disciplines, I employ Shilpa Davé’s conception of “accent,” which, among other things, “involves verbal intonations that stress particular syllables so the manner of speaking is just as significant as what is being said... Accent not only includes tonal qualities but also involves word choice, arrangement of words, and cultural expressions that are rooted

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<sup>59</sup> White, “Nationalization of Nature,” 986.

in national (and regional) expressions of identity.”<sup>60</sup> To add to this, the act of detecting accent is done in comparison to another, and therefore does not exist by itself.<sup>61</sup> Accent is both about group membership and individual experience. Mari Matsuda points out that accent has a history:

Your accent carries the story of who you are – who first held you and talked to you when you were a child, where you have lived, your age, the schools you attended, the languages you know, your ethnicity, whom you admire, your loyalties, your profession, your class position: traces of your life and identity are woven into your pronunciation, your phrasing, your choice of words.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to this individualized history, accent is linked to larger forces at play and can be markers of belonging, of inclusion (or exclusion) in an imagined community. If "Standard American English" is a myth (as I discuss in Chapter 5), then, to follow Rosina Lippi-Green, the idea of "non-accent" is a falsehood as well.<sup>63</sup> Matsuda clarifies, "Every person has an accent. Yet, in ordinary usage, we say a person 'has an accent' to mark difference from some unstated norm of non-accent, as though only some foreign few

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<sup>60</sup> Davé, *Indian Accents*, 2. Davé argues for an expanded definition of accent to include sidekick characters who operate as accents to the protagonists in a film or television show, as well as other forms of representation. For the purpose of my discussion, I work with a definition of accent that is specifically related to language. To be clear, accent is, of course, studied extensively by linguists who have a more technical or empirical understanding of accent. For example, Moyer defines accent as "a set of dynamic segmental and suprasegmental habits that convey linguistic meaning along with social and situational affiliation." My interest is in the perception of accent (whether foreign or southern) not so much in the linguistic nuances of the accents themselves (e.g., empirical data on speech patterns). Moyer, *Foreign Accent*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 45. Furthermore, while accent involves phonology (which involves "how sounds are organized into systems") and is related to phonetics (which looks at the "production and perception of speech sounds," Lippi-Green concedes that "in so far as linguists are concerned, the term has no technical or specific meaning." Ibid., 22, 44.

<sup>62</sup> Matsuda, "Voices of America," 1329.

<sup>63</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 44-54.

have accents.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, although the research indicates that *everyone* has an “accent,” some accents are privileged more than others. While the question of intelligibility regarding accent involves everyday communication between individuals, it also has deep ramifications at a systemic level, as seen through accent discrimination cases.<sup>65</sup> Through all this, it is critical to acknowledge that “Accent has little to do with what is generally called communicative competence, or the ability to use and interpret language in a wide variety of contexts effectively.”<sup>66</sup> The “hidden norm of non-accent -- a linguistic impossibility, but a socially constructed reality,” as Matsuda describes, has historically been a means to assert racial power.<sup>67</sup>

In the study of the racialization of Asian Americans in the U.S. South, accent is a most productive site of inquiry because it is an aural expression of national and regional belonging. Additionally, if one of the strongest indicators of being a “southerner” is that of the accent, then one of the strongest markers of being a “foreigner” is *also* the accent. My study primarily concerns first-generation naturalized citizens who are multilingual, in which English is *not* their “first” language.<sup>68</sup> Centering accent speaks to how Asian Americans force a reconceptualization of southern identity. While the first half of this

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<sup>64</sup> Matsuda, “Voices of America,” 1330.

<sup>65</sup> Matsuda discusses how such cases are extremely difficult to prove in a court of law, attributing this to flaws in the legal system.

<sup>66</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 50.

<sup>67</sup> Matsuda, “Voices of America,” 1361. Matsuda also notes, “The puzzle in accent cases is that accent is often derivative of race and national origin.” *Ibid.*, 1348.

<sup>68</sup> I do not use the term “English as a Second Language” (“ESL”) because of the way that it is pathologized and used as a form of linguistic Othering, reflecting a deficit model. Instead, I employ the term “multilingual” to recognize the value of one being fluent in multiple languages.

dissertation most clearly engages the U.S. national security state, the chapters of the second half of this dissertation continue the engagement of the regional, national, and international frames as mediated through accent. This shift from national security to accent is achieved only through an extended self-reflexive discussion of methodology that involves the implications of interviewing multilingual research subjects (chapter 5).

### **Asian American Communities in the U.S. South**

The Asian American South has been the subject of a handful of publications. Most well-known, perhaps, might be the multigenerational Chinese American community in Mississippi,<sup>69</sup> or, in more recent scholarship, its Georgian counterpart.<sup>70</sup> Still others have written about their experiences as Asians living in or traveling through the region,<sup>71</sup> and these memoirs are also joined by a small body of fiction.<sup>72</sup> While there is a small cohort of academic studies, the notion of Asian American racial inbetweenness particularly in the U.S. South has especially been explored by Leslie Bow and Ajantha Subramanian.

Bow theorizes the Asian American's state of "racial interstitiality" in the U.S. South during the Jim Crow era: "there is always an excess to the Asian community's

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<sup>69</sup> Loewen, *Mississippi Chinese*; Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias*.

<sup>70</sup> For example, see Brown, "A Geographic Analysis of the Chinese in Georgia, 1865-1980"; Bronstein, "The Formation and Development of Chinese Communities in Atlanta, Augusta, and Savannah, Georgia." Post-1965 Atlanta has also been the subject of study: Sakamoto White, "The Growing Asian Population in the American South," 123-134; Zhao, *Strangers in the City*; Goldstein, ed. *Georgia's East Asian Connection*. Focusing more on the Chinese in Louisiana, too, is Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*; M.H. Jung, *Coolies and Cane*. See also Joshi and Desai, eds., *Asian Americans in Dixie*.

<sup>71</sup> Jung, *Southern Fried Rice*; Kim, *An Asian Anthropologist in the South*; Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*; Verghese, *My Own Country*.

<sup>72</sup> Kadohata, *Floating World*; Choi, *Foreign Student*; Butler, *Good Scent on a Strange Mountain*.

‘successful’ disassociation from African Americans and its own ‘partly colored’ past.”<sup>73</sup> That is, Asians would distinguish themselves from African Americans to rise up in status, tacitly accepting an inferior social position to whites and creating “a spatial metaphor that emphasizes the condition of being between the terms that define a dominant social hierarchy, the condition of interstitiality.”<sup>74</sup> The U.S. South is particularly interesting because “segregation in the American South made no provision for gradations of color.”<sup>75</sup> To date, Bow’s groundbreaking study is arguably the most theoretically nuanced study of Asian American racialization in the context of the South.

Moving to contemporary times, the post-1965 Indian immigrant communities of Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, according to Ajantha Subramanian, are an elite group from a country that historically emphasized science and technology education. The author finds that her research subjects’ understanding of difference is rooted not in race but in *culture*, a distinction that augments liberal multiculturalism’s elision of historical and structural racism under the guise of cultural diversity. Accordingly, “‘community’ or ‘culture’ has served Indian Americans, among others, as a means to claim white privilege and disown blackness.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, whereas in Bow’s analysis the Asian American in the Jim Crow South was arguably more openly racist by participating in Black disavowal, the

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<sup>73</sup> Bow, “Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the ‘Partly Colored,’” Abstract.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 6. Accordingly, the racial anxieties of Asians in the U.S. South surface in distinct, sometimes subtle ways. For example, Bow looks to James Loewen’s study which reveals both the Chinese American community’s disassociation from African Americans (including mixed race Chinese African Americans) and their explicit affiliation with whites, a combination that demonstrates “the incompleteness of status elevation.” Ibid., 17. See also Bow, *Partly Colored*.

<sup>75</sup> Bow, “Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the ‘Partly Colored,’” 3.

<sup>76</sup> Subramanian, “Indians in North Carolina,” 108.

post-1965 Asian American of Subramanian's study uses cultural difference to differentiate from African Americans with a recognition that "Black America represents the negative side of belonging, a racialized citizenship that is a permanent disadvantage."<sup>77</sup> The Indians' interstitiality is also situated in an assertion of a status as a *foreigner*: "As soon as they figured out that I was a non-white foreigner, they treated me very well," according to one individual.<sup>78</sup> The Indian immigrants of North Carolina, recruited by the white-collar industries of Research Triangle Park, articulate their interstitial status through asserting class privilege in excess. This work reminds us that studies of Asian American identity in the U.S. South are further complicated by the demographic shifts instituted by the 1965 Hart-Celler Act that facilitated an exponential increase of Asian migration to the United States. Years beyond Jim Crow and into a multiculturalist society marked by colorblindness, a post-1965 lens makes the notion of southern specificity even more complex.

### **Disciplinarity, Methods, and Asian American Studies**

This dissertation navigates through three different sites and texts that concern Asian American racialization in the U.S. South: first, the lived experiences of post-1965 Asian migrant scientists and engineers living in Tennessee and working at a historically highly securitized space; second, the community response to the proposal for the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, a public monument established in the 1990s; and third, the stand-up comedy of Henry Cho, whose performance responds to the perceived

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 110.



anomalousness of Asian southerners. Comprised of a three part multidisciplinary approach that most prominently draws from over thirty interviews of current and former Asian migrant scientists at ORNL, this project employs methods rooted in ethnography, history, and cultural studies.<sup>79</sup> Referring to the divide between the humanities and social sciences, historian Alice Yang Murray notes, “Ironically, many theorists who write about the ‘politics of representation’ miss the chance to explore the implications of their research for living people.”<sup>80</sup> This dissertation looks to speak across this divide, drawing from multiple methods and types of sources. Analyzing representation in popular culture and in public monuments in the context of the Asian American South both complements ethnography and also serves a critical purpose in the projects of Asian American studies.

A project of this scope and of this nature must at its methodological heart be multidisciplinary and multi-sited across source material, particularly because of my investment in Asian American studies. Discussing certain aspects of the field can help explain this connection between multidisciplinary and Asian American studies. To

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<sup>79</sup> Whether this project is “interdisciplinary” remains a question: my methods reflect a combination but not necessarily a reconfiguration of methods. I think of Sucheng Chan’s critique of the tendency of Asian Americanists to conflate multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, for the field of Asian American Studies “is at best multidisciplinary; there has not been much intellectual cross-fertilization despite the fact that its practitioners have invoked interdisciplinarity as a goal for more than three decades.” *In Defense of Asian American Studies*, 184.

To clarify the way I claim ethnography as one of my methods, I turn to D. Soyini Madison, who reminds us that ethnographic methods are also acts of representation, in that I as the researcher am re-presenting my interview subjects: “Representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated.” Madison goes on to assert how a particular documentary “was ethnographic in that the author or interpreter spent time in a location interacting with others within that prescribed space; furthermore, she interpreted and recorded what she found there and then, through her own interpretive standpoint, represented those findings to us. We meet the woman [featured in the film] and learn of her experience and culture through the idiosyncratic lens of the interpreter’s interpretation. In this instance, as in most, interpretation holds a great deal of power.” Working with live subjects and interpreting- and therefore representing- their stories entail tremendous responsibility on the part of the researcher. Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 4.

<sup>80</sup>Yang Murray, “Oral History Research, Theory, and Asian American Studies,” 117.

begin with, conceptualizing a definition and explanation of this relatively new field is complicated perhaps because it is not unified by method. Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu and Min Song state, “Asian American Studies as an interdisciplinary field of academic study is a recent invention, probably originating in the late 1960s in California. It concerns itself with the lives of people in the United States, and perhaps other parts of the Americas, who trace their ancestry to Asia.”<sup>81</sup> They continue, “The first general claim we can make about Asian American Studies, then, is that it has difficulty defining what its object of study is.”<sup>82</sup> Given the multiple interpretations about what Asian American studies is or how it began, one unifying thread is the idea of addressing racial power and inequality. Lane Ryo Hirabayashi and Marilyn Caballero Alquizola observe that based on the origins of the field, “AAS was and still remains a transformative enterprise, encompassing critique and practice to bring about constructive social change in pursuit of social justice, whenever and wherever necessary.”<sup>83</sup> Kandice Chuh also notes:

“Asian American”... is a designation of the *(im)possibility of justice*, where ‘justice’ refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable, one that can only connotatively be implied. Arguably, the overarching purpose of Asian American studies has been and continues to be pursuit of the *(im)possibility*...<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Wu and Song, “Introduction,” xiv.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. Lisa Lowe further problematizes the identity politics often associated with the field’s ‘object of study,’ for “the force of Asian American Studies is not the restoration of a cultural heritage to an identity formation, but rather the history of Asian alterity to the modern nation-state highlights the convergence of nationalism with racial exclusion, gendered social stratification, and labor exploitation.” Lowe, “The International within the National,” 30. Also, the challenges of identifying the parameters of Asian American studies appear in the field’s intellectual history as well. According to Chan, the field is credited to have begun in public demonstrations, as opposed to pioneering studies that would serve as canonical foundations of the field: “Asian American studies... did not begin with the production of certain texts that in time became canonical. Rather, our field began with two large student strikes that captured media attention and a series of less visible actions elsewhere.” Chan, *In Defense of Asian American Studies*, xvii.

<sup>83</sup> Hirabayashi and Alquizola, “Whither the Asian American Subject?,” 176.

<sup>84</sup> Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 8.

Thus, even though Chuh scrutinizes the implications of how “justice” appears in the project of Asian American studies, social justice is configured prominently in how Asian Americanists reflect on the field’s disciplinarity.

A strong link exists between popular culture studies and Asian American studies. Admittedly, despite the fact that “[p]opular culture is an enduring interest in Asian American Studies,”<sup>85</sup> the connection between analyzing representation in popular culture and addressing social inequality may initially seem fuzzy. In response, Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu make a case for the value of popular culture analyses particularly with respect to Asian American studies:

[T]he imaginative reach of cultural work is too often foreshortened by the demand that it redress political, economic, or social inequities...[For example,] What can this do to address structural poverty or racism? How does this reverse anti-immigrant sentiments? ... These types of questions tend to ignore the ways in which cultural work might address these very real problems in *other manners* - to perhaps act as a release for the anxieties engendered by everyday struggles, to act as a balm for one’s complicity, to provide a dream of another world, to piece together an armored body able to withstand, for a while, such slings and arrows.<sup>86</sup>

My analysis of stand-up comedian Henry Cho’s performance will speak to the nuances of these “other manners” – ones that suggest how popular culture can offer ways for Asian Americans to metabolize, numb, or resist everyday unease and tension. Popular culture offers a text that allows a critical look at different manifestations of racialization, and Cho's performance exposes the contradictions and challenges of articulating an Asian southerner identity. I follow Shilpa Davé’s lead, in which “popular culture is a powerful

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<sup>85</sup> Davé, Nishime, and Oren, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>86</sup> Nguyen and Tu, “Introduction,” 10 (*italics mine*).

medium to express and portray the ideals of American national culture in domestic and international spheres... How national identity is parlayed through popular culture establishes expectations about what is normative and nonnormative.”<sup>87</sup> I would add *regional* identity to this formulation as well: popular culture can establish or critique “normative and nonnormative” constructions of southernness.

In a study of Asian migration and racialization, I anticipated gathering my research data from living subjects (face to face or in performance), not in inanimate objects. In deep contrast to the ephemeral nature of performance, another example of representation – that of the public monument – is designed to endure the changing of the seasons year after year: the public monument is long-lasting, projecting a sense of permanence in the space it inhabits and as an object itself. Thus, exploring the politics of representation productively extends beyond performance and into the realm of public space. Public monuments, as argued by Nuala Johnson, are “a source for unravelling the geographies of political and cultural identity especially as they relate to conceptions of national identity.”<sup>88</sup> After a couple research trips to conduct interviews, I could no longer ignore the fact that my study of Asian American racialization in this area *had* to involve a local bonsho bell, an Oak Ridge monument cited as “the first U.S.-Japan monument at any Manhattan Project site.”<sup>89</sup> The bell provoked local resistance that was highly racialized. While the chapter on Cho’s stand-up comedy highlights one particular

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<sup>87</sup> Davé, *Indian Accents*, 10.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, “Cast in Stone,” 52.

<sup>89</sup> Teree Caruthers, “Children’s Museum Receives Friendship Bell Replica,” *Oak Ridger*, date unknown. A photocopy from the private collection of Shigeko Uppuluri, the article was most likely written in 1993.

expression of southerner identity, the public monument of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell articulates another: Oak Ridger identity (and its instability when recognizing racial formation). Through this coupling of two representational forms, we might see both Cho's performance and the bell monument as commentaries on national and regional identities which are deeply tied to questions of belonging with respect to Asians in the United States, and, in the case of the bell, the unequal (and uneasy) relationship between Japan and the United States. With a dissertation drawing on performance, public memory, and lived experiences, I argue for a methodological synergy when all three are taken together.

### **Terminology and the Re-presentation of Interviewees**

#### *On the Term "the South"*

When describing the region, I use the term "U.S. South" interchangeably with the "South." I choose this while recognizing Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn's astute argument about how "'south' – not to mention 'American' – is a relative term whose meaning is contingent on a geopolitical context fraught with power imbalances both inter- and intranationally."<sup>90</sup> My choice is also predicated on the fact that employing the term "the South" recognizes the cultural currency this term has in U.S. mainstream discourse.

#### *On the Term "Scientist"*

I use this term to describe my interviewees who have training in science and engineering. We *might* otherwise call them "STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) workers," but the extent to which my interviewees might identify with

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<sup>90</sup> Smith and Cohn, "Part 1: The U.S. South and the Caribbean," 21-22.

such an umbrella term is unclear (whereas my interviews revealed that "scientist" seemed more agreeable). STEM is also a category that encompasses information technology professionals, including programmers, so the wide range of this term is not as helpful.<sup>91</sup> It would perhaps be more appropriate to call my interviewees "scientists and engineers," in totality. For the sake of brevity, I am shortening this to the generic term "scientist," recognizing that this choice simplifies the specificities of their professional fields. Unless stated otherwise, when referring to scientists, I do not mean physicians or social scientists (two areas that the National Science Foundation includes in their designation of "scientists").<sup>92</sup> I also choose to not identify specific disciplines and titles (e.g., physicist, biologist, etc) in the interest of protecting the identities of my interviewees.

*On the Term "Migrant"*

I use the term "migrant" through the course of this dissertation, in place of the more traditional term, "immigrant." This choice allows the individual the possibility of transnational identities, as "immigrant" suggests a sense of staying in the United States and does not necessarily allow the maintenance of transnational ties to places other than the United States. I do not use "transmigrant" (nor do I claim that this is a transnational project) because not everyone in my study participates in "establishing and maintaining kinship, economic, cultural, and political networks across national boundaries, and the creation of multiple sites of 'home.'"<sup>93</sup> I also pull away from the term "immigration" as

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<sup>91</sup> See Lowell, "A Long View of America's Immigration Policy," 1029-1044.

<sup>92</sup> The NSF considers psychologists and economists to be social scientists. Also, I am not including physicians in my term because there is an historical specificity to the migration of physicians. National Science Foundation, *Scientists, Engineers, and Physicians from Abroad*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Anderson and Lee, "Asian American Displacements," 8.

well: to borrow from Lisong Liu, “I use ‘migration’ rather than ‘immigration’ or ‘emigration’ to emphasize the mobility of migrants and the process of migration (with possible return) rather than a fixed direction oriented towards one single nation-state.”<sup>94</sup> Although the terms “immigrant”/“immigration” have legal currency and are often appropriate, my word choices of “migrant”/ “migration” also look to resist what I see as assimilationist, U.S.-centric narratives that are often attached to “immigrants” (e.g., the rhetoric around “Nation of Immigrants”).<sup>95</sup>

This word choice also implicitly reflects my engagement with an international frame; Moon-Ho Jung and Donna Gabaccia, respectively, problematize some of the paradigms and narratives that emerge from scholarship that only employs a national frame. Jung points out how Asian American history can espouse “liberal narratives” that feature “a story of exclusion and betrayal from the nation (the United States) that Asian Americans should be able to claim as their own. That is, Asian Americans, like all Americans, deserve a place in the ‘nation of immigrants.’”<sup>96</sup> Jung calls for Asian Americanists “to dislodge nationalist narratives and... expose and critique the racial and imperial formations that have made the conception of the United States possible in the first place.”<sup>97</sup> By centering the nation-state only, Asian American history can overlook

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<sup>94</sup> L. Liu, “Mobility, Community and Identity,” xiv.

<sup>95</sup> A powerful artistic critique of this John F. Kennedy term can also be seen in the spoken word album, *¿Nation of Immigrants?*, a compilation of spoken word performances by Minnesota artists of color who collectively problematize this popular notion. *¿Nation of Immigrants?*, curated by Bao Phi.

<sup>96</sup> Though Jung is writing about Asian American history, I extend this critique to the broader field of Asian American studies, including multidisciplinary works like my own. M. Jung, “Beyond These Mythical Shores,” 634.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

"struggles against a world governed by white supremacy and uneven flows of capital and labor."<sup>98</sup> I make the semantic shift from "immigrant" to "migrant" to acknowledge this critique of liberal, nationalist narratives. This move further speaks to the necessity of employing the international alongside the national and the regional. Gabaccia also discusses the potential reach of employing an international frame in studying migration. That is, the category of internationalism can "facilitate critiques of national historiographies," including the "immigrant paradigm."<sup>99</sup> This paradigm is a reflection of U.S. exceptionalism in which the idea of "nation of immigrants" is part of the fabric of American national identity where the "incorporation of foreigners symbolizes the promise and accomplishments of American democracy."<sup>100</sup> My word choice "migrant" semantically demonstrates a move to decenter the nation-state, reflecting both Jung's critique of liberal narratives and Gabaccia's critique of the immigrant paradigm.

From 2008 to 2013, I interviewed a total of 36 individuals employing a snowball method (see appendices). Based on respondents' self-identification, the ethnic breakdown is as follows: 26 Chinese (including those from the P.R.C., Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, as well as those who identify as ethnic Chinese from other countries), 4 Indian, 2 Japanese, 1 Bangladeshi, 1 Filipino, 1 Vietnamese, 1 African American. Of the 36 interviews, 32 research subjects were current or former employees of the Lab, and the remaining 4 were recruited because of their leadership in Asian American community

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 633.

<sup>99</sup> Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere?," 1117.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 1115.



organizations in east Tennessee. Despite my best efforts, I was only able to successfully recruit and interview 13 Asian women. I believe this was in large part due to the generally low numbers of women in science.<sup>101</sup> The Asian migrant scientists at the Lab are a small community. As a result, in the interest of protecting all interviewees' identities, I do not always identify the gender of the interviewees I quote: I do so when it is necessary for comprehension or clarity of argument. To borrow from Matsuda, with regard to my interview subjects, at times, "I choose to use 'they, those, and their' to refer to both individuals and groups in a gender-neutral fashion."<sup>102</sup>

*On the Terms "Asian" and "Asian American"*

Over the course of my interviews, there were a number of subjects who identified with the term "Asian American" or "Asian Pacific" in a way that spoke to a political, pan-ethnic identity. Furthermore, because Asian American studies has historically been invested in distinguishing itself from Asian studies and because Asians in the United States are constantly faced with the perpetual foreigner motif in everyday life, my instincts as one who is invested in Asian American studies is to use the term "Asian American" when describing my research subjects.<sup>103</sup> However, the fact remains that the

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<sup>101</sup> The National Science Foundation reports that in 1972, only 8% of immigrant scientists and engineers were women. The numbers for the amorphous category of the "Far East" was slightly higher, at approximately 10%. *Immigrant Scientists and Engineers in the United States*, 3. Also, there is a "higher proportion of women among native-born than foreign-born scientists and engineers"; by the mid-1990s, it was reported that "women are only one-tenth of all engineers, one-fourth of natural scientists, and just over one-third of mathematicians and computer scientists." Gurcak, Espenshade, Sparrow, and Paskoff, "Immigration of Scientists and Engineers to the United States," 60.

<sup>102</sup> Matsuda, "Voices of America," 1329. Linda D. Wayne also makes a compelling case for gender-neutral pronoun usage. "Neutral Pronouns," 85-91.

<sup>103</sup> Anderson and Lee, in fact, talk about the "unstable nature of 'Asian America,'" observing that, "The Asian American Studies project is confronted... with the reality that the majority of Asians in the United States do not articulate their experiences as Asian American." "Asian American Displacements," 8. For a

individuals I interviewed do not *all* identify with such a term: those who did not identify as Asian Americans most often were not yet legal citizens of the United States.

Privileging their self-identification, I therefore use the term "Asian."<sup>104</sup>

I want to be clear that the use of the term "Asian" and not "Asian American" can still reflect a critique of the perpetual foreigner stereotype of Asian Americans because I am drawing upon the notion of Asian American panethnicity developed among Asian American activist communities in the 1960s. To explain, the formation of Asian American panethnic identity in the United States is influenced by geography and the histories of nation-states: once in the United States, Asians from different nation-states and ethnicities find themselves racialized in a way that totalizes these many ethnicities as one. Thus, this is a panethnic study in which my research subjects are unified by this historical context and specificity: that is, the perception of Asian ethnicities as one monolithic entity is a condition that Asians inherit in the United States.<sup>105</sup> As Yen Le Espiritu clarifies, "the exclusion acts and quotas limiting Asian immigration to the United

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discussion on the disciplinary distinctions between Asian studies and Asian American studies, see Hune, "Asian American Studies and Asian Studies."

<sup>104</sup> It is important to note that legal citizenship is not a requirement in the category "Asian American." For example, I appreciate Zuoyue Wang's definition of "Chinese American scientist," which involves "all those scientists and engineers of Chinese ethnic origin who spent a significant portion of their career in the United States." Z. Wang, "Chinese American Scientists and U.S.-China Scientific Relations," 209.

<sup>105</sup> There are limits to the notion of Asian American panethnicity. In an early critique, Peter Kwong, for example, discusses how Asian American panethnicity elides class because its proponents "want to stress the collective attributes to reinforce this unity and avoid issues, such as class, that might be divisive." As such, Asian American studies and the notion of panethnicity can fall into the trappings of multiculturalism, for "diversity, according to the established convention, perceives American society as made up of many independent and autonomous parts" in which class is not included. Kwong, "Asian American Studies Needs Class Analysis," 76, 80.

States relied upon racist constructions of Asians as homogeneous."<sup>106</sup> As a result, "Asian American activists built pan-Asian solidarity by pointing out their common fate in American society."<sup>107</sup>

I once heard pioneer Asian Americanist Ronald Takaki state at a public lecture, "In Asia, there are no Asians."<sup>108</sup> In this way, ethnicity and country of origin undoubtedly play an important role in informing the experiences of my interview subjects.<sup>109</sup> At times, I identify the ethnicities of my research subjects, but only when it is necessary for the clarity of the argument; my motivation also comes from the necessity of protecting the identities of my interviewees. The majority of my respondents identified as ethnic Chinese. Through the course of the interviews, I heard many reflections referring to social and political upheaval at different points in time, some of which involved Taiwan-born interviewees whose parents fled to the island; the mainland Chinese who were sent to work in the countryside; or the Hong Kongers who grew up in a British colonial educational system and left well before the 1997 Handover. And still, there are the individuals like my father, growing up in the Chinatown of Bangkok, Thailand, and self-identifying as both Thai and Chaozhouese. These intra-ethnic distinctions and

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<sup>106</sup> Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 19. For a history of the development of the term "Asian American," see Espiritu (19-52).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>108</sup> Another way to think of this is through Espiritu's summary: "Arriving in the United States, nineteenth-century immigrants from Asian countries did not think of themselves as 'Asians.'... Members of each group considered themselves culturally and politically distinct." *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> I employ Smedley's definition of ethnicity here: "The terms 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' are best used, analytically, to refer to all those traditions, customs, activities, beliefs, and practices that pertain to a particular group of people who see themselves and are seen by others as having distinct cultural features, a separate history, and a specific sociocultural identity." Smedley, *Race in North America*, 31.

differences among my Chinese interviewees are still in marked contrast to, say, the Japanese interviewee who lived through the air raids of Tokyo during World War II, the Vietnamese PhD whose priority was to bring the entire family to the United States after the fall of Saigon, or the South Asian American Muslim scientist who told me about how being a "double minority" was magnified after 9/11. With these important distinctions in mind, I still argue that Asians in the United States experience a racialization that categorically totalizes them. This is perhaps best exemplified by the construction of yellow peril discourse, which I discuss in the next chapter.

### **Road Map**

The remainder of this dissertation is structured into five chapters. Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for the national security migration of Asian scientists, featuring a close reading of the 1965 Immigration Act and placing this in conversation with the history of scientist migration and Asian migration to the United States. Pausing on migration studies for a moment, Chapter 3 focuses on the local: I analyze the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, which both serves as a case study of the racialization of Asian Americans in the area, and also shows the local specificities and circumstances of national security. The bell centers the town's role in building the bomb, disrupting the way the U.S. imaginary envisions southern memory-making (i.e., as connected to the antebellum South). Chapter 4 explores the specificity of national security migration in east Tennessee while connecting this to larger discourses that especially surfaced during the persecution of perhaps the most famous Asian national security migrant of all, Wen Ho Lee. Drawing from the reflections of my interviewees, chapter 6 focuses on language and accent, a final and full capitulation of southernness that raises questions about

dis/articulations of Asian southerner identity. The final chapter (chapter 7) features a close reading of body and accent in performance, the stand-up comedy of a Tennessee-born son of an ORNL Asian migrant scientist. The shift in focus from national security migration to language and accent is achieved by the insertion of a discussion (Chapter 5) on the inevitable "epistemological violence" enacted in my research.<sup>110</sup> I conclude the project with a self-reflexive afterword on Asian southerner identities.

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<sup>110</sup> I borrow this term from Padron, "Legal Injuries."

## Chapter 2

### “Alien at Work”:

#### Science, Migration, and the Yellow Peril of the U.S. National Security State

What does it mean to work in the interest of national security for a nation-state you were not born in? And, even if your work does not involve national security per se, what if you are treated similarly as those whose work *does* involve national security? What does it mean when your presence elicits immediate suspicion, even after you’ve become a legal citizen? In other words, what does it mean to be a national security migrant, an “alien at work” (as an ORNL Asian migrant scientist had posted on their door)? This chapter lays the groundwork for “national security migration” by turning to migration studies and looking specifically at science, the 1965 immigration act, and the discourse of “yellow peril.” Resisting “the tyranny of the national” frame that characterizes many historical studies of migration,<sup>1</sup> the following discussion features three sections: first, I deconstruct dominant narratives in immigration history that especially concern the 1965 act. Second, I discuss the intersection of science, migration, and national security. Third, I bring these conversations together with the “yellow peril” ideology that is attached to Asian migrants. With Asian migration to the United States as the underlying thread (one that involves the construction of Asians as racial Others<sup>2</sup>), this

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<sup>1</sup> Noiriél, *La Tyrannie du National*, quoted in Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere?,” 1116.

<sup>2</sup> Denny best explains why I am capitalizing “Other”: “My capitalization of the term ‘Other,’ . . . is a cover term for the wider group of marginalized people, those who are variously understood as outside the mainstream, and Other presents an identity around which people mobilize into formal social and identity movements as well as loosely-organized networks of mutual recognition and support.” Denny, *Facing the Center*, 3.

chapter suggests that the formation of post-1965 Asian national security migration occurs through the triangulation of immigration policy, the migration of scientists, and the maintenance of the U.S. national security state.

### **On the 1965 Immigration Act**

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 represented a watershed moment for Asian America. This measure, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, was significant not just for the sheer number of Asians who were now able to migrate to the United States: it would also have major social and cultural ramifications for how Asian Americans would be perceived in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Asian migration to the United States in 1964 constituted only 7% of total legal immigration, but by 1974, this figure increased to 33%.<sup>4</sup> Leading the group in terms of country of origin were migrants from China, the Philippines, Korea, and India.<sup>5</sup> As I make my way toward the notion of national security migration, it is worth noting that periodizing this phenomenon to a post-1965 frame does not mean that post-1965 migrants have had it any “worse” than those in other times: it is that the national security migrant surfaces very visibly in the post-1965 era, an observation that is complicated by the circumstances of the 1965 act itself. Considering the implications of the act shows how Asian migration to east Tennessee engages

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the 1965 act has been linked to the prevailing image of the Asian American as the model minority. See Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 69-83; R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 145-203. Mendoza and Shankar also characterize the 1965 act as the marker of a “new literature of immigration,” expanding the “paradigmatic themes of immigrant literature”: that is, post-1965 literature reflects a “preoccupation with race and the limitations imposed by it in America.” *Crossing into America*, xxi.

<sup>4</sup> And further, “a decade later, Asian immigration reached 256,000 (47%), and stood at 292,000 (37%) in 1994.” Lobo and Salvo, “Changing U.S. Immigration Law,” 737.

<sup>5</sup> Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 116-117.

national and international conversations about migration, national security, and race. Oak Ridge National Laboratory is a research facility that attracted scientists both domestically and internationally to work on cold war era (and post-cold war) projects. This section features a close look at dominant frameworks associated with the 1965 act. I will briefly critique the push-pull model of immigration and the notion of "brain drain" immigration, but first I focus mainly on speaking back to the dominant narrative of the act, which involves the idea that it "brought an end to systematic discrimination against Asian immigrants."<sup>6</sup> I instead align my work with more critical scholarship that suggests that the post-1965 migrant, upon arrival, inherits a set of conditions that reflects the contradictions of the U.S. nation-state's uneasy incorporation of racialized subjects. Furthermore, I view the act through an international frame, and the Asian migrant scientists in east Tennessee are situated in these developments, amplified by their employment at a Department of Energy institution.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 reflected major policy reform especially in relation to the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act's highly discriminatory immigration measures. The latter act involved restricting immigration based on national origins, establishing an "Asia-Pacific Triangle" that restricted peoples from specific Asian countries. The 1965 act eliminated these two measures and therefore somewhat loosened the restrictions, setting up a seven-point preference system of immigration from the "eastern hemisphere" (a distinction I explain later). In this system, four preferences involved family reunification, two other categories favored occupational migrants, and

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<sup>6</sup> Ong and Liu, "U.S. Immigration Policies and Asian Migration," 51.



the final category targeted refugee immigration.<sup>7</sup> Because of the breadth of demographics covered by the act, the preference system's seven categories are important to note, lest we totalize the circumstances of all post-1965 migrants; my study involves those possibly coming under the "third preference" – that being "members of the professions and scientists and artists of exceptional ability."<sup>8</sup>

The passage of the 1965 act was embedded in conversations about the nation-state's standing on the world stage. We might first look to the opponents of the act. For example, immigration reform was associated with being soft on communism: according to David Reimers, "defenders of the [McCarran-Walter] act maintained that it kept out subversives, and changing it would be detrimental to American national security."<sup>9</sup> However, a strong case for immigration reform emerged in the anticommunist ideology that characterized U.S. mainstream discourse: while the Soviet Sputnik launch of 1957 prompted interest in bringing in "technical labor" from abroad,<sup>10</sup> the United States also needed to address worldwide claims of racism in the midst of its civil rights movement

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<sup>7</sup> The first, second, fourth, and fifth preferences favored family reunification; the third and sixth favored occupational migrants; and the seventh was for refugee immigration.

<sup>8</sup> Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 81. J. Liu classifies these migrants as "professional, technical and kindred" workers, a category that involves health professionals and "high-tech personnel." Liu, "The Contours of Asian Professional, Technical and Kindred Work Immigration," 683. For the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to this category of third (and possibly sixth) preference migrants as "occupational migrants." Although many studies of migration would describe such migrants as "highly skilled," I do not use this language, for a false neutrality is constructed around who or what is considered "skilled" or "unskilled." To be fair, the closest approximation of defining "highly skilled" may be in the association of skill acquisition to educational attainment. Batalova and Lowell acknowledge how "the most obvious markers of 'skill' are either education or occupation" and that "a common international definition of highly skilled tends to be persons with a tertiary education, typically meaning adult age persons who have completed a formal two-year college degree or more." "The Best and the Brightest," 87.

<sup>9</sup> Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 74.

and the cold war.<sup>11</sup> That is, if the United States was interested in establishing itself as the more desirable alternative to communism, it would have to work out its contradictions and finally address domestic racism. Still, Lisa Lowe points to the importance of *not* reducing these developments and U.S.-Asia relations simply to communism, for this all "must be understood in relation to a contradiction between the growing need for economic internationalism and the desire [of the United States] to fortify the political nation-state."<sup>12</sup> Attributing U.S. policies to the "containment of Communism" glosses over the fact that the United States was actively and forcefully rising as a superpower in the postwar years. Containment was not a passive project. Lowe's reading points to Donna Gabaccia's insistence on the necessity of reading U.S. immigration policy through a global perspective<sup>13</sup>: the 1965 act was not an endeavor motivated solely by domestic concerns, for the United States was protecting its interests on the international stage. As one of the major proponents of immigration reform, President Kennedy's support of change stemmed from his own romantic notions of the internationalism that characterized the postwar era. Reimers suggests that the president's "approach [to immigration] recognized the interdependence among nations": Kennedy supported "more open movement across international borders, in which the United States would stand both as a leader and as an example."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hing writes, "For the time being... nativism was quieted, since the legislation was debated at the height of congressional sensitivity over civil rights." *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations*.

<sup>14</sup> Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 39.

The way in which the 1965 act was passed also reflected the social unease surrounding the immigration of people of color. The Asian subject was dismissed in talks about what the 1965 act would facilitate, a dismissal that looks to have been a matter of miscalculation based on racism toward peoples from "underdeveloped areas."<sup>15</sup> Senator Edward Kennedy noted at the time, "[This reform will] not inundate America with immigrants from any one country or [from] the most populated and economically deprived nations of Africa and Asia."<sup>16</sup> One might conclude that the 1965 act was passed more as a symbolic gesture in terms of Asian immigration, but Erika Lee takes this even further, noting that "lawmakers still expressed a desire ... to limit – or at the very least, discourage – immigration from Asia, Latin America, and Africa."<sup>17</sup> Unanticipated by policymakers,<sup>18</sup> most post-1965 Asian migrants arrived in the United States by means of family reunification: the first arrival would be a student pursuing graduate studies in the United States, and on average, this one student would be the starting point for the eventual migration of *nineteen* family members ten years down the road<sup>19</sup> – the exact circumstances of my own family. Fittingly, the 1965 act eventually was referred to as "the brothers and sisters act,"<sup>20</sup> and the lack of a quota system for families enabled

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<sup>15</sup> Assistant Attorney General Norbet Schlei, quoted in Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> quoted in Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> E. Lee, "American Gatekeeping," 21.

<sup>18</sup> Hing explains, "Since most of the visas were reserved for family reunification, policymakers believed that countries of Asia (and Africa), with low rates of immigration prior to 1965, might in fact be handicapped, since their smaller numbers presumably meant that there were fewer people here who had relatives there." *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

massive chain migration.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, within family reunification in the 1965 act, the irony is that the Asian subject's migration was justified even according to nativists' standards and conceptions of "American" ideals and values: the prioritization of "family" for immigration fits within narratives of the ideal citizen-subject for the U.S. nation-state. The notion of family was a talking point during the cold war for the United States,<sup>22</sup> one that is particularly intriguing when paired with discourses around Asian immigration, given the anti-miscegenation sentiment (and laws) that focused on the 'bachelor societies' of earlier waves of Asian migration.<sup>23</sup> In a post-1965 moment, the nation-state experienced the migration of a different 'kind' of Asian subject, not to mention one that would think to bring over legal spouses, children, and siblings in the name of family reunification.

It is easy to read the Hart-Celler Act through the Asian American experience, but the act also exhibits social unease about the migration of other people of color, as seen through distinctions in the law based on *hemisphere*. Specifically, the 1965 act instituted measures to restrict Latin American immigration. The eastern hemisphere ("defined as Asia, Europe, Africa, and Oceania"<sup>24</sup>) had the seven preferences. The preferences of the western hemisphere ("primarily countries in the Americas and the Caribbean"<sup>25</sup>) had a

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<sup>21</sup> According to Hing, "immediate relatives [of U.S. citizens] were not subject to quotas or numerical limitations." *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy*, 198.

<sup>22</sup> See May, *Homeward Bound*.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 72-82; Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 315-354.

<sup>24</sup> Lobo and Salvo, "Changing U.S. Immigration Law," 742.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 744.

ceiling cap overall, “which aimed at limiting Latin American immigration.”<sup>26</sup> According to Mae Ngai, the racialized ideas of reformists reinforced a dichotomy between the “illegal” Mexican versus the legal European migrant, a sentiment that surfaced in the Hart-Celler Act itself. Even though the new law abandoned national origins quotas, Ngai sees the 1965 act as a law that simultaneously “creat[ed] greater opportunities for migration from Asia and Africa... [while] severely restricting [immigration] from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Latin America.”<sup>27</sup> Concerns about Latin American immigration were a key part of discussions that prompted eventual changes to western hemispheric immigration.<sup>28</sup> The continued regulation of racialized subjects is very apparent in the eventual amendments made to the 1965 act as well. According to Reimers, because of these hemispheric distinctions, “the United States had two immigration policies,” but this was not enough to curb immigration from undesirable subjects.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Asian migrant scientists of Tennessee fit conceptions of ideal subjects for the technical skills they offered occupationally, but other racialized subjects were not so fortunate.

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<sup>26</sup> Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 263.

<sup>28</sup> Reimers, *Still the Golden Door*, 85-86.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. In the first decade after the passage of the 1965 act, the western hemisphere did not have a limit on migration per country while the eastern hemisphere did. Policymakers envisioned the act as a measure that would allow more southern and eastern Europeans to immigrate. The absence of this policy for the western hemisphere became a source of concern. Mexican emigration increased dramatically after the act, prompting policymakers to call for a limit: in the late 1970s, amendments were made to the act that instituted preferences and limits per country. *Ibid.*, 85.

Described as “the architecture of today’s U.S. immigration system,”<sup>30</sup> the 1965 act undoubtedly was a landmark event in immigration legislation. Widely hailed as a bill that finally loosened restrictive measures for Asians, it has even been asserted that the act “ended the traditional European bias in U.S. immigration law and, for the first time, all countries were placed on an equal footing.”<sup>31</sup> This type of an assessment is at least problematically simplistic and at most inaccurate. Lee argues that the “gatekeeping” mentality of the U.S. nation-state, as instituted in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, persisted in the 1965 act. This law did *not* “end the traditional European bias”<sup>32</sup> because the preference system was written with specific nationalities in mind. The ideal Asian migrant would come to fulfill labor demands, and would not be one that arrived in the name of family reunification.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the act itself is a site of tremendous contradiction: “while the 1965 act may have ‘opened’ the United States to new immigrants, it also produced differentiated categories of ‘the immigrant’ for surveillance and regulation.”<sup>34</sup> 1965 represented a moment in U.S. migration history where this regulation was not just maintained but *reinforced*. According to Lowe, this act has not necessitated a loosening of rules: “The 1965 act has initiated not fewer but indeed more specifications and

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<sup>30</sup> Batalova and Lowell, “The Best and the Brightest,” 82.

<sup>31</sup> Lobo and Salvo, “Changing U.S. Immigration Law,” 757.

<sup>32</sup> Lobo and Salvo, “Changing U.S. Immigration Law,” 757.

<sup>33</sup> According to Lobo and Salvo, “This period [1978-1991] was marked by *complaints about the ‘quality’ of immigrants*; the decline in the skills of these immigrants was also reflected in a deterioration in their earnings. Ironically, the family reunification goals of the 1965 law largely were met in this period – family preferences and the immediate relative category accounted for the bulk of all Asian immigration.” “Changing U.S. Immigration Law,” 758 (my emphasis).

<sup>34</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 185.

regulations for immigrants of Asian origins.”<sup>35</sup> These “specifications and regulations” play out in more visible ways for the national security migrant.

Thus far I have critiqued a dominant narrative that views the Hart-Celler Act as a progressive measure of immigration reform. Here I attach this critique to two others: the push-pull model and the notion of an immigration “brain drain.” Post-1965 migration to the United States has often been understood through the push-pull model of immigration, in which a set of circumstances pushes the subject out of the home country, and a corresponding set of circumstances in the host country pulls in and attracts the subject to immigrate<sup>36</sup>; this model is too simplistic for a number of reasons – one being that it does not address or allow for power differentials between the countries. The significance of the 1965 act deepens when considering the unequal power relations among Asian countries and the United States: specifically, the conditions of Asian migration to the United States have involved narratives about modernization and the role of the “West” in this process.<sup>37</sup> A postwar U.S. project looked to “modernize” Asian countries to undergo an “ideological transformation.”<sup>38</sup> For example, according to John Liu, World War II resulted in the

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<sup>35</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Ong and Liu, “U.S. Immigration Policies and Asian Migration.” Also, as Daniels explains, “*Push* refers to those [catastrophic, political, or economic] forces existing in the place of origin that encourage or impel persons to emigrate,” whereas “*Pull* refers to those attractive forces emanating from the migrants’ goal that draw migrants” in which many of such forces are either economic or “noneconomic” such as “promises of political and/or religious freedom and such factors as climate and freedom from military service.” Daniels, *Coming to America*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Professional emigration in the wake of the 1965 act has long been a source of concern for the sending countries, too. See Ahmad, *Estimation of Brain Drain*; Atal, Yogesh, and Dall’Oglio, eds. *Migration of Talent*; Khadria, *The Migration of Knowledge Workers*; Mahanti, Krishna, Haribabu, Jairath, and Basu, *Scientific Communities and Brain Drain*.

<sup>38</sup> Liu, “The Contours of Asian Professional, Technical and Kindred Work Immigration,” 675.

destruction of numerous schools in the Philippines and Korea, which the United States helped to rebuild. Part of this American effort involved the development of particular areas: "Many Asian nations accepted the Westernization message, particularly its assertions concerning the training of professional and technical talent."<sup>39</sup> In the case of India, the Indian state's emphasis on education in science and technology produced ready-made professionals by the 1960s; as Vijay Prashad explains, "The 1965 law eased entry restrictions just as Britain tightened its immigration provisions... Those who would once have gone to Britain now came to the United States."<sup>40</sup> In fact, these occupational migrants would constitute 45% of Indian immigrants to the United States by the decade's end.<sup>41</sup> And though most pre-1965 migrant scientists came from the U.K., Canada, and Germany, "by 1969 India was the leading source of scientists and engineers [in the United States]."<sup>42</sup> Another colony of the British empire, Hong Kong, received its largest foreign investments from the United States, creating a relationship that the latter could exploit: John Liu and Lucie Cheng further note that "export-oriented economies and the infusion of Asian educational systems with United States/Western modes of thought, patterns of action, and ideals predisposed the Asian middle class and professionals to emigrate," especially with respect to "the Philippines, the three Chinese-speaking

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy*, 82.

<sup>42</sup> National Science Foundation, *Scientists, Engineers, and Physicians from Abroad*, 3.



regions, India, Vietnam, and South Korea.”<sup>43</sup> In the three decades after the Hart-Celler Act, “the foreign-born working in emerging IT [information technology] industries and hard sciences in general were mainly of Asian (often Chinese) origin.”<sup>44</sup>

The push-pull model can also elide colonial histories and problematically individualize migration, denying a systems-based approach and instead rendering it an individual’s choice to be pushed or pulled to migrate.<sup>45</sup> The notion of “choice” has especially been applied to the migration of the “highly skilled,” a phenomenon also called “talent mobility.”<sup>46</sup> My interest is to continue to complicate the push-pull model as it relates to the 1965 act, a measure of Congress that was infused with racial power, enacted into law.<sup>47</sup> In other words, this was not an innocent endeavor<sup>48</sup>: the push-pull characterizations of the 1965 act have deep ramifications. Migrant scientists in east Tennessee came into a political moment that was firmly embedded in national

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<sup>43</sup> Liu and Cheng, “Pacific Rim Development and the Duality of Post-1965 Asian Immigration to the United States,” 89

<sup>44</sup> Batalova and Lowell, “The Best and the Brightest,” 94.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Choy’s study, which implicitly challenges the push-pull model through an examination of how the legacy of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines is particularly manifested in the field of nursing, a gendered profession that facilitated significant waves of migration to the United States. Choy, *Empire of Care*.

<sup>46</sup> Solimano, “Causes and Consequences of Talent Mobility,” 1. See also Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *International Mobility of the Highly Skilled*.

<sup>47</sup> Yang, for example, critiques existing immigration models, such as push-pull or world systems theories, instead proposing what he calls “multilevel causation theory” in which several aspects come into play, including immigration policies and “economic, political, social, and/or environmental disparities” between countries. With respect to the 1965 act, he follows 1965 traditional narratives and also stays within a pre-65 and post-65 construction of Asian immigration history. “A Theory of Asian Immigration to the United States.”

<sup>48</sup> Flax discusses the significance of rendering qualities of innocence to developments in intellectual thought such as postmodernism. I am applying her critique here. Flax, “The End of Innocence.”

conversations and narratives that had everything to do with their subjectivities as white-collar, Asia-born, racialized subjects. Viewing Asian scientist migration through a push-pull model obscures the nuances of U.S. national security interests.

Reed Ueda observes, “The post-1965 influx possessed the largest contingents of human capital – highly educated and trained workers – in history, reflecting the development of admission preferences that favored newcomers in fields requiring a high level of training.”<sup>49</sup> Consequently, the term “brain drain” has been used to describe the migration of highly educated individuals to the United States; similar to critiques of the push-pull model, the characterization of the 1965 act as a “brain drain” also oversimplifies the circumstances of Asian scientist migration. The term itself is a site of contestation: for example, in an early study, Das suggests that “brain drain” problematically totalizes professional migration, for a brain drain occurs only when the home government cannot retain the citizens that the nation-state actually needs. What in fact might be termed a brain drain could be a “brain gain” or a “brain exchange” where the home country benefits from sending its citizens abroad for further education or training.<sup>50</sup> A. Rahman and T.H. Shama Rau also offer a semantic corrective to the term “brain drain,” opting instead for the term “flight,” which is arguably more accurate because the former “assumes a reservoir of talent...which most of the developing countries do not have.”<sup>51</sup> Anita Mak also problematizes the notion of “brain drain” as one that does not allow the possibility of return migration: for example, many Hong Kong

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<sup>49</sup> Ueda, *Postwar Immigrant America*, 62.

<sup>50</sup> Das, *Brain Drain Controversy and International Students*.

<sup>51</sup> Rahman and Shama Rau, *Flight of Scientific and Technical Personnel*.

migrants in Australia wish to return to Hong Kong.<sup>52</sup> Liu and Cheng further suggest that the more appropriate term may be “brain overflow” in which home countries may not have been able to employ its professional-class citizens in the first place.<sup>53</sup> Lastly, S.P. Sukhatme argues that the “real” brain drain from India concerns a handful of elite individuals (constituting “five to ten percent of the total brain drain”) whose emigration hurts India’s progress more than anyone else.<sup>54</sup> Still others freely employ “brain drain” to describe the emigration of students and scholars.<sup>55</sup> In sum, employing the push-pull model and the term “brain drain” to better understand post-1965 occupational migration is not only part of a larger conversation that inaccurately characterizes the Hart-Celler Act as a wholly liberatory measure, but it also obfuscates the possibility that the recruitment of scientists from Asia could be in the interest of U.S. national security.

### **On Scientists**

The intersection of science and migration produces critically important questions, including considerations of scientists’ ethics and responsibility in weapons development.<sup>56</sup> The migration of professionals trained in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields has been studied quite extensively, including those from Germany and other European countries post-World War I and II;

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<sup>52</sup> Mak, “Career Relocation Issues and Repatriation Dilemma.”

<sup>53</sup> Liu and Cheng, “Pacific Rim Development and the Duality of Post-1965 Asian Immigration to the United States.”

<sup>54</sup> Sukhatme, *The Real Brain Drain*.

<sup>55</sup> See Zweig and Chen Changgui, *China's Brain Drain to the United States*.

<sup>56</sup> Badash, *Scientists and the Development of Nuclear Weapons*; Bailey, *The Good Servant*; Broad, *Star Warriors*; Rosenthal, *At the Heart of the Bomb*; Schweber, *In the Shadow of the Bomb*.

Albert Einstein was perhaps the most famous member of this cohort.<sup>57</sup> Most migrant scientists and engineers in the United States after World War II and before the Hart-Celler Act were from Europe, which can partially be attributed to the national origins system in U.S. immigration law.<sup>58</sup> During this period, there was a gradual increase in the number of scientists and engineers coming to the United States as refugees or as “displaced persons.”<sup>59</sup> However, it was the Hart-Celler Act that prompted a huge rise in the migration of scientists: one year after Hart-Celler was in effect, Asians made up nearly 53% of immigrants in the natural sciences and engineering.<sup>60</sup>

As we consider the post-1965 arrival of Asian migrant scientists, the fact is that national security has historically been played out on (and embodied by) scientists. Dan Kevles, for example, explains that in the most immediate years after World War II, the idea of national security came to be understood as deeply linked to technological advances. In this way, physics and its related fields became deeply entrenched in the “national-security system,” facilitating a “transformation of the relationship between

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<sup>57</sup> Rider, “Alarm and Opportunity”; Siegmund-Schultze, *Mathematicians Fleeing from Nazi Germany*; Nossum, “Emigration of Mathematicians from Outside German-Speaking Academia”; Laney, “Wernher von Braun and Arthur Rudolph.”

<sup>58</sup> “From 1949 through 1965 the bulk of the immigrant scientists and engineers came from the Eastern Hemisphere, primarily Europe.” National Science Foundation, *Scientists, Engineers, and Physicians from Abroad*, 1. One early study of this time period focuses on European immigration, citing lack of data with respect to the immigration of Asian scientists and engineers. Grubel and Scott, “The Immigration of Scientists and Engineers to the United States,” 377.

<sup>59</sup> National Science Foundation, *Scientists, Engineers, and Physicians from Abroad*, 1. A number of laws affected this migration, including the 1948 Displaced Persons Act, the 1953 Refugee Relief Act, and the 1962 Alien Skilled Specialist Act. *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-7.

science, especially civilian science, and the American state.”<sup>61</sup> This transformation also meant that scientists became more visible, as some even served in an advisory capacity for national security policies. While there was an “increased integration [of American physics] as both a research and advisory enterprise into the national-security system,”<sup>62</sup> this integration *also* affected the research itself. In other words, when funding comes in the interest of weapons development, much is compromised: physics research does not achieve its potential when national security enters the picture.<sup>63</sup> Physics became inextricably tied to national security. Kevles notes that for some physicists, “national security was not a mere distraction. It was the life blood of their profession.”<sup>64</sup> The study of physics in the United States is rarely, if ever, neutral.

Scientist communities in the postwar years also responded to or took part in ongoing political ideologies of anticommunism. Jessica Wang traces the intentions and workings of individual scientists as well as formal scientific organizations and associations from the immediate postwar years to how such politics left them vulnerable to accusations in the age of anticommunist ideologies. Accordingly, the connection between these accusations and gaining clearance to classified materials revealed a

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<sup>61</sup> Kevles, “Cold War and Hot Physics,” 264, 240. See also an earlier study, Kevles, *The Physicists*.

<sup>62</sup> Kevles, “Cold War and Hot Physics,” 264.

<sup>63</sup> Such funding “seduced American physicists from, so to speak, a ‘true basic physics,’ encouraging them to the self-delusion that they were engaged in basic research of intrinsic interest while in reality there were merely doing the military’s bidding.” *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

"loyalty-security system."<sup>65</sup> Thus, Wang explores the nexus of scientists, national security, and perceived loyalty to the nation-state.

Lawrence Badash examines the impact of McCarthyism on scientists themselves, for they were among those targeted during this era: "Whereas screen writers and educators could influence opinion, scientists had real power. From the war onwards, they were recognized as vital to national security. They knew secrets, particularly the secrets of nuclear weapons."<sup>66</sup> Scientists were subjected to intense scrutiny in the name of national security. Internationalism, a hallmark of science and the exchange of ideas, was criticized. Some U.S.-based scientists experienced problems receiving passports, and foreign scientists looking to visit the United States faced visa holds-ups. The denial of applications was not that uncommon.<sup>67</sup> McCarthyist persecution and scrutiny were not just applied to scientific fields directly related to weapons development, for "even scientists in fields far distant from nuclear physics, or silent on current issues, also felt the barbs of the bureaucracy. Thus, fundamentally, it was politics, rather than fear of misplaced professional skills, that gave rise to the suspicion of scientists."<sup>68</sup> Badash points out the uncanny conflation of racial difference and political leanings via visas, noting that the origin of visas involved restricting visitors based on race or ethnicity, but that during McCarthyism, the notion of "'subversive' political ideologies" particularly

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<sup>65</sup> J. Wang, *American Science in an Age of Anxiety*, 183.

<sup>66</sup> Badash, "Science and McCarthyism," 60.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

surfaced in the denial of visa applications.<sup>69</sup> The overall idea of international scientific exchange was called into question.<sup>70</sup>

Skepticism of international scientific exchange was not lost on Asians in the United States: Benjamin Zulueta establishes that, “As the experiences of H.S. Tsien [also known as Qian Xuesen] as well as those of other American-educated Chinese during exactly this period illustrate, travel abroad was particularly fraught with peril for Chinese trained in science and technology.”<sup>71</sup> The effects of McCarthyism on Asian American scientists could involve the denial of citizenship or even deportation. When looking at the nexus of science and national security in the midst of anti-communist persecution, studies frequently point to Qian Xuesen, a China-born missile scientist who received his academic training in the United States in the 1930s, later becoming the director of the Center for Jet Propulsion Research at the California Institute of Technology.<sup>72</sup> In the midst of 1950s anti-communist hysteria, Qian was suspected of being a spy for China and was placed under house arrest for five years, ironically a year after he decided to seek U.S. citizenship. Qian was eventually deported to China, where he became the undisputed “father of Chinese rocketry.”<sup>73</sup> While to this day “we will never learn where Qian’s

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Proviso 9, which enabled temporary visas, came about because one U.S. scientist, “Koepli argued that many Europeans became communists during the war in resistance to German occupation.” Ibid., 72.

<sup>71</sup> Zulueta, “Master of the Master Gland,” 164. Chinese American endocrinologist Choh Hao Li, who revolutionized the study of the pituitary gland in the 1930s-40s, produced work in which “even internal secretions could be imagined as having indirect military application and thus national security import.” Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> I. Chang, *Thread of the Silkworm*, vii.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., xi.

loyalties lay during his twenty years in the United States..., or whether there is a remote possibility that he could have been a spy,” Qian’s case serves as an early example of racial profiling of Asian migrant scientists, a predecessor of the persecution of Wen Ho Lee.<sup>74</sup>

Zulueta’s theorization of the inextricability of science, migration, and race is critically important to understanding the idea of Asian national security migration: there is a “fallacy of choosing one [historical trend] over the others as an analytical framework for understanding the experiences of those whose lives were inflected by the convergence of science, migration, and race during the twentieth century.”<sup>75</sup> Because scientific and technological advances became so enmeshed in issues of national security, the arrival of Asian scientists in the United States would elicit concerns about national security as well. Qian was one such casualty and presented the most well-known case: for one, because of the extreme nature of the circumstances he faced (house arrest and eventual deportation); and two, because he revolutionized China’s missile defense program. Jessica Wang describes Qian’s case as “one of the more interesting ironies of the red scare. The Cold War fostered the notion that the United States needed superior weaponry to preserve its national security, yet anticommunist policies led to the expulsion of one of the leading authorities in rocketry from the United States to a communist country.”<sup>76</sup> Qian is in fact a

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 262. The documentary *Agent Yellow* also suggests this link between Qian and Lee. *Agent Yellow*, directed by Christine Choy.

<sup>75</sup> Zulueta, “Master of the Master Gland,” 169.

<sup>76</sup> J. Wang, *American Science in an Age of Anxiety*, 279. For more on U.S.-China relations with regard to Chinese scientists in both countries, see Z. Wang, “Transnational Science during the Cold War”; Z. Wang, “U.S.-China Scientific Exchange.”



classic national security migrant: working in the interest of the United States, his loyalty was under suspicion, to the point that he was denied citizenship and eventually deported. The extent of this loss of talent experienced by the United States can be seen in Qian's contributions to China's defense program.

Zulueta and Zuoyue Wang, respectively, show that race, ethnicity, and occupational status are connected to how national security is played out on migrants: that is, scientific migration to the United States has historically been racialized. For example, “especially after World War II, migrations, and in particular the movements of Chinese Americans, on the one hand, and scientists, on the other, became the focus on intense public and government suspicion and scrutiny.”<sup>77</sup> In the same way that the case of Qian Xuesen emerges when examining science, national security, and race, Wen Ho Lee's case shows how this intersection has continued to surface in discriminatory ways. Badash notes how “the inflammatory rhetoric and the atmosphere of oppression [during the Wen Ho Lee case] brought to mind comparisons with the McCarthy era.”<sup>78</sup> Unlike Qian, Lee was already a U.S. citizen when he was accused of disloyalty. Lee, a classic national security migrant, also should be seen through a post-1965 lens, within a cohort of Asian scientists whose migration was prompted by the 1965 act.

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<sup>77</sup> Zulueta, “Master of the Master Gland,” 134. Wang further discusses how Chinese American scientists have historically been active players in forging stronger ties between the United States and China. I. Chang and Wang, respectively, discuss the Boxer scholars program (of which Qian Xuesen was a fellow), for example, which brought “hundreds of elite Chinese students and scientists to the United States from the 1910s to the 1940s.” Z. Wang, “Chinese American Scientists and U.S.-China Scientific Relations,” 210; I. Chang, *Thread of the Silkworm*, 35-39.

<sup>78</sup> Badash, “Science and McCarthyism,” 54.

### Post-1965 Asian National Security Migration and Yellow Peril Discourse

Though some came from class-privileged backgrounds, the migration of post-1965 Asian scientists to the United States involved forms of labor exploitation amid the continued development of the U.S. nation-state as a superpower in the cold war era. Choice and agency can come amid exploitation, too. One of my respondents complained about the “cheap student labor” embodied by Chinese students, but alongside this complaint was another: “it’s almost like, the only purpose they’re here is because they want to come to the U.S. rather than coming here to pursue a *dream* in science.”<sup>79</sup> Taking into account the differing motivations of Asian migrant scientists, it is important to also consider Lowe's characterizations of these migrants and "the concept of the 'white-collar proletariat,' which describes U.S. capital's demotion and manipulation of skilled labor”:

Because trained Asian immigrants, in particular, are subject to this demotion and manipulation, the 'white-collar proletarianization' of Asian-educated immigrant engineers or nurses needs to be distinguished from situations of U.S.-educated, white middle-class 'professionals'... [given] the use of lower-cost Asian immigrant professionals as one form of capital investment for the maximizing of surplus value.<sup>80</sup>

Lowe's analysis also exists alongside an alarmist argument that carries traces of the nativism and xenophobia historically attached to the arrival of Asians in the U.S. nation-state. An article from as late as 2012 speaks to this well in its effort to critique a “shortage narrative.” To clarify, this narrative is the idea that the United States is “failing to produce a sufficient quantity of scientists and engineers and therefore must import

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<sup>79</sup> Still, certain occupational choices make one more employable as well. Lowell asserts, “Highly skilled foreign-born workers historically have been more likely to find employment in STEM than other types of occupations.” Lowell, “‘The Best and the Brightest,’” 1035.

<sup>80</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 190.

large numbers of foreigners to remain innovative and competitive."<sup>81</sup> The author of the review problematizes the narrative and notes how "the perpetuation of this [scientist shortage] myth is discouraging Americans from pursuing scientific careers."<sup>82</sup> This kind of critique is not new, evoking a nativist 'Made-in-the-U.S.A.' stance of earlier times. While such nativist narratives can be attached to the broader category of those who are foreign-born (i.e., not exclusively Asian), Asia is a main source of post-1965 scientist migration,<sup>83</sup> thereby carrying hints of a yellow peril discourse.

In this way, the regulations in the 1965 act play out a liberal version of yellow peril, which involves a set of ideas concerning Asians as "the nation's external threat."<sup>84</sup> Richard Austin Thompson summarily notes that "the common denominator among yellow perilists was a fear of change."<sup>85</sup> As Gary Okihiro clarifies, this fear historically was about the "change within the relationship between Europe (and America) and Asia, which was becoming increasingly more intimate and equal."<sup>86</sup> The origin of yellow peril

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<sup>81</sup> Benderly, "What Scientist Shortage?," 19. For more on U.S. scientific labor shortages, see Cornelius, Espenshade, and Salehyan, eds., *The International Migration of the Highly Skilled*.

<sup>82</sup> Benderly, "What Scientist Shortage?," 19. The article also traces the origins of this myth to the launch of Sputnik, a landmark event widely understood as one of the instigators of the discussions that led to the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act.

<sup>83</sup> For example, by 2003, Asians made up 56% of migrant scientists and engineers, with Europe a distant second at 19%. Nirmala Kannanjutty and Joan Burrelli, *Info Brief: Why Did They Come to the United States? A Profile of Immigrant Scientists and Engineers*, June 2007, <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/infbrief/nsf07324/nsf07324.pdf>. Moreover, in the broader category of STEM immigration, Lowell traces that while in 1970, "54% of foreign-born [STEM] workers were from Europe. . . . By 2000, about 59% were from Asia." Lowell, "A Long View of America's Immigration Policy, 1035-1036.

<sup>84</sup> R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 120.

<sup>85</sup> Thompson, *The Yellow Peril*, 37; quoted in Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 137.

<sup>86</sup> Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 137.

arguably dates back to the late 1800s<sup>87</sup> and would become embedded and reflected in U.S. mainstream discourse, popular culture,<sup>88</sup> and in immigration restriction.<sup>89</sup> Yellow peril is historically connected to "black peril": Jung notes that European Americans "applied the negative African images they had conjured up throughout slavery to the Chinese and consequently perceived that the Chinese, like Africans, were 'threats' to their moral and social order. In the same manner, white workers began to feel threatened economically by Chinese laborers as they had by black slaves and free laborers."<sup>90</sup> This fear of Asians – "this irrational fear of Oriental conquest"<sup>91</sup> – persists in contemporary society, and Asian national security migrants inherit being on the receiving end of this fear. Within a broader category of national security migration, this is what distinguishes the experiences of Asians from non-Asians.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 119. Marchetti asserts that yellow peril dates even further back, involving "medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe." *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> R. Lee and Marchetti, respectively, locate yellow peril specifically in anxiety about miscegenation, sexuality, and family. Lee analyzes how "anxieties were voiced in debates over nationality, naturalization, and family in which the Oriental was consolidated as the Yellow Peril." R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 106. Marchetti notes, "One of the most potent aspects of these yellow peril discourses is the sexual danger of contact between the races." Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> E. Lee considers yellow peril in legal immigration restrictions across the western hemisphere, linking it to discourses surrounding the "White Pacific" and "hemispheric Orientalism." "The 'Yellow Peril' and Asian Exclusion in the Americas," 550. See also E. Lee, "The 'Yellow Peril' in the United States and Peru."

<sup>90</sup> Jung, "The Influence of 'Black Peril' on 'Yellow Peril' in Nineteenth Century America," 355.

<sup>91</sup> Daniels, *Concentration Camps*, 29; quoted in Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 119.

<sup>92</sup> The relevance of yellow peril discourse to South Asians is debatable. As Davé asserts, "Indians, because of their status as a British colony and later as a fledgling democracy, were not associated with the 'Yellow Peril.' Instead, Indians were portrayed as resisting the British or as spiritual figures." I would still contend, though, that in a contemporary post-1965 context, yellow peril discourse can be associated and extended to include South Asians, especially in the wake of 9/11. Davé, *Indian Accents*, 15.

Asian national security migration takes a specific form of yellow peril, one in line with Okiihiro's contention in which yellow peril and model minority are linked, not so much dichotomous.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, "the model minority mitigates the alleged danger of the yellow peril"<sup>94</sup>: the model minority's "benign image" is predicated on "mimicries" coming out of yellow peril and involving "grotesque representations of the European identity" and the creation of "copies [that historically] were ludicrous, flattering, and threatening all at once."<sup>95</sup> Asian national security migrants, supported by the 1965 act, fit the bill as model minorities who are harmless, "benign" subjects recruited to help advance the U.S. nation-state as a global technological power. But what happens when the model minority/ Asian American national security migrant asks for more? Okiihiro argues, too, that "the model minority, if taken too far, can become the yellow peril."<sup>96</sup> Thus, Asian national security migrants must dance along the line of not *going too far*, of not presuming "too much" of what, say, naturalized citizenship enables. The U.S. scientist shortage narrative (i.e., "The U.S. cannot produce its own scientists and must turn to other countries") speaks to how the model minority *is* yellow peril, placing the Asian national security migrant in a position to perform an intricate dance to belong, but

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<sup>93</sup> "The Asian work ethic, family values, self-help, culture and religiosity, and intermarriage – all elements of the model minority – can also be read as components of the yellow peril." Okiihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 142-143. For more on the interplay between the model minority and yellow peril discourses, see also Kawai, "Stereotyping Asian Americans."

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

not too much – to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States but to also subject themselves to greater scrutiny as a result.

What remains clear is that Asian migrant scientists represent a new way to make use of the racialized body. Furthermore, the state taps into their brainpower to fuel the nation-building projects that would advance the interests of the state on the world stage. The nuclear scientists at national laboratories (e.g., in Oak Ridge or Los Alamos) exemplify this well. My own father, a self-described “nuclear garbageman,” was involved in designing radioactive waste containers; Wen Ho Lee was engaged in developing computer codes for nuclear weapons development. This phenomenon is not exclusive to a post-1965 moment, of course. What is critical about 1965, however, is the scale of immigration that resulted: the Hart-Celler Act was a formalized plan that had the clear intention to recruit the best and brightest minds from other countries, particularly in the name of science and technology. The circumstances of the post-1965 migration of Asian scientists, when considered alongside the history of scientist migration and the history of the U.S. national security state, was not a push-pull, brain-drain endeavor, but a nuanced phenomenon. National security migration involves a convergence of immigration policy (in this case, 1965's privileging of scientists) and the discourses and histories embedded in the U.S. national security state. The phenomenon of the national security migration of Asian scientists also appears in heightened form on the campus of a Department of Energy National Laboratory. In order to understand the extent to which the culture of national security is infused in the history of Oak Ridge in particular, I now turn to a case study of a controversy in 1990s Oak Ridge in which the racialization (and Othering) of Asians came to the forefront.

### Chapter 3

#### "The Sound... Shakes the Air of the South":

#### Race, the Bomb, and the "Bell Wars" of Oak Ridge

"The sound [of the bell], which is familiar to the Japanese but the Americans have never heard, shakes the air of the South."

-Mic Kurosawa, resident of Nakamachi, Oak Ridge's Sister City<sup>1</sup>

"It [the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell] will be similar to the bell in the Peace Park in Hiroshima symbolizing the fact that Oak Ridge and Hiroshima are forever connected since Oak Ridge was where material for the bomb was produced."

-Alvin Weinberg, former ORNL Director (1955-1973), Honorary Chairperson of the Friendship Bell Committee<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-1990s, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., began planning an exhibit on the *Enola Gay*, the plane responsible for detonating the "Little Boy" bomb in Hiroshima in 1945. To commemorate the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, the exhibit was designed to feature many aspects of the war, including the

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<sup>1</sup> Susanna Drake and Sarah Schweitzer, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 24, 1993. The authors are quoting their friend, Mic Kurosawa. Note: Most sources from *The Oak Ridger* newspaper are from the personal collection of Shigeko Uppuluri. A small portion of sources are from the Oak Ridge Room of the Oak Ridge Public Library in Oak Ridge, TN.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Carey, "Trip Abroad Unites Mothers in Japan, India," *Oak Ridger*, March 30, 1993. Weinberg also worked on the Manhattan Project. "Tribute to Alvin Weinberg," accessed Nov. 16, 2013, [http://web.ornl.gov/ornlhome/news\\_items/news\\_061019.shtml](http://web.ornl.gov/ornlhome/news_items/news_061019.shtml).

casualties of the bomb in Japan.<sup>3</sup> The curators and Smithsonian staff soon encountered strong objections to specific aspects of the planned installation, on the grounds that it was historically inaccurate. It was an opposition that continued to escalate through increasing media coverage and political momentum reaching all the way to the White House, resulting in major changes.<sup>4</sup> Among those who objected to the Smithsonian's representation of the war was a vocal contingent of U.S. veterans. The *Enola Gay* controversy at the Smithsonian quickly became a prime example of contemporary censorship – that of politically unpopular representations of U.S. history that do not necessarily promote narratives of victory and triumph.

A few hundred miles away in the town of Oak Ridge (population 30,000), the *Enola Gay* news story would appear in the local newspaper: buried toward the bottom of the page among advertisements, a small Associated Press headline notes, “Controversy Continues at Museum.”<sup>5</sup> But for Oak Ridge, a news story involving memory and World

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<sup>3</sup> While this chapter discusses anti-Japanese sentiment, it is important to note that the casualties of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs included people of other nationalities and/or ethnicities in Japan. For example, “Among the 350,000 to 400,000 who were attacked by the atom bomb and/or exposed to the lethal postexplosion radiation, at least 45,000 were people from the Korean Peninsula who had been forcibly sent to Japan as mobilized workers and soldiers or who had left their villages following the devastation caused by Japan’s colonial takeover of Korea in 1910.” Yoneyama, “Memory Matters,” 205. For a discussion of bomb victims who were American citizens, see Sodei, “Were We the Enemy?”

<sup>4</sup> Also, as Yoneyama documents, “... all of the following were eliminated: the details of debates among U.S. political leaders, scholars, and military commanders over the decision to use the atom bombs; a great of number of photographs and descriptions concerning Japan’s military invasions and colonial atrocities committed in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands; photographs showing physical and human damage in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and general observations about the subsequent development of the atomic age and nuclear weapons proliferation.” Yoneyama, “For Transformative Knowledge and Postnationalist Public Spheres,” 324-325. For more on the *Enola Gay* exhibit controversy, see also Nobile, *Judgment at the Smithsonian*; Thelen, “History after the Enola Gay Controversy.”

<sup>5</sup> “Controversy Continues at Museum,” *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 7, 1995. Also, I understand that my more frequent use of “town” (instead of “city”) to describe Oak Ridge may in turn privilege the metropolitan; as O’Brien notes, in time, “... Southern culture was now ‘provincial’ or ‘regional,’ with the clear implication that there was a metropolitan culture somewhere else to whose status the South should now aspire.”



War II is not just an interesting historical tidbit, not when the town itself was constructed and created in the name of building the bomb and winning the war. Prefacing that small news blurb in *The Oak Ridger* that day was a series of front-page stories under the theme, “50 Years after Hiroshima.” The newspaper also reprinted the front page from August 1945: “Oak Ridge Attacks Japanese: Workers Thrill as Atomic Bomb Secret Breaks; Press and Radio Stories Describe ‘Fantastically Powerful’ Weapon; Expected to Save Many Lives” (see figure 1).<sup>6</sup> While all American towns and cities were part of the national commemoration of the bomb, Oak Ridge, like the two other secret cities that were created to build the bomb, would experience this commemoration in a way that was acutely tied to its civic identity.



Figure 1: An August 9, 1945, Oak Ridge Journal headline reprinted on the 50th anniversary of the city of Oak Ridge.

*Placing the South*, 102-103. Still, I base my usage on how Oak Ridgers identify their place of residence, as seen in numerous references in *The Oak Ridger*.

<sup>6</sup> “Oak Ridge Attacks Japanese: Workers Thrill as Atomic Bomb Secret Breaks; Press and Radio Stories Describe ‘Fantastically Powerful’ Weapon; Expected to Save Many Lives,” *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 7, 1995.

As the nation's museum was experiencing the *Enola Gay* controversy, Oak Ridge was going through a battle of its own, one also around public memory and representation. The town was marking its fiftieth anniversary: that of the birth of Oak Ridge itself. This "birthday celebration," as it was often called, involved the development of a public monument that came to be known as the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell (see figure 2).<sup>7</sup> The Oak Ridge City Council sought proposals for a monument that would speak to the anniversary, for in 1942, General Leslie Groves, the newly appointed head of the Manhattan Project, selected east Tennessee as the site where the enrichment of uranium would take place: after three years of daily work on a fenced-in "reservation" (that at its peak reached a population of 70,000), the uranium would make up the atomic bomb detonated in Hiroshima.<sup>8</sup> This area of Tennessee, officially called "Clinton Engineer Works," "presumably would exist only for the duration of the war."<sup>9</sup> It is said that the Oak Ridge reservation was responsible for "one-seventh of all the power being produced in the nation" by the war's end.<sup>10</sup> The campus, in essence a "military-industrial complex,"<sup>11</sup> was made up of three divisions: K-25 (currently undergoing demolition); Y-12 (now called the Y-12 National Security Complex); and X-10 (now called Oak Ridge National Laboratory). These three sites became known as Oak Ridge, and fifty years

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<sup>7</sup> Kay Brookshire, "Friendship Bell Will Symbolize Unique Ties," *Oak Ridger*, April 28, 1991. Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau, accessed Sept. 2, 2011, <http://oakridgevisitor.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson and Jackson, *The City Behind a Fence*, xxi.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson and Jackson, *The City Behind a Fence*, 8, xxi.

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of Energy, *The Manhattan Project: Making the Atomic Bomb*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Harper, "Secrets Revealed, Revelations Concealed," 45. For more on the history of Y-12, see Wilcox, *An Overview of the History of Y-12 1942-1992*.

later, city officials wanted to celebrate the city's birthday with the theme, "Born of War, Living for Peace, Growing through Science."<sup>12</sup> With such a complicated theme, perhaps any proposed monument that could actually encapsulate two opposites (war and peace) would encounter some degree of controversy. A number of proposals were submitted, and the winning entry was that of the "Oak Ridge Friendship Bell," an effort led by chairperson Shigeko Uppuluri, an Oak Ridger who left Japan as a student in the 1960s and stayed in the United States ever since.<sup>13</sup>

Bringing a bell to the town was an idea that came about in the 1980s. Shigeko recalls that she and her husband, Ram (himself an ORNL scientist from India), visited the Japanese Atomic Energy Research Institute in Naka, Japan, one year: "Somebody took him around that area, and he saw a huge bell hanging," she recalls. "And Ram said, 'What does this mean?' And the man who took us there said, 'You gong it, and this sound carries and echoes, and it means some kind of healing, resting.' And Ram said, 'Well, maybe this is a good thing to have in Oak Ridge!'"<sup>14</sup> Years later, the call for proposals turned out to be well-suited for the project. In their proposal, the committee included letters of support ranging from government officials to executives of Japanese companies that had branches in Tennessee.<sup>15</sup> The Uppuluris were able to garner tremendous support from the

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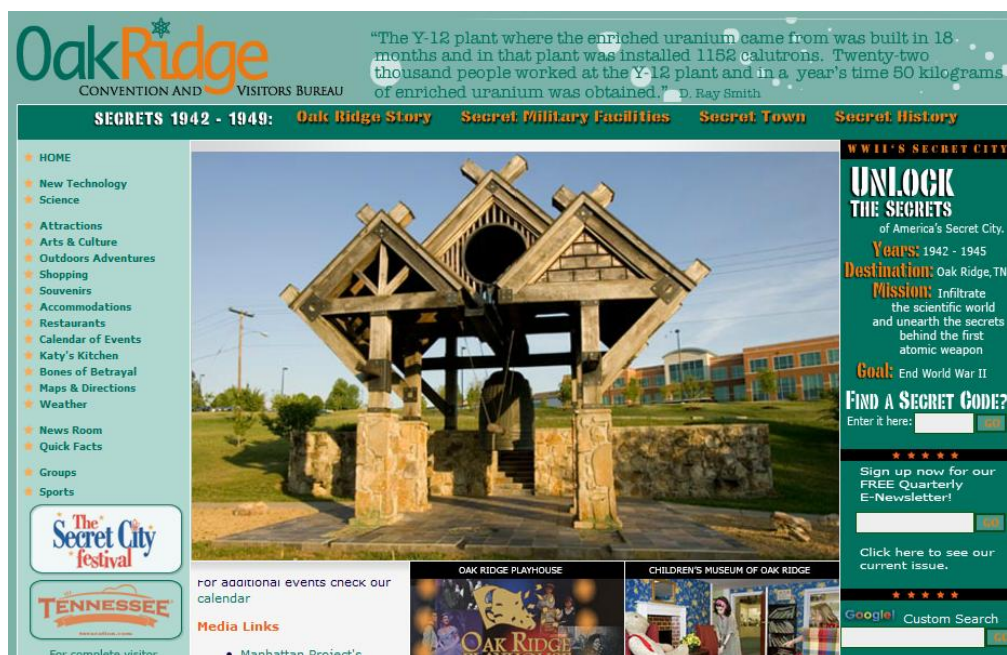
<sup>12</sup> "Interview with Dr. Joe Tittle, Chairman for Oak Ridge's 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration," *Oak Ridge Community Foundation*, January 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Shigeko Uppuluri, "A Proposal for the Oak Ridge Friendship Bell Presented to the 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration Committee Oak Ridge Community Foundation," March 1, 1990, photocopy, private collection; Shigeko Uppuluri, interview by the author, August 28, 2010, Oak Ridge.

<sup>14</sup> Shigeko Uppuluri, interview by the author, August 28, 2010, Oak Ridge.

<sup>15</sup> The proposal included support from U.S. congresswoman Marilyn Lloyd; Consul General of Japan Mitsuru Eguchi; the Japan-United States Friendship Commission; and from Tennessee branches of Brother

surrounding community: the bell reflected a local, regional, national, *and* international effort.



**Figure 2: The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, featured on Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau's website.**

John Bodnar talks about “the mask of innocence that surrounds commemorative events,”<sup>16</sup> an idea revealed in the resulting controversy regarding this monument. This controversy has since been aptly labeled the “bell wars” by Edward Lollis.<sup>17</sup> A formal proposal was made in 1990, and the final bell dedication ceremony took place in 1996. During those years, the bell became an object in which tensions concerning public memory were enacted, eliciting a series of debates that took place in numerous editorials and letters to the editor (hence the “bell wars”). As Oak Ridger Walt Zobel proclaimed at

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Industries, Tsubaki Conveyor of America. There was also a signed petition with 350 names. Uppuluri, “A Proposal for the Oak Ridge Friendship Bell.”

<sup>16</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Lollis, “The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell,” 350.

a city council meeting, “You’re dealing with an exceedingly controversial project. I would not want to touch this thing with an 11-foot pole.”<sup>18</sup> The bell even survived a civil lawsuit charging that it was a religious symbol that therefore did not belong in a public park.<sup>19</sup> “Some anniversaries speak louder than others,” Marita Sturken observes, “and the fiftieth anniversary of an event speaks perhaps most dramatically of all: fifty years, representing half a century, a time when, unlike the hundredth anniversary, many participants are still alive, reflecting on the meaning of their lives.”<sup>20</sup> The circumstances surrounding the bell were no exception. Much of the opposition to the bell concerned the idea that it would symbolize guilt about the bomb. As one resident wrote:

For Oak Ridgers to purchase a ‘Peace Bell’ cast in Japan can only be interpreted as an expression of contrition for the Oak Ridge role in the production of the atomic bombs used on Japan. Such a project is an implied insult to the thousands of Oak Ridge workers who have a justified pride in their role in forcing an early end to a bloody war.<sup>21</sup>

While the fundraising for the bell involved private donors, this sentiment (that the bell resembled an apology to Japan) characterized the opposition’s reasoning during the bell wars.

This chapter considers how the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell has been read in ways that produce an uncritical narrative that obscures the role of race in the bell wars, and in a larger sense, Oak Ridge identity. Drawing from library archives and also

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<sup>18</sup> Walt Zobel, quoted in Will Fitzgerald, “City to Display Friendship Bell in Courtyard,” *Oak Ridger*, Oct. 5, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Levering, “Are Friendship *Bonsho* Bells Buddhist Symbols?,” 173-174.

<sup>20</sup> Sturken, “Absent Images of Memory,” 33. For more on the implications of the fiftieth anniversary of the bomb, see Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds. *Living with the Bomb*.

<sup>21</sup> Radford M. Carroll, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Oct. 16, 1991.

from the personal archive of Shigeo Uppuluri, this analysis illuminates how racial meaning was imbued on the bell. I argue that the bell wars were racialized, manifesting in two primary ways: in objections to the bell's aesthetics and its naming, and in racially coded language directed at Asian leaders of the project. The controversy surrounding the monument also spoke to the power differential between Japan and the United States: that is, the U.S. military dictatorship in postwar Japan discursively haunted the bell wars. My analysis then employs a regional frame: if the bell wars demonstrated a regulation of belonging, then they also exposed the limits of hospitality in Oak Ridge in a way that is southern and national, amplified by a set of historical circumstances specific to the town itself.

Jacques Derrida's theory of hospitality is instructive here as he engages questions of belonging and home: the idea of hospitality represents a contradiction because it is simultaneously an act of welcome and one of hostility. Extending a conditional welcome, the host asserts their control of the situation and power of the space. Hospitality is therefore an act extended only to guests and strangers: it is not necessary in instances where everyone belongs. Hospitality cannot be reduced and individualized to a singular event or phenomenon: it has a history and a system involving "circles of conditionality that are family, nation, state, and citizenship."<sup>22</sup> This deconstructed understanding of hospitality fits into the realm of what Derrida calls the "hospitality of invitation," which presumes that the host invites a guest to the home. Such an event is therefore conditional and contingent on an invitation, reinforcing societal norms and rules: guests will only be

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<sup>22</sup> Derrida, "Hostipitality," 8.

welcomed if they show up on the day and time they are invited.<sup>23</sup> The bell wars illuminated a Derridean hospitality of invitation (that is, the hostility) that was already present in Oak Ridge. This form of hospitality is embedded in the history of this national security town, with its gates and regulations. Thus, while Oak Ridge's unique history fits within a larger narrative of the U.S. national security state, the town is an example in which the limits of hospitality are made even more visible because of its history as an “atomic city” of the Manhattan Project.<sup>24</sup> This discussion suggests that this regulation of belonging is racialized, constructing Asians and Asia as Other amid a historical backdrop of unequal U.S.-Japan relations.

The bell wars illuminated the uneasiness Oak Ridgers had with the bomb and with the Japanese. To invoke Debra Rosenthal, while it may be “hard to find the bomb” in Oak Ridge, it is easy to find (in its place, perhaps) the figure of the Oak Ridge Manhattan Project worker in the dominant narratives of the town.<sup>25</sup> As Thomas E. Shriver, Sherry Cable, Lachelle Norris, and Donald W. Hastings surmise, “The message in all the media is the same: Oak Ridgers saved soldiers’ lives and were special patriots on whom the fate of the nation rested, and the mission continues.”<sup>26</sup> In Oak Ridge it is hard to find an

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<sup>23</sup> The way out of this contradiction -- the way to achieve a real version of hospitality (one without hostility) -- is to first recognize that a hospitality of invitation exists and to then move beyond this into a “hospitality of visitation,” which is unconditional: the host cannot expect or anticipate a visitor. Despite arriving unannounced, the visitor is welcomed. The hospitality of visitation has high risk, for the guest “could come with the best or worst of intentions: a visitation could be an invasion by the worst.” Derrida, “Hostipitality,” 17.

<sup>24</sup> Korsemeier, “Growing Up in the Atomic City,” 93.

<sup>25</sup> In her study of Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories, Rosenthal observes, “It is hard to find the bomb in Los Alamos.” *At the Heart of the Bomb*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings, “The Role Of Collective Identity In Inhibiting Mobilization,” 50.

alternative narrative of the bomb, one that includes the victims of this weapon of mass destruction in Japan. Still, the bell would not be the first official connection that Oak Ridge would have with Japan: in 1990, Oak Ridge signed a “Sister City Agreement” with Naka, home of the Japanese Atomic Energy Research Institute. It was an “alliance [that] stem[med] from years of friendship between a scientist at ORNL and one at Japan’s research institute.”<sup>27</sup> This agreement began a series of foreign exchange trips that continues to this day. I read the Sister City Agreement as a “safe” arrangement, predicated on cultural exchange.<sup>28</sup>

To explain further, despite its articulation of U.S.-Japan reconciliation, the Friendship Bell would not follow the paternalistic and feminizing narratives that characterized similar conciliatory attempts that defined U.S.-Japan postwar relations. For example, as Naoko Shibusawa contends, the Hiroshima Maidens and “moral adoptions” projects that were created to help bomb victims actually “neglected the adult male victims of the atomic bomb, providing yet another example of the postwar interpretive framework that cast the Japanese as the dependents of a big-hearted and wise U.S. breadwinner, protector, and parental figure.”<sup>29</sup> This paternalistic approach was highly gendered as well. Masako Nakamura, in her case study of a postwar beauty contest in

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Silence, “Oak Ridge Welcomes Officials from Japanese ‘Sister-to-Be,’” *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, Oct. 28, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Coverage of the Agreement and the foreign exchange trips that resulted would follow a ‘we are more similar than different’ rhetoric, with Naka residents expressing their enjoyment of American movies and popular culture. See Piper Lowell, “Oak Ridge, Naka-machi Officials Ink Twin City Agreement for Cultural and Scientific Exchanges,” *Oak Ridger*, Oct. 30, 1990.

<sup>29</sup> “The ‘Hiroshima Maidens’ project (1955-1956) arranged plastic surgery in New York City for twenty-five women disfigured by ‘Little Boy,’ and the ‘moral adoptions’ program (1949 to the mid-1960s) assisted roughly 300 children orphaned by the bombing.” Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally*, 216.



Nagasaki, notes “how Japanese women’s bodies... became a central site of negotiation” in terms of “cultural forms [that] were employed to legitimize U.S. expansion in Asia while simultaneously concealing American imperialism.”<sup>30</sup> A modern-day articulation of reconciliation might be seen in the many “sister city” agreements between Japanese and U.S. cities, which in turn flatten the lopsided postwar relationship between the two nation-states. But the Friendship Bell would neither employ this historical paternalism, nor would it follow the flattening “cultural exchange” flavor of sister city agreements. The bell proposal did not reflect these more palatable narratives, and its aesthetics emphasize this distinction: construed by opponents as “a horrible symbol of a former enemy,”<sup>31</sup> the bell is a tangible reminder of the effects of the bomb, insisting on visibilizing “Asianness” and “Japaneseness” through its explicit effort to link Oak Ridge to Japan.

### **“Born of War, Living for Peace, Growing through Science”: Aesthetics and Names**

Downtown Oak Ridge features a series of strip malls and chain restaurants that line a large five-lane road. There’s nothing too eye-catching, until one stumbles across small markers that show that this is a place connected to a particular history. For example, next to the block letters spelling out its name, Oak Ridge High School has a distinctive atom symbol on the building.<sup>32</sup> The American Museum of Science and Energy

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<sup>30</sup> Nakamura, “Miss Atom Bomb’ Contests in Nagasaki and Nevada,” 118.

<sup>31</sup> Reynolds, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Feb. 24, 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Oak Ridger Bonnie Lee Dings has recounted how this atom symbol appeared at the high school in 1965. The symbol also was featured on the local bank’s checks. (In fact, prior to adapting the atom symbol, the bank’s checks featured an image of a mushroom cloud.) Dings, “A Teenage Remembrance of ‘Monumental Maggie,’” 341-345.

is also nearby, across the street from the post office and the mall. Tucked away in an even quieter part of downtown is an expanse of green, A.K. Bissell Park, where the bell appears. As a tourist brochure proclaims, “Let peace ring at the International Friendship Bell... The bell serves as an expression of hope for everlasting peace. Ring the bell in honor of those who served in WWII.” Housed in a wood pavilion and in a nicely landscaped surrounding (it is clearly well cared for), the bell is suspended for passers-by and visitors to ring at any time. The aesthetic of the bell has the simultaneous effect of being both understated and attention-getting. The sheer magnitude is perhaps its most apparent feature: at six feet tall and made up of four tons of bronze, the size of the bell is matched by the pavilion. The bell’s more unassuming quality comes from its simplicity: there is nothing flashy or ostentatious about it or the bell house. Still, the aesthetics and the language attached to the bell elicited a debate among Oak Ridgers that was highly racialized.

The theme of internationalism persists in readings of the bell, in a way that casts Japan and its people as a foreign Other. During the bell wars, the bell was also characterized as having both American and Japanese ideas and aesthetics, at most speaking to a sense of a cultural binary and at least to a sense of “Japaneseness.” For example, the pavilion (or bell house) was created by a local architect whose “design was influenced by the cantilevered style barns of east Tennessee.”<sup>33</sup> As an early account reassured, “Although the bell itself will be cast in Japan, the entire project will have a

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<sup>33</sup> D. Ray Smith, “Our International Friendship Bell – A Unique Oak Ridge Symbol,” *Oak Ridger*, May 28, 2008.

distinctly ‘local’ flavor.”<sup>34</sup> This “local flavor” is depicted in the inscribed picture drawn by Oak Ridger Susanna Harris: to symbolize friendship between Japan and the United States, the picture inscribed on the bell features “the Great Smoky Mountains, Mount Fuji and cherry and dogwood trees.”<sup>35</sup> These were the “the official flowers, trees and birds of Tennessee and Japan. Thus the spirit of cooperation is included in the design and implementation as well as in the funding and rhetoric.”<sup>36</sup> Through this, the bell may aesthetically articulate the possibility of Japanese American identity, a double consciousness perhaps. However, this possibility is unrealized through its official name (the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell). The bell, too, at times is read as purely Japanese: Miriam Levering, in theorizing the bell's religiosity, concludes that the bell “speaks of Japaneseness, of building bridges between nations and cultures, of peace that has grown up following a war, and of the desirability of working for international peace.”<sup>37</sup> With few exceptions,<sup>38</sup> the responses to the bell denied the possibility of Japanese American identity, with discourses surrounding the bell operating on a U.S./Japan dichotomy and themes of internationalism. Contributing to this sense of “internationalism” early on, supporters cited the existence of Japanese companies in

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<sup>34</sup> Kay Brookshire, “Friendship Bell Will Symbolize Unique Ties,” *Oak Ridger*, April 28, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Silence, “Japanese Bellmaker: Bomb Justified,” *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, April 10, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> Tom Cole, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 7, 1995.

<sup>37</sup> Levering, “Are Friendship *Bonsho* Bells Buddhist Symbols?,” 175.

<sup>38</sup> As one Oak Ridger noted, “...the bell incorporates the Oak Ridge-Japan historical link because that is what is most historically relevant for our community, because the project has been supported so strongly in both countries, and because the initial concept was suggested by Oak Ridgers and Japanese-American Shigeko Uppuluri...” Tom Cole, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 7, 1995.

Tennessee, the Meiji Gakuin Japanese High School in nearby Sweetwater,<sup>39</sup> and the Oak Ridge-Nakamachi Sister City Agreement.<sup>40</sup> The bell would in fact be “the first U.S.-Japan monument at any Manhattan Project site.”<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 3: Inscriptions on the bell.**

One of the larger sources of contention around the bell involved its inscribed

<sup>39</sup> Tennessee Meiji Gakuin School, which opened from 1989 to 2007, “was the first accredited Japanese high school in the U.S.” Officially affiliated with Tokyo Meiji Gakuin University, this boarding school was for Japanese students who were living in the United States but wanted to return to Japan for college. The school eventually closed due to low enrollment. Melissa DiPane, “Tennessee Meiji Gakuin School Holds Last Graduation,” March 9, 2007, <http://www.wate.com/Global/story.asp?S=6203323>. See also Katy Koontz, “Japanese High School Opens in Tennessee Town,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/11/us/japanese-high-school-opens-in-tennessee-town.html>.

<sup>40</sup> The existence of these three U.S.-Japan connections furthered the case that the bell would be good for tourism. Ram Uppuluri stated early on that, “The purpose of the friendship bell is to attract the tourism of the Japanese in Tennessee to the natural beauty of the area, and to symbolize friendship of the two countries.” Audrey Siemens, “Friendship Bell is Planned for Oak Ridge Area,” *Oak Ridger*, July 14, 1988. Thus, in trying to drum up support for the bell, it was written that “In recent years Japanese companies, recognizing the unique natural and human resources of East Tennessee, have helped revitalize the economic strength of the region. The bell will undoubtedly become a drawing card for further visits from Japanese tourists.” Ruth Carey, “Friendship Bell to Become Permanent Monument and Attraction for Tourists,” *Oak Ridger*, July 17, 1991.

<sup>41</sup> Caruthers, “Children’s Museum Receives Friendship Bell Replica.”

dates, bringing forth a racially coded discussion that also Othered the Japanese. Prominently inscribed on two panels of the bell are four events and dates: the left side states, “Pearl Harbor December 7 1941” and “VJ Day September 2 1945”; the corresponding right side states, “Hiroshima August 6 1945” and “Nagasaki August 9 1945.” These two panels are intersected by a vertically inscribed word, “peace” (see figure 3).<sup>42</sup> Oak Ridger, John Barrett, described the tension well:

the trouble appears to lie with the dates of Aug. 6 and 9, 1945 [the dates marking the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively]. As we have seen recently from the Enola Gay exhibit and from the passage of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of these two dates, they generate a great deal of controversy... Whatever the inscription meant then to those who fashioned it, the question has now become what it means to our community as a whole.<sup>43</sup>

For example, another Oak Ridger, Hugo Bertini, articulated his reason for objecting to the bell, writing that the dates seem to “equate the dropping of the bomb with the attack on Pearl Harbor.”<sup>44</sup> In response to a series of letters published in the newspaper, Shigeo and Ram Uppuluri’s son, Ram II (also a leader in the project), made a case for the necessity of the dates, noting, “Striking the dates from the bell would be like striking the first three words [“born of war”] from the Birthday Celebration theme.”<sup>45</sup> This point speaks to the complexities of the city’s theme, “Born of War, Living for Peace, Growing through Science.” The opposition to the inscription of dates revealed Oak Ridgers’ insistence that “born of war” needs to be one-sided: that is, Hiroshima cannot be equated

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<sup>42</sup> Figure 3 photograph taken by the author.

<sup>43</sup> John Barrett, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 1, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Hugo Bertini, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 20, 1995.

<sup>45</sup> Ram Uppuluri, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 25, 1995. The dates were “announced after the bell was cast.”

with Pearl Harbor. Mirroring the asymmetrical power balance of U.S.-Japan relations, This U.S.-only one-sidedness was in line with objections that the bell would be “a memorial to the war dead of the two nations.”<sup>46</sup> As Bertini continued, “[The idea that] ‘The bell is dedicated foremost to the memory of those of all nations who died in World War II’ ... puts those who died in the service of our country on a par [*sic*] with everybody else who died during that war, including the Nazis and the Japanese military. That dishonors our dead.”<sup>47</sup> The combination of the four dates has the effect of humanizing a former enemy. Historian John Dower goes as far as to assert that, “Humanizing the civilians killed and injured by the bombs, and, indeed, humanizing the Japanese enemy generally, is difficult and distasteful for most Americans.”<sup>48</sup> The objections against the bell’s dates rested mostly on why Hiroshima and Nagasaki’s dates and names were on it: “If there must be dates, then [day of Pearl Harbor attack and VJ Day]... are the only logical ones to appear. Better still, no dates at all.”<sup>49</sup> The four dates (said to have been suggested by an Oak Ridger who had worked on the Manhattan Project<sup>50</sup>) were the last straw: there was already opposition to there being an aesthetically Japanese monument, and now these dates involved literally placing the word “Hiroshima” next to “Pearl Harbor.” The opposition to having a “Japanese bell” illustrated the inseparability of the

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<sup>46</sup> Uppuluri, “A Proposal for the Oak Ridge Friendship Bell.”

<sup>47</sup> Hugo Bertini, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 20, 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Dower, “Triumphal and Tragic Narrative of the War in Asia,” 40.

<sup>49</sup> Robert S. Crouse, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 5, 1993.

<sup>50</sup> Lollis documents that the four dates were likely suggested by Jack Goodwin, an Oak Ridger who was a former worker on the Oak Ridge reservation during the Manhattan Project years. “The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell,” 353, 371.

bell's aesthetics from the construction of Japan as enemy.

In addition to what was *on* the bell, the naming of the bell (particularly the possibility of it as a “peace” bell) also revealed the persistent idea of Japan as the enemy. In the proposal, the official title was “Oak Ridge Friendship Bell,”<sup>51</sup> but the bell was referred to variously as the “peace bell,”<sup>52</sup> “Japanese birthday bell,”<sup>53</sup> “U.S.-Japan International Friendship Bell,”<sup>54</sup> and, simply (and most commonly among anti-bell residents), the “Japanese bell.”<sup>55</sup> While the title officially became the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, “peace bell” was sometimes used by journalists and supporters alike, a description that was met with dissatisfaction: “I have always been in favor of the Friendship Bell. However, when it was mentioned as the ‘Peace Bell’ in The Oak Ridger [*sic*], I recoiled from that term.”<sup>56</sup> Here again, the invocation of “peace” perhaps overly humanized the Japanese, displaying “too much” sympathy for a former enemy. Some Oak Ridgers followed this theme, pointing to a “forgive, not forget”

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<sup>51</sup> Uppuluri, “A Proposal for the Oak Ridge Friendship Bell.” As an early account noted, “What to call the bell itself has been a question. First it was suggested calling it the Japanese Peace Bell, then the Japanese Friendship Bell, and finally the committee settled on calling it the International Friendship Bell.” Piper Lowell, “Group Hopes for Better Support for Friendship Bell,” *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 30, 1991.

<sup>52</sup> Will Fitzgerald, “Bellmaker Visits Site for Peace Bell,” *Oak Ridger*, April 7, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Bob Fowler, “Japanese Birthday Bell Will Soon Get Permanent Home,” *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, July 9, 1995.

<sup>54</sup> Will Fitzgerald, “Plans for Bell House Are Nearly Complete,” *Oak Ridger*, July 31, 1994.

<sup>55</sup> Much of the anti-bell sentiment expressed in letters to the editor specifically used the term “Japanese bell,” as in “...the proposed Japanese bell in Oak Ridge degrades my [Navy veteran] father’s sacrifices and his memory.” This semantic association of the Friendship Bell with Japan hurt the project. Proponents and members of the organizing committee most often referred to the bell as the Friendship Bell, *not* the “Japanese bell.” Jo Anna R. Meredith, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, July 28, 1993

<sup>56</sup> Ardis Leichsenring, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 1, 1995. Opponents responded with sarcasm, too. “I feel that being a Navy veteran and having four uncles (brothers) at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, gives me some license to also comment on the ‘Peace Bell.’” Gick, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 8, 1993.

mentality and holding onto a history in which Japan and the United States were enemies. Of course, the bell committee was responding to the city's anniversary theme: it was reported, "Ms. Uppuluri commented that the theme of Oak Ridge's 50th Anniversary celebration is 'Born of War, Living for Peace, and Growing Through Science.' The idea of the bell, she said, is not to rekindle emotion, but to recognize the city's history, to pray for all those of every nation who lost their lives in wars and to pray for peace."<sup>57</sup> It seems that supporters had to shift the rhetoric from "peace" to "friendship," a more palatable term and idea (and one that complemented the existing Oak Ridge-Nakamachi Sister City Agreement).

Moreover, the way the term "Japanese" was used even in describing the aesthetics of the bell reflected an anti-Japanese sentiment. A guest column written by a resident demonstrates this well: "...ringing that Japanese bell... is like a knife in our heart... We are sorry for the Japanese who died with our two nuclear bombs... We had no choice ... So, toll that bell you so love, not for the Japs now living who perhaps were not even born, but be a true American and ring the bell for those who let you be born."<sup>58</sup> Oak Ridger Clarence F. Runtsch insisted, "Please be assured that my animosity in this matter is not directed in any way toward patriotic Japanese-Americans, nor to the Japanese people in

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<sup>57</sup> Ruth Carey, "Trip Abroad Unites Mothers in Japan, India," *Oak Ridger*, March 30, 1993. Ram Uppuluri II also talked about the history of Oak Ridge, noting, "We want to present the community with this beautiful object, in honor of all this. In memory of all this, before the last signs and survivors of it all disappear. But with a message... And that message is simple. Peace." Ram Y. Uppuluri, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 31, 1993.

<sup>58</sup> Walt Bogdanowicz, "An Early Oak Ridger's View of the Bomb and the Bell," *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 14, 1995.



general.”<sup>59</sup> But I would argue otherwise: when taken together, the vehement remarks about Japan as the enemy, the idea that the bell would represent sympathy (much less empathy) to Japanese casualties of World War II, and the sarcasm and disgust with a “Japanese bell” altogether present an anti-Japanese sentiment that transcends simple discussions of Japanese aesthetics or art traditions. Thus, while yellow peril discourse emerges here, the perceived threat is specific to the Japanese. Supporters of the bell had no choice but to point to the *international* (not Japanese or U.S.-Japan) nature of the bell. As Ram Uppuluri II wrote, “It is a message to Japanese people, to Indian people, to Russian people, to Europeans, Asians, Africans and Americans. (That’s why it’s called the International Friendship Bell).”<sup>60</sup> The message had to be universalized because anti-Japanese emotions ran high.

The racialized nature of the bell wars is also seen in how Oak Ridgers responded to invocations of Hiroshima. Inscribing “Hiroshima” on the bell directed one’s focus to the aftermath of the bomb, drawing attention to death and the sobering sense of defeat for the Japanese, in contrast to the triumphant sense of victory for Oak Ridgers. Analyzing the fiftieth anniversary of the bomb and the objections to the Smithsonian’s *Enola Gay* exhibit, Dower attributes the main reason of the debates to “the fact that victory over Japan entailed incinerating and irradiating men, women, and children with a weapon more terrible than any previously known or imagined. Triumph and tragedy became

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<sup>59</sup> Clarence F. Runtsch, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Oct. 6, 1991.

<sup>60</sup> Ram Y. Uppuluri, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 31, 1993.

inseparable.”<sup>61</sup> The Oak Ridge bell’s inscription of the sites of the bombs (“Hiroshima” and “Nagasaki”) symbolically insisted on this inseparability of triumph and tragedy, much to the anger of some Oak Ridgers.<sup>62</sup>

### **“This Is a Special Town”: The U.S. National Security State in Oak Ridge**

Nowhere is the relationship between Oak Ridge and the U.S. national security state more obvious than in the issue of environmental contamination in the area. An underlying current in the bell wars, Oak Ridger identity has been researched particularly in connection to environmental and health concerns in the wake of this cold-war-era federal investigation.<sup>63</sup> As Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings explain, “Between 1950 and 1977 approximately 2.4 million pounds of mercury were released to the environment in Oak Ridge ... [A] congressional investigation... concluded that the government had deliberately misled the public and hid the data, *using national security as a convenient shield.*”<sup>64</sup> Exploring environmental justice issues of Oak Ridge reveals aspects of Oak Ridger identity that sparked the bell wars, making known the limits of hospitality. I now

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<sup>61</sup> Dower, “Triumphal and Tragic Narrative of the War in Asia,” 37.

<sup>62</sup> And lastly, so as not to ignore Hiroshima’s overlooked sibling Nagasaki, the uranium enrichment in Oak Ridge was produced for the bomb used in Hiroshima, so the latter city had more resonance with Oak Ridgers. Still, it is important to note that the Nagasaki bomb is “marginalized in the orthodox narrative.” Dower suggests that the marginalization of this bomb works to obscure other realities: “Why was it dropped before Japan’s high command had a chance to assess Hiroshima and the Soviet entry? How should we respond to the position... [that] the bombing of Nagasaki was plainly and simply a war crime?” “Triumphal and Tragic Narrative of the War in Asia,” 41.

<sup>63</sup> While this extremely complex and controversial issue of environmental contamination is beyond the scope of my study, my attention here is centered on understanding Oak Ridger identity. Also, the scope of environmental contamination at the secret city of Hanford has also been extensively studied. See for example D’Antonio, *Atomic Harvest*; Gerber, *On the Home Front*; Loeb, *Nuclear Culture*; Sanger, *Working on the Bomb*.

<sup>64</sup> Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings, “The Role Of Collective Identity In Inhibiting Mobilization,” 53 (italics mine).

turn briefly to this local history of contamination to contextualize the (lack of) hospitality displayed during the bell wars – a hospitality that constructed Asians as outsiders and Others to a culture of national security and secrecy.

One of the most unusual aspects of Oak Ridge is the idea that it operates as a "government 'company town'" where "virtually every local job depends directly or indirectly on DOE [Department of Energy] money."<sup>65</sup> The town relied on federal aid well after World War II: "A 1953 move to incorporate the city under Tennessee laws failed because residents feared privatization would bring loss of government funding."<sup>66</sup> Thus, the city was reluctant to sever its connection from the federal government many years ago. In the postwar years, an ongoing "economic dependence on the reservation" arguably bred an environment conducive to the conditions of the national security state, one steeped in secrecy with a definition of patriotism rooted in trusting the federal government (a government that, in turn, withheld information from its citizens).<sup>67</sup> Sherry Cable, Thomas E. Shriver, and Tamara L. Mix point to the "residents' internalization of secrecy norms" during the Manhattan Project years when residents participated in upholding the government's directive to maintain secrecy: "residents not only accepted governmental restrictions on access to information but also derogated their neighbors who violated norms of secrecy."<sup>68</sup> During the years of the Manhattan Project, Oak Ridge

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<sup>65</sup> Molella, "Exhibiting Atomic Culture," 219, 222.

<sup>66</sup> Cable, Shriver, and Hastings, "The Silenced Majority," 71. "Oak Ridge finally incorporated in 1959, but only after an agreement between the government and the town council stipulated the government's continuation of funds for 10 years." Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings, "The Role of Collective Identity In Inhibiting Mobilization," 48.

<sup>68</sup> Cable, Shriver, and Mix, "Risk Society and Contested Illness," 386.

workers had to keep quiet about their daily work or face the consequences.

This culture of secrecy is said to be alive and well today and is seen through the lack of collective uproar in response to reports of hazardous waste dumping in Oak Ridge through the 1970s. According to Janice Harper, “The issue of secrecy thus pervades the Oak Ridge community and has shaped how people perceive not only the origins of their health problems, *but their identities as citizens, as well.*”<sup>69</sup> One Oak Ridger described the town as having a “government identity.”<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere it is noted that Oak Ridgers appear to exhibit a “patriotic pride in their community’s contribution to national security.”<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, a “faith in science [is] a major component of the local culture.”<sup>72</sup> As one resident told me, “This is a special town, this is a scientific town.” When considered together, these aspects of Oak Ridger identity (this “routinization of secrecy,”<sup>73</sup> overall trust in science, and a definition of patriotism built on trusting the government) are normalized and socialized into a culture that is multigenerational and has supported and adapted to the national security state well into the present day. In the context of industrial pollution, these characteristics of Oak Ridger identity contributed to what researchers describe as the *lack* of community activism.

Every year on the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, “anti nuclear activists” gather to stage protests at the Y-12 National Security Complex, but these

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<sup>69</sup> Harper, “Secrets Revealed, Revelations Concealed,” 58 (*italics mine*).

<sup>70</sup> R. Cathey Daniels, “Scared to Tell Den 9 They Can’t Ring the Bell,” *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 12, 1995.

<sup>71</sup> Cable, Shriver, and Mix, “Risk Society and Contested Illness,” 386.

<sup>72</sup> Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings, “The Role of Collective Identity In Inhibiting Mobilization,” 55.

<sup>73</sup> Harper, “Secrets Revealed, Revelations Concealed,” 44.

activists are perhaps the exception. Moreover, their protests receive little media coverage; during the bell wars, *The Oak Ridger* belittled the event: “The demonstration drew little attention except from the security guards... Two men who drove by yelled at the group. One warned ‘a bunch of nuts’ were coming while the protestors were marching to the site. The second man hollered, ‘Let’s bomb them again.’”<sup>74</sup> In the same issue of the newspaper, one of the protesters, Reverend Konomu Utsumi, linked the bomb to Oak Ridge industrial pollution, for he “noted the signs posted near the Y-12 entrance saying no swimming or fishing and said the jobs at the plant were not worth the harm to the environment. ‘Hiroshima is not the only victim,’ he said. ‘We are also victims.’”<sup>75</sup> The fact remains, however, that as a community, Oak Ridge has not rallied around these concerns. This is the political climate that the Friendship Bell proposal came into.<sup>76</sup> Thus, many of the reasons and motivations (for this lack of collective activism) surfaced during the bell wars as well.

### **"Who Is This Uppuluri?": Animosity toward Asian Leaders**

An instability at the axis of racial difference and Oak Ridger identity played out during the bell wars, featuring an insider/outsider dynamic imposed on and embodied by Oak Ridgers Shigeko and Ram Uppuluri, and by the Kyoto-based bellmaker, Sotetsu Iwasawa. Thus, the racialized nature of the bell wars becomes more evident when examining how Asian and Asian American bell leaders were portrayed, characterized, or

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<sup>74</sup> Ron Bridgeman, “50 Years after Hiroshima: Rally Attracts about 175,” *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 7, 1995.

<sup>75</sup> “50 Years after Hiroshima: Rally Attracts about 175,” *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 7, 1995.

<sup>76</sup> Ridiculing the activists who protested the use of nuclear weapons, one bell supporter even talked about how these “morally myopic morons” would “bong the bell every Aug. 6” if the city allowed anyone to ring the bell. Radford M. Carroll, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 5, 1993.

treated by residents. Complemented by the newspaper's logo (as the atom symbol cannot be missed), the front page of *The Oak Ridger* on April 7, 1993, is particularly illuminating. Two articles share the page: the first speaks to Oak Ridge's unusual status as a "government 'company town'": "DOE Plans Show Major Cuts at Y-12: Layoffs to Be Announced in Summer." The second article, "Bellmaker Visits Site for Peace Bell," features a large photo of a group of people (including Shigeko Uppuluri), with Iwasawa at the center.<sup>77</sup> The pairing of these two articles, as well as the visual feature of Iwasawa, demonstrate the inextricability of the bell from both the unusual circumstances of the Department of Energy-driven town of Oak Ridge – and the racialization of Asians and Asian Americans.

The article about Iwasawa's visit highlights his foreign status and elicits questions about national belonging in Oak Ridge. Iwasawa's trip to Tennessee produces a particular narrative: he supported the decision to drop the bomb. The bellmaker became a point of conversation in which the debates about the bell played out. Oak Ridgers made it personal: Iwasawa represented Japan, and the bellmaker's personal opinion became important. His own life story was viewed as extremely relevant to the argument from both supporters *and* opponents of the project:

Oak Ridge's beauty belies the fact that the city was the birthplace of the death of thousands of his fellow Japanese, Soutetu [*sic*] Iwasawa said. But the city's role in the atomic bomb's production probably saved his life, did save thousands of other lives, ended the war earlier and was justified, said Iwasawa, 73, on Friday. The bomb also put Japan on the road to democracy, he added.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Will Fitzgerald, "Bellmaker Visits Site for Peace Bell," *Oak Ridger*, April 7, 1993.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Silence, "Japanese Bellmaker: Bomb Justified," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, April 10, 1993.

In whatever way his story was being used or interpreted, Iwasawa, like the members of the bell committee, *had* to agree with the U.S. master narrative on the atomic bomb, without question. Given the media coverage of his visit, I contend that if the bellmaker did not have a (pro-bomb) opinion, then the bell project would have lost a great deal of public support and may not have succeeded in the end. Oak Ridgers needed to see Japanese remorse about World War II, and these desires were acted out on Iwasawa.

The bellmaker's perspective of the bomb is somewhat unsurprising and fits within narratives facilitated by the U.S. occupation of postwar Japan, an eight-year-long "neocolonial military dictatorship" with General Douglas MacArthur at the helm.<sup>79</sup> Dower paints a picture of the social climate after the surrender: "The Americans arrived anticipating, many of them, a traumatic confrontation with fanatical emperor worshippers. They were accosted instead by women who called 'yoo hoo' to the first troops landing on the beaches in full battle gear, and men who bowed and asked what it was the conquerors wished."<sup>80</sup> While "there was no single or singular 'Japanese' response to the defeat apart from a widespread abhorrence of war,"<sup>81</sup> lest we let Iwasawa the bellmaker represent all Japanese, it is at least clear that his personal life story and opinions became extremely important during the bell wars. One Oak Ridger – a veteran and alumnus of Oak Ridge High School during the war years – wrote:

...the Japanese bell maker [Iwasawa] served in the Japanese military during World War II. In what capacity?...Did he participate in the Bataan Death March? Was he involved in the rape of Nanking?...[T]he proposed Japanese bell is

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<sup>79</sup> Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 81.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

certainly not a symbol of peace, but instead is one of death and suffering and sorrow. The insistence of having a Japanese monument against such strong American patriotic opposition only serves to keep open the wounds of war. If this bell becomes a reality, the nation will surely judge Oak Ridge to be a totally inconsiderate, irresponsible, ludicrous farce.<sup>82</sup>

The significance of the bellmaker to Oak Ridgers continued through the duration of the bell wars, too, and finally a bell supporter wrote, “To imply that this bell should not be rung because it was cast by a citizen of a country formerly our enemy is in stark contrast to our national history. Do we forego listening to the magnificent music of Beethoven, Mozart, Verdi and many others because of their countries of origin? Of course we don’t.”<sup>83</sup> With all the commentary about Iwasawa, it should come as no surprise that during his 1993 visit to Oak Ridge, he was granted honorary Oak Ridge citizenship by the city mayor, symbolically linking the notion of the bomb’s necessity to a discourse of citizenship. That is, Iwasawa was the embodiment of the move that had to occur in order for the bell project to progress. An interesting parallel emerges in Shigeko Uppuluri’s *Oak Ridger* guest column, published fifty years (to the day) after newspaper headlines around the world proclaimed that Hiroshima was bombed:

When do I want to ring the bell? I want to ring it on the day both my late husband and I got citizenship of this county [*sic*]. It was Aug. 20, 1972... There were many people of many nationalities, Germans, Italians, Koreans, Mexicans, Indians and Japanese and others. I remembered the judge congratulated us, saying with strong but warm voice, “Welcome to the United States.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Raymond A. Sears, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, June 16, 1993. Ram Uppuluri II was then compelled to respond to this comment, reiterating Iwasawa’s support of the bomb, directly stating how Iwasawa was drafted into the Japanese military but did not serve, and also noting that Iwasawa was dedicated to making bells especially because many had been destroyed and used to for weapons. Ram Y. Uppuluri, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, June 24, 1993.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Minturn, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 4, 1995.

<sup>84</sup> Shigeko Uppuluri, “The Bell Is for Everyone, the Young and the Old,” *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 7, 1995.



Citizenship for Iwasawa (symbolic) and the Uppuluris (legal) is acted by or upon them. These rhetorical moves – in Uppuluri’s act to proclaim her U.S. citizenship status, and in Iwasawa being given honorary Oak Ridge citizenship – come amid questions of foreignness and of belonging. What is clear is the way that their foreignness – their outsidership – emerges through this arguable overarticulation of belonging, revealing the (limits of) hospitality extended to them by other Oak Ridgers. Iwasawa and the Uppuluris, despite their different legal citizenship status, are placed in the category of the international.

Highly visible at the Lab and in the surrounding area, the presence of Asian Americans in east Tennessee adds to the equation and complicates this moment of instability. The personal attacks on the bell project’s leaders who are Asian may attest to this tension: calling their status as Oak Ridgers and as Americans into question, local resident Mattie Galyon wrote, “I don’t know if Shigeke Uppuluri and Keiko Murakami are residents of Oak Ridge or American citizens. I am sure all my ancestors came here from another country but I don’t cling to that country I cling to the country I am living in [*sic*].”<sup>85</sup> This comment prompted Uppuluri and Murakami to then publicly respond in writing that they are “long-time residents of Oak Ridge.”<sup>86</sup> And in one coded expression of Oak Ridge gate-keeping, resident Tommye Kelly, one of the most vocal opponents of the bell, wrote, “It is difficult to write to Ram Uppuluri personally because his letters to the editor never show an address. Why is that, I wonder? All other letter writers are

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<sup>85</sup> Mattie Galyon, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Feb. 8, 1990.

<sup>86</sup> Shigeke Uppuluri and Keiko Murakami, *Oak Ridger*, Feb. 23, 1990.

required to show an address.”<sup>87</sup> Harper notes that an “outsider status” is made visible in the environmental justice struggles of Oak Ridge: “those who were not a part of this secret history... [are] viewed by many as unable to grasp the cultural legacy that has characterized the community of today.”<sup>88</sup> This sentiment surfaces in the letters opposing the bell:

Why are some here so adamant about purchasing a bell from Japan? Had Japan not tried to blow us off the map, so to speak, there would have been no Oak Ridge. Now we are “Sister Cities.” I could be a sister to most any country but Japan...[W]hy can’t we have a bell made in the U.S.A., if we need a bell? And who is this Uppuluri already on TV saying a bell is coming here from Japan?<sup>89</sup>

The Uppuluris (Shigeiko, Ram, or Ram II) are outsiders.

The possibility of insider status being granted to, or assumed by, Asian Americans is perhaps unrealized, and at most, this possibility elicits skepticism, as made visible in one Oak Ridger’s letter: “According to The Oak Ridger [*sic*], the project is being pushed by Japanese interests. It is the brainchild of an Oak Ridge resident of Japanese ancestry who is being lauded in Japan for her efforts. It is important to the people of Japan to have it located HERE.”<sup>90</sup> The “suppression of health grievances” in the wake of environmental contamination may help us understand the context for Oak Ridgers’ resistance to the bell,<sup>91</sup> but also, the boundaries of Oak Ridger identity seem closed to

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<sup>87</sup> Tommye F. Kelly, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, date unknown. Note: This letter, from the personal collection of Shigeiko Uppuluri, was published after Sept. 24, 1993.

<sup>88</sup> Harper, "Secrets Revealed, Revelations Concealed," 42.

<sup>89</sup> Virginia Boswell, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Nov. 3, 1991.

<sup>90</sup> Minton J. Kelly and Tommye F. Kelly, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 17, 1993.

<sup>91</sup> Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings, "The Role of Collective Identity In Inhibiting Mobilization," 41

Asians, for within this notion of a “culture of secrecy,” the question remains, a secret from *whom*?<sup>92</sup> During wartime, the picture of the enemy included Asian faces. The discourses constructed around the bell make these tensions visible in unpleasant ways, as seen most clearly in the personal attacks directed at the Uppuluri family and through subtler shades of local opposition to the bell.

In addition to the animosity leveled at the Uppuluris, supporters and opponents alike paint a picture of the Uppuluris that often does not allow the possibility of Asian American identity. As Edward Lollis describes, “this international couple traveled widely, thought globally, and brought personal memories of two Asian cultures to east Tennessee.”<sup>93</sup> The Uppuluris moved to Tennessee in 1963 for Ram's career as a mathematician at ORNL,<sup>94</sup> and the couple eventually obtained U.S. citizenship. Their son, Ram II, was born in Oak Ridge as well.<sup>95</sup> Despite their identification with the South, however, the Uppuluris continue to be constructed as “international,” a hint of the perpetual foreigner narrative familiar to Asian Americans. The narrative that emerges in the secondary source literature that retells the bell's history distinctly ascribes to a cultural binary of Asian/American and Japanese/American. Thus, the transnational could possibly be read here, but Asian American identity is not. Through an uncritical, essentialist adherence to cultural binaries, the discourses constructed around the bell and

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<sup>92</sup> Harper, "Secrets Revealed, Revelations Concealed," 39.

<sup>93</sup> Lollis, "The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell," 347.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> In 1994 (in the midst of the bell wars), Ram Uppuluri II ran for a seat in the House of Representatives, losing in the Democratic primary. During Ram II's involvement in the bell wars, he “represented himself as a solid Oak Ridge resident.” Srikanth, “Ram Yoshino Uppuluri's Campaign,” 207.

around the Uppuluris further reinscribe liberal multiculturalist frameworks, masking (or perhaps demonstrating) the racial anxieties that the town harbored toward Asian people and Asian things. The persistence of this theme of internationalism rests on ideas of unbelonging, reinscribing a Derridean hospitality. The Japanese of both past and present were racialized as enemy at worst, and as foreign at best. Even in sympathetic portrayals, the theme of the foreign – the international – is attached time and again to the bell’s leaders, most notably the Uppuluris, despite their decades-long residence in Oak Ridge.

Mixed in with this insistence on internationalism is the exceptionalist idea that Oak Ridge welcomes visitors from around the world: as an *Oak Ridger* staff editorial expressed, “Oak Ridge has had a reputation for decades as an international city. More so than most other cities our size, we are known for the number of visitors from other countries and for our hospitality toward those visitors.”<sup>96</sup> The bell project interrupted and questioned the success of this notion. Bell supporters lamented the idea that if the bell effort failed, it would be a statement that Oak Ridge is not a welcoming place. For example, in accordance with the town birthday theme, Herman Postma (who, like Weinberg, was a former director of ORNL and also served on the bell committee), stated:

[Oak Ridge] had better be open, supportive and aggressive in seeking partnerships internationally... This is one of the primary reasons I was so enthusiastic about helping the bell project. Any hint of a closed, biased, narrow society in welcoming foreigners to Oak Ridge will close opportunity, not only by them but by Washington or by industry.<sup>97</sup>

The bell project challenged whether Oak Ridge is actually a hospitable place for visitors

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<sup>96</sup> “Bell Should Ring and Bring Us Together,” *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 1, 1995.

<sup>97</sup> Herman Postma, “Celebrate Friendship, Let the Bell Toll Anytime,” *Oak Ridger*, Aug. 10, 1995.

from abroad (many of whom are from Asia).

### **Conclusion: “A Moral Issue”**

Though there was local specificity to the bell wars (that is, Oak Ridge’s particular history as a secret city), the controversy should not solely be interpreted as a local, isolated event. The bell acted as a representation of friendship, and this did not sit well in a town historically associated with a “patriotic consensus” formed while its residents were busy building the bomb.<sup>98</sup> The bell wars revealed tensions around U.S.-Japan reconciliation in which race was inextricably tied. The bell as a physical object houses a relationship that involves the bomb and the Japanese subject. At most, the latter emerges through xenophobic comments (“So you see they [the Japanese] are still trying to take over America”<sup>99</sup>) and at least, references emerge in the language of multiculturalism (regarding student exchange visits between Oak Ridge and Nakamachi, one article focused on how “Students Break Language, Cultural Barriers”).<sup>100</sup> Naoko Shibusawa discusses how the perception of the Japanese shifted from enemy to ally over the course of the post-World-War-II twentieth century,<sup>101</sup> but the sentiment expressed by many Oak Ridgers did not appear to reflect this shift, one that is called for by supporters of the bell

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<sup>98</sup> Olwell, *At Work in the Atomic City*, 3.

<sup>99</sup> Mattie Galyon, *Oak Ridger*, Feb. 8, 1990.

<sup>100</sup> This article talks about how Oak Ridge students unlearn the stereotypes they had about Japanese people (“Clair said she has learned that Japanese students are not as stoic as they are often portrayed”). These exchanges would also be part of normalizing the U.S. military presence in Japan: for one visiting Japanese teacher, “The help the United States provided his people was a gesture not lost on him,” and this idea came from a “conversion experience” he had upon his first trip to the United States, augmented by his visit to Oak Ridge. Sam Cristy, “Students Break Language, Cultural Barriers,” *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 2, 1993.

<sup>101</sup> Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally*, 1-12.

project.<sup>102</sup> Many letters to the editor suggest that an irony exists in the idea of a bell in Oak Ridge: “it certainly seems that people should honor and have respect for those who gave their lives while protecting us from a foreign aggressor... The loss of my son will be on my mind all of my life, so don’t insult his memory by insisting that *a horrible symbol of a former enemy* be used as a showplace of honor in this city.”<sup>103</sup> The bell inherits the cultural politics of U.S.-Japan relations, including this transition from foe to friend.

The bell controversy exposed the incompleteness of the transition, however. This monument perhaps was an object of reconciliation, but the Oak Ridger opposition would not have it. While the city mayor insisted that “the bell symbolizes the transition of a wartime enemy into a peacetime friend,”<sup>104</sup> the absence of this shift is perhaps reflected in another resident’s letter: “Taking it a bit further, even the Sister City in Japan matter bothers me. Sometimes I wonder how we can forget, apparently so easily, the events which took place on Dec. 7, 1941, that precipitated our entry into World War II. We can and should be a forgiving society; but not a forgetting one.”<sup>105</sup> The birth of the bomb was the birth of the Oak Ridge reservation. For some bell opponents, this was linked to the idea of the Japanese as enemies, an idea that, during the bell wars of the 1990s, refused to go away. To some residents, reconciliation (“friendship”) would imply a flattening of

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<sup>102</sup> The board of the Oak Ridge Community Foundation issued a statement noting that “...the bell also symbolizes looking forward by recognizing the transition of Japan from wartime enemy into a peacetime friend and promoting the best within all nations – friendship, peace, cooperation – as well as commemorating the past.” Will Fitzgerald, “City Will Be Asked to Display Friendship Bell,” *Oak Ridger*, Oct. 1, 1993.

<sup>103</sup> Eunice Donnell Reynolds, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Feb. 24, 1992 (italics mine).

<sup>104</sup> Edmund A. Nephew, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, June 24, 1993.

<sup>105</sup> Carl S. Kincaid, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Oct. 18, 1991.

relations between the United States and Japan. This was not an acceptable prospect in the need to continue justifying the atomic bomb. The message was clear: ‘They [the Japanese] attacked us [the Americans] first.’

One aspect of the bell wars involved a debate about bell ringing regulations, and a local church minister, Boyd Carter, was reported to have “told the council he regards the ringing of the bell a ‘moral issue’ much like the civil rights march of 1965 from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., which he said he participated in. ‘I will find a way to ring the bell,’ he declared.”<sup>106</sup> Acting on moral resolve, Carter likened the bell project to the civil rights movement: I want to read this analogy as one that insists on acknowledging how racial difference played a role in the bell wars. My intention in this chapter has been to read the bell as a manifestation of racial tension, one that Othered Asians and ignored the unequal history of U.S.-Japan relations. Town residents discussed how the general ringing of bells invokes community: Oak Ridger Jon Pierce talked “about the appeal of bells around the world and the grand sense of community that their ringing brings. Community is the only thing mankind has to sustain and protect his future... Let the bell be rung often, daily, nightly, hourly.”<sup>107</sup> But like hospitality, the idea of community rests on exclusion: something or someone is excluded. In the bell wars, exclusion involved alternative narratives of the bomb (that is, death and destruction in Hiroshima) and a view from Japan. These narratives elicited local objections, revealing concern that the bell could symbolize a memorial for Japanese casualties of war. This act to exclude or gate-keep

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<sup>106</sup> Ron Bridgeman, “Council Delays Decision on Bell,” *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 6, 1995.

<sup>107</sup> Jon Pierce, letter to the editor, *Oak Ridger*, Sept. 5, 1995.

Oak Ridger identity was also played out on Asian and Asian American leaders of the project, including Ram Uppuluri, one of many national security migrants working at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, a discussion to which I now turn.



## Chapter 4

### "I Have a Job at a Place that Really Depends on Foreigners to Survive": Asian National Security Migrants in the South and the Contradictions of the U.S. Nation-State

"The U.S. state... tries to fashion immigration laws to draw in migrants for their labor  
and not for their lives."

-Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*<sup>1</sup>



Figure 4: poster, circa 1960s.

<sup>1</sup> Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 76.

It is some sort of small poster. The librarians at the Lab have led me to the informally named “History Room,” a space where a dedicated volunteer group of retired employees put together and sort through files related to the history of the Lab. Whether these are real names and real employees in the photo is unknown to me, but my eyes are drawn to the white badge of a Mr. C.H. Ho, a “No Clearance Non-Citizen” (see figure 4).<sup>2</sup> The man’s legal foreignness is highlighted by this designation. Except that it was most likely produced around 1960-1965, we know nothing of the story behind this poster, but its legacy remains intact on the campus of the Lab in contemporary times.<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to overlook the national and international significance of Asian migration to a place like Tennessee, considering that the Asian population in the 2000 Census finally came close to making up 1% of the state.<sup>4</sup> While the Asian migrant has been central to foundational tenets of U.S. immigration policy and border control,<sup>5</sup> the post-1965 Asian migration of scientists to Tennessee speaks to the convergence of the yellow peril and the national security state. If I have argued for the triangulation of science, national security, and immigration policy to make up national security migration, this chapter further situates the east Tennessee Asian scientist community within the

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<sup>2</sup> A poster in the History Room of library of Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Photograph taken by the author.

<sup>3</sup> I thank Anna Galyon of the ORNL library and Bill Yee of the ORNL History Room for this information.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *Tennessee: 2000 Summary*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act established the idea of the United States as a "gatekeeping nation," according to E. Lee. McKeown further emphasizes the impact of Asian migration on the history of U.S. border control, arguing that regarding "the documentation of status and the formulation of the border as a site of control,...Basic principles were developed through the control of migration from Asia to the white settler nations in the late nineteenth century." McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 13. E. Lee, *At America's Gates*, 9.

context of national security migration and the yellow peril. I explore the perceived paradox of national security in the hands of naturalized citizens – and how this is complicated by the specificities of working at Oak Ridge. For as I wander through the town of Oak Ridge, the Asian American subject is there – but not quite: they/ we surface in images and references like the photo in the History Room, but do not really emerge in more tangible ways in the public history of the town. There are two exceptions, though: the Friendship Bell and the noticeable presence of Asians on the ORNL campus. When I began my research, I found myself thinking of the connection between my interviewees and the victims of the bomb in Japan: What does it mean that the atomic bomb was detonated on thousands of Asian bodies, and that the U.S. nation-state, through its national laboratories, continues to recruit foreign-born and racialized subjects (many from Asia) to work on projects in the name of U.S. national security? And, why the disconnect in public memory between the fact that the bomb killed Asian peoples while the Lab relies so heavily on Asian labor that involves science and national security? These questions complicate the circumstances surrounding the Asian national security migrants of ORNL. Furthermore, if these questions reveal a sense of irony or contradiction, then my interviews show that my respondents, perhaps unsurprisingly, do not think too much about Oak Ridge's past involvement in the Manhattan Project. Instead, the Lab's current projects and priorities no longer speak to weapons production, not the way Y-12 or Los Alamos might. But this legacy comes through in the landscape of both the town and the Lab – and, I argue, in the daily work lives of Asian migrant scientists.

I draw from ethnographic research, looking at both the spaces of Oak Ridge and my interview source material. Particularly highlighting the status of Asian migrant scientists as national security migrants, my central argument is that these circumstances (of the scientist as the yellow peril of the national security state), combined with the highly securitized spaces of the Lab and discourses of national security throughout the town, produce an elevated sense of racial Othering: the body of the Asian migrant scientist at the Lab inherits a particular form of racialization that is characterized by the possible equivocation of foreigner and spy. This coupling, too, places *more restrictions on the body*. If the traditional narrative of the 1965 act is that it was a wholly liberatory measure, then narratives of U.S. citizenship also involve notions of freedom and progress. Thus, there is a parallel to be drawn between the 1965 act and the act of receiving U.S. citizenship: naturalized citizenship allows more freedom and movement (in international travel, for example), but also subjects the Asian migrant scientist to regulation and surveillance. Together, these ideas make up the circumstances faced and inherited by post-1965 Asian national security migrants. This argument is crafted in three ways in the following discussion: First, I begin by giving more language to what I mean by post-1965 Asian national security migration. I follow this with a case study of Wen Ho Lee and how his trial affected Asian national security migrants at the Lab, revealing how yellow peril meets the U.S. national security state. Third, I examine the highly securitized (and security-invoking) spaces in Oak Ridge (the Lab *and* the town) to demonstrate how national security is infused in the built environment. Lastly, I conclude by discussing the catch-22 that Asian national security migrants may encounter when working in the interest of a nation-state that is not their country of origin.

**“Foreign Nationality on the Floor”:** Post-1965 Asian National Security Migration

National security migration allows me to name a phenomenon that involves the funny moments: ones that I have either witnessed ethnographically or that have been shared with me by my interviewees. These moments, observations, and thoughts elicit double-takes. For one, there is my originary question, could Dad have been Wen Ho Lee? Two, I think of a conversation I witnessed between two foreign-born U.S. citizen PhDs from different Asian countries working in radiation shielding, where one discussed how the other needed Q clearance in order to bring him on board for a new project. Another sharp memory: an interviewee recalls an experience from many years ago, where “foreign nationality on the floor” was blasted over the intercom once he entered the building. And lastly, I think of the very visible red badge that all non-U.S. citizens must wear on the ORNL campus (in contrast to the U.S. citizens’ green badges, and the Q clearance citizens’ purple badges). The national security migrant experiences these magnified moments of (un)belonging *at work*.

National security migration includes the phenomenon of a foreign-born individual who migrates to (or, after their academic training, remains in) the United States as a result of their occupational status as a scientist or engineer working to advance the U.S. nation-state’s national security interests, broadly defined. This includes working in the interest of the United States in terms of making advances in science and technology as it intersects with U.S. national security.<sup>6</sup> Wen Ho Lee is an example of such circumstances:

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewees made clear that they are *not* government employees and that they are technically employees of whatever company the DOE has chosen as a contractor.

in his words, “When I first came to Los Alamos, I was one of the ‘Cold Warriors,’ using my scientific knowledge for nuclear deterrence... I worked to keep America safe.”<sup>7</sup>

These national security migrants represent the contradictions of the nation-state: national security relies on foreign-born workers. The U.S. nation-state wants migrant brain power, and the scientists may desire a host of things, from having a high-paying job to being in a workplace that allows them to pursue their love of science. But at what cost to Asians are these exchanges made? To be fair, many of my interviewees were very happy with their jobs, appreciating the flexibility in hours as salaried employees: “Almost every day I come to work, I feel that this is not a real *job-job*... Of course, there’s always paperwork: crap here, trouble there. But the fact is, you can sit here and think. And that’s amazing.” The state’s incorporation of some of these migrants for national security interests (developing or managing a nuclear arsenal) paradoxically illuminates the foreignness of the migrant scientist. The persecution of Wen Ho Lee demonstrates, too, that this incorporation places Q-clearance migrant scientists in a catch-22: that is, the scientist may also be seen as a threat to national security especially once one begins working on national security measures. These migrant scientists negotiate this contradiction in a multitude of ways, but also, the construct of national security is imposed even on migrant scientists whose work does *not* involve nuclear weaponry and/or classified materials. Thus, I suggest that the post-1965 national security migrant involves *both* 1) those whose work explicitly includes classified materials, nuclear weapons development in the interest of U.S. national security and with this, U.S. empire

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<sup>7</sup> W.H. Lee, *My Country Versus Me*, 93.

building; and 2) those whose work does *not* involve the above categories but who migrate and work under a set of conditions that impose regulations in the interest of national security. These regulations are most literally seen and felt in the physical spaces of the ORNL campus, and reverberations from the Wen Ho Lee case were felt even by those who were not necessarily working in classified materials.

**“There Was an Incident You Probably Don’t Know About, with a Scientist at Los Alamos of Chinese Descent”: The Persecution of Wen Ho Lee**

“Have you ever heard of Wen Ho Lee?” It was a question my latest interviewee informally asked me when we met up at the ORNL Visitor’s Center. As we walked across the lawn and ultimately to an office building, my ears perked up with this question – for it was one I myself was hesitant to pose. This was one of several ways that Asian migrant scientists brought up Lee: from off-the-cusp remarks to explicitly worded “This is off the record” discussions, Wen Ho Lee’s case had unmistakably affected many of my respondents. When recruiting one particular scientist and briefly summarizing my project, I was asked, “Do you know the possible repercussions of this conversation I’m having with you?”

Born in Taiwan, Wen Ho Lee came to the United States in 1965, received his Ph.D., became a U.S. citizen, and eventually worked in classified research as a code developer at Los Alamos National Laboratory. In 1999, Lee became the subject of an extensive FBI investigation involving espionage in the interest of the Chinese government. The U.S. government directed fifty-nine counts against him.<sup>8</sup> During his

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<sup>8</sup> W.H. Lee, *My Country Versus Me*, 203. Lee’s memoir is assisted by prominent Asian American civil rights leader and activist Helen Zia, who led the 1980s resurgence of the Asian American political

trial, Lee served nine months of solitary confinement without bail. Lee's trial attracted tremendous attention from the news media, and for many, his case has also become the quintessential example of anti-Asian racial scapegoating. To be certain, Lee clearly violated workplace regulations. According to anthropologist Hugh Gusterson, "He had, in fact, removed from the lab computer copies of top-secret nuclear weapons simulation codes, a serious offense for which he surely deserved to lose his clearance and his job."<sup>9</sup> While Joseph Masco points out that these 'top-secret codes' were in fact "legacy codes" (codes that were used in the past and whose relevance is questionable), "Lee has yet to explain fully why he moved the legacy codes from a secure to a nonsecure computer and to account adequately for the missing computer tapes containing the downloaded weapons codes."<sup>10</sup> To complicate matters, another line is blurry: the line between what is classified and what is not, for what is considered a "secret" is constantly being redefined. (As Masco shows, those working in Q-clearance must be acutely aware of these shifting definitions of secrecy and security, lest they accidentally disclose something that is now considered a "secret.") Lee has been described as a "rogue individual" who participated in "extreme rule-breaking with classified information."<sup>11</sup> And it has also been speculated that he broke workplace regulations in the interest of job security: under constant threat of being laid off, he may have thought that having these codes in his possession could

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movement in the wake of Vincent Chin's brutal murder. Thus, Zia's involvement makes a specific statement: that Lee's case involves civil rights and racial justice. *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* Directed by Christine Choy.

<sup>9</sup> Gusterson, "Assault on Los Alamos National Laboratory," 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Masco, *Nuclear Borderlands*, 274.

<sup>11</sup> Gusterson, "The Assault on Los Alamos," 16.



help him beyond Los Alamos.<sup>12</sup> Lee himself has noted that his intention all along was “to protect my files, to make a backup copy... These were my most important work products... I had lost some important codes before when the operating systems changed and I didn’t want that to happen again.”<sup>13</sup> Lee served time for this offense: of 59 counts, he pled guilty to the mishandling of classified data, his punishment being the nine months he had served in solitary confinement. All other charges were dismissed, and in a highly unorthodox move, the federal judge apologized to Lee for how he was treated.

My interest is not so much in Lee’s culpability or in the details of the charges leveled against him; rather, I am more interested in what his case reveals about the status of post-1965 Asian national security migrants, particularly those who work at Department of Energy national laboratories. I now briefly turn to studies of this case that augment the fact that the persecution of Lee was grounded in larger forces at play. Lee’s case undoubtedly affected the communities of Asian migrant scientists recruited to national laboratories. His case was not lost on my interviewees, and some expressed a sense of connection with Lee. They may have remarked about his stupidity or naivete (in how he handled classified information), but many accepted as fact that Lee was subjected to racial profiling and/or scapegoating.

This case prompted the development of a “hypersecure, racialized workspace,” one that involved great anxiety and concern among foreign-born Asian American scientists and engineers at national laboratories, according to Masco, who analyzed what

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<sup>12</sup> Stober and Hoffman, *A Convenient Spy*, 346.

<sup>13</sup> W.H. Lee, *My Country Versus Me*, 323.

was happening during the Wen Ho Lee trial within the “U.S. nuclear complex.”<sup>14</sup> Masco’s focus is on Los Alamos (LANL), so an important distinction must be made: the persecution of Lee illuminates the conditions faced by the Asian national security migrants I interviewed in Oak Ridge. However, though they are both secret cities of the Manhattan Project, ORNL and Wen Ho Lee’s LANL serve different purposes in the post-war era: LANL is a *weapons* lab, and ORNL is *not*. During the Manhattan Project, the Oak Ridge reservation had three sites named K-25, Y-12, and X-10. K-25 is currently undergoing demolition, X-10 became what we know as ORNL, and Y-12 retained its name and is now the neighboring Y-12 National Security Complex, a weapons lab.<sup>15</sup> While ORNL *does* have aspects of its work dedicated to national security and while some scientists do work in Q clearance, after the war it no longer engaged in weapons development. It is at heart a multidisciplinary research facility that conducts work in “energy, advanced materials, biological systems, high-performance computing, neutron sciences, and national security.”<sup>16</sup>

Although this distinction between ORNL and LANL is key, the Wen Ho Lee case *still* reverberated through the Asian American scientist community in Oak Ridge, for the underlying elements of national security migration exist at weapons and non-weapons

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<sup>14</sup> Masco, *Nuclear Borderlands*, 283.

<sup>15</sup> Much to the chagrin of some Oak Ridgers, Y-12 is the site of annual anti-nuclear weapons protests at its gates.

<sup>16</sup> Oak Ridge National Laboratory, *Laboratory is Reborn*, 5. Alvin Trivelpiece, former ORNL director, describes the history of the Lab: after the war, the lab moved to “the development of nuclear energy for peaceful uses. . . . In the 1960s, it became the first national laboratory to turn to research tied only tangentially to nuclear energy.” It was in the 1970s that the Lab broadened to work on “all forms of energy.” Trivelpiece, “Prologue,” vi.

laboratories. Thus, regardless of which national laboratory and the color of one's badge, reading Wen Ho Lee alongside the experiences of Asian scientists at ORNL reveals the circumstances around national security migration. One scientist recounted an incident related to a fellow Asian scientist at Y-12 and X-10 (the Lab) shortly after the Lee trial:

X: For two years, the whole environment at Los Alamos was not very good. Now, at Oak Ridge, the situation also was not so good because there was a scientist, Chinese (he probably did not yet have citizenship), and he went to Y-12 [the neighboring National Security Complex], and somehow there was a misunderstanding of one kind or another that he was not allowed to continue his contract afterwards... And he had to work at UT [University of Tennessee] and call his colleague to turn on the knobs at Oak Ridge [ORNL, also known as X-10]... And then there was a big, internal investigation about whether or not he violated certain rules, or security rules and so on. And then as a result, he was not allowed to go back to work at ORNL, at X-10.

J: At all?

X: At all. So there was, at that time, this kind of atmosphere of national security, and... all the fear about the People's Republic [of China] using, targeting thousands of scientists as potential spies and so on. That was the atmosphere.<sup>17</sup>

This “atmosphere of national security” that followed the persecution of Wen Ho Lee is precisely why framing the classified and non-classified Asian scientists at the Lab as national security migrants is productive. The scientist in question was not a U.S. citizen, but my interviewee (a long-time U.S. citizen) felt a sense of kinship or commonality with an Asian migrant colleague.

In 2000, Oak Ridger and chairperson of the Overseas Chinese Physics Association (OCPA), C.Y. Wong, delivered an address to his colleagues at the prestigious American Physical Society entitled, “The Los Alamos Incident and Its Effects

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<sup>17</sup> Hereafter, I use “X” to signal the interviewee's words, and “J” (for Jasmine) to signal my own.

on Chinese American Scientists.” Among other goals, the OCPA seeks “to promote greater awareness by the physics/astronomy community at large of the achievements by ethnic Chinese scientists in physics/astronomy and related fields in this country and abroad.”<sup>18</sup> Representing the organization, Wong’s speech was given while Lee was held in solitary confinement, and Wong did not hold back in making clear the different degrees to which Chinese American scientists working in the United States were affected by the allegations against Lee. For one, those in classified work settings encountered a “working environment... [that] has deteriorated,” with scientists fearing their contributions were being devalued and that this would surface in hiring and promotion practices.<sup>19</sup> Wong argued that even those working in non-classified materials were concerned that grant funding would react unfavorably to Chinese American applicants, further noting that security was imposed to an even greater degree on migrant workers from “sensitive countries”: even though such employees were not working in classified research, many experienced greater surveillance such as requiring an escort when walking on the campus of a national laboratory.<sup>20</sup> The persecution of Wen Ho Lee spoke to the importance of organizations like the OCPA, in which its members feel the need to come together based on their shared ethnic and occupational identities.

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<sup>18</sup> “By-Laws of the Overseas Chinese Physics Association,” International Organization of Chinese Physicists and Astronomers, accessed August 25, 2013, <http://www.ocpaweb.org/new/bylaw/bylaw.html>. With about 400 members, the OCPA, which has since been renamed the International Organization of Chinese Physicists and Astronomers, was formed in 1990 in response to the growing “number of ethnic Chinese physicists in North America and elsewhere.” Ngee-Pong Chang, Bing-lin Young, Chi-Sing Lam, and Cheuk-Yin Wong, “A Short History of OCPA,” International Organization of Chinese Physicists and Astronomers, last modified September 2011, accessed Nov. 16, 2013, <http://www.ocpaweb.org/new/aboutus/history.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Wong, “Los Alamos Incident,” 420.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

## **“You Become the Same Category: Asian Spy”: The Post-1965 Yellow Peril of the U.S. National Security State**

While it is clear that many Asian migrant scientists experienced a challenging work environment during and after the trial of Wen Ho Lee, these conditions were grounded in yellow peril: that is, the Lee case is symptomatic of how the discourse of yellow peril and the national security state are connected. This next section has two parts: first I talk briefly about yellow peril in the 1990s; then I discuss the historical context of yellow peril and the national security state.

According to Michael Chang, the Wen Ho Lee affair was the last of a line of events and a series of discursive shifts involving “the ‘Asian Donorgate’ discourses,” which engaged in a heavy-handed racialization of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, under the rubric of national security, race, and citizenship, the 1990s “Asian Donorgate” campaign finance controversy regarding Chinese American John Huang is discursively connected to the spy case of Wen Ho Lee: “DNC [Democratic National Committee] vice chair of finance John Huang was accused of accepting illegal foreign funds” from Asia.<sup>22</sup> This possibility of a so-called “China connection” in 1996 led to the formation of two congressional committees that were formed to pursue the charges. “Asian Donorgate” and its discourses were predicated on “normative constructions of nation and citizenship” used to regulate Asian American subjects and “deployed in the

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<sup>21</sup> M. Chang, *Racial Politics in an Era of Transnational Citizenship*, xx-xxiv.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

name of national sovereignty and security.”<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, the conversation began with the “campaign finance reform discourse” in which “Asian Donorgate” surfaced, whereby the rhetoric shifted to reflect a “foreign political influence discourse” of China influencing the United States.<sup>24</sup> Finally, this eventually moved to what Chang labels as “the threat to national security discourse,” marked by the charges against Lee. This is how Lee’s case became an example of racial scapegoating: he was an easy target at a time when leaders were looking for a “China connection.” These accusations originated in the Cox Report, a congressional document that investigated the fundraising scandal and suggested the possibility of “nuclear espionage.”<sup>25</sup> Lest we view the persecution of Wen Ho Lee as a spy case only, looking at the political climate of that time period reveals how the case was part of a larger discourse of Asian Americans and the limits of belonging. One of the scientists I interviewed spoke to this when referring to the Lee case:

What happens if science and society are in conflict – [if] security and the pursuit of truth are having a conflict? And how does one deal with this kind of problem? It’s a reflection of our time ... It was also occurring at a time when ... China was a kind of potential image of an enemy of the U.S. This was before 9/11 ... Then we Chinese Americans were caught in-between.

And yet the persecution of Asian migrant scientist Wen Ho Lee in the name of national security has an historical precedent, Qian Xuesen. While the persecution of Qian preceded that of Wen Ho Lee’s, the effects of Lee’s case were exacerbated by the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 58.

escalating anti-Asian sentiment of the 1990s (via “Asian Donorgate”) and were particularly felt by the comparatively larger numbers of Asian migrant scientists working in the United States (due to the Hart-Celler Act).

Furthermore, if this anti-Asian sentiment is rooted in the yellow peril discourses that are attached to Asians in the United States, then Lee’s memoir speaks powerfully to how Asian American communities have been construed as a monolithic entity with questionable allegiance to the U.S. nation-state, reflecting the relationship between yellow peril and national security. Because of Lee’s status as an Asian American, he was suspected when any supposed cultural markers appeared, such as writings in Chinese, presentations of unclassified papers in Asia, communication in Mandarin with his family while in prison, or the sending of Christmas cards to Chinese nationals he met at conferences. During the trial, notions of Lee’s racial Otherness reached heights of absurdity as well. In court arguments about the possibility of “at-home bail,” the prosecuting attorneys proposed outlandish ideas of escape: Lee describes, “They even suggested that enemy foreign agents from some as yet unspecified countries would swoop into White Rock [where Lee lived] with planes or black helicopters and some ninjas would snatch me away.”<sup>26</sup> “Loyalty” may require severing one’s cultural connections. As an Oak Ridge Chinese American scientist remarked, “That could have happened to anybody. Just because you visited China. So they could impose or accuse you of spying. I mean, if they don’t – ‘they,’ by that I mean the company or the company you work for, doesn’t like you, wants to find a reason to get rid of you. They can accuse

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<sup>26</sup> W.H. Lee, *My Country Versus Me*, 232-233.

you just because you are different.” The idea of threat is extended beyond those who work with a Q-clearance: the racialization of Asians as potential threat – as yellow peril – means that the racial implications of the Wen Ho Lee case affected Asian migrant scientists with badges of all colors. The Lee case showed that ties to all things Chinese could implicate Chinese American scientists. Given this, it was unsurprising to find that some interviewees insist on an English-only work environment. As a group leader, one Chinese American scientist made known, “If I catch my colleagues talking in Chinese in the Lab, I’ll say, ‘No, you’re not supposed to do that.’ We have to maintain professionalism at work.” Though this disciplining (and possibly assimilationist) move is made in the name of professionalism, I could not help but think this decision was also made out of self-preservation, as an act of survival.

It is also not surprising that the Wen Ho Lee case provided the grounds for political mobilization among some Asian migrant scientists at Oak Ridge. For the scientist who thought “that could have happened to anyone,” this case, an example of unequal citizenship, became a reason for political mobilization:

X: That’s why I joined the OCA [Organization of Chinese Americans]. At the time, we felt threatened, actually-

J: "We"? As in?

X: Chinese Americans. I’m not sure if I was a citizen yet. But we work in the Lab and we *knew*. We sort of sensed that this was an unfounded accusation, that it was more or less like a political convenience imposed on a guy like him. I couldn’t even imagine he would do anything like that. So we were very concerned. You could say out of selfishness, for our own.

For this scientist, the Wen Ho Lee case also “made things easier: peopled started to realize there was a stereotype against Asian Americans.”



After the Lee trial, Asian migrant scientists also began to identify bigger connections, particularly regarding the possibility of a glass ceiling. In his speech, Wong also noted how foreign-born postdocs were facing difficulties applying for permanent work. He pointed out the existence of a glass ceiling well before Wen Ho Lee's trial, noting that the "Los Alamos incident will only further reinforce existing prejudices."<sup>27</sup> I also found it interesting when a scientist told me, "I almost got Wen Ho Leed once," proceeding to talk about a poor performance review that was unfounded. This individual equivocated racial discrimination in the workplace with being "Wen Ho Leed." Another of my interviewee's thoughts spoke directly to the way national security, racial prejudice, and the Lee trial intersected. This scientist brought up the trial, and I followed up:

J: Can you tell me a little bit about what you thought of the whole Wen Ho Lee case?

X: The whole thing? Yeah, I think both sides have a problem. He has a problem, too. He shouldn't bring the disc, the security, to his home or outside the lab environment. This action is a no-no. But secondly, the DOE used him as a scapegoat, mostly as a prop because this- in Los Alamos, basically, I heard, most people were doing what he was doing: casual about some of the information, you know, electronic device. So he was singled out. To me, it's not fair. You have four bad people at the table. You punish only one [chuckles], and so it's an analogy. And the whole thing I feel is a big lesson for Asian Americans –

J: What's the lesson?

X: ... You probably remember [that] 80-20 and several other Asian organizations tried to drum up [support]: they realized we needed a voice.<sup>[28]</sup> You know, if you

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<sup>27</sup> Wong, "Los Alamos Incident," 422.

<sup>28</sup> For example, During Lee's trial, 80-20 sought to draw attention to his mistreatment by circulating a petition in support of a presidential pardon. Xiao-huang Yin, "The Lee Case Shakes Asian Americans' Faith in Justice System," *L.A. Times*, Sept. 24, 2000, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/sep/24/opinion/op-25927>. The 80-20 Initiative is "a national, nonpartisan, Political Action Committee dedicated to winning equal opportunity and justice for all Asian Americans through a SWING bloc vote, ideally directing 80% of our community's votes and money to the presidential candidate endorsed by the 80-20, who better

are stepped on and you don't have a voice, then you're always stepped on. So they tried to organize..., tried to clear the, you know, performance review or some other relations. Why is there such a large percentage of Asian American scientists, but very few on the management level? They asked questions, simple questions like that...

J: When the Wen Ho Lee thing happened, did that affect you at work?

X: A little bit. Because it's sort of, you become the same category. You know, *Asian spy... They don't tell you, but you feel*. Remember World War II, Japanese Americans were all put in concentration camps without any good reason. Because they categorize us as one group. It doesn't matter even if you live here for twenty years or thirty years. Or even if you're Asian American. They consider you an Asian [chuckles].

To my surprise (given the strained history between China and Japan), my Chinese American interviewee made this link between Lee's trial and Japanese American incarceration, showing his awareness of racial discrimination of Asian Americans in the United States and the racialization that he, as a Chinese migrant, shares even with the Japanese. The parallel he draws is predicated on yellow peril in the national security state. Japanese Americans were, of course, incarcerated in the name of "military necessity," with suspicions of their loyalty at the center of this claim. My interviewee's *feeling* of being in the category of "Asian spy" powerfully speaks to how Wen Ho Lee's case, as dramatic and tumultuous as it was, filtered through in the everyday lives of the post-1965 national security migrants in east Tennessee. These challenging questions around the possibility of workplace discrimination are situated within the idea of a racialized Other being at odds with the national security state, though I contend that this

construction actually also begins the moment one steps on the campus – pre *and* post the trial of Wen Ho Lee.

### **Oak Ridge (National Laboratory): The “City Behind a Fence”**

From its very inception, Oak Ridge was grounded in discourses of national security. The purpose of this section is to paint a picture of how national security emerges at ORNL and in Oak Ridge. Of course, Oak Ridge’s origin story was to aid the construction of the atomic bomb. Indeed, the city of Oak Ridge did not actually appear on a map until 1949.<sup>29</sup> Because the Lab *made* the town, national security extends beyond the Lab’s present-day borders. National security is felt discursively and experientially through the town’s public history. In the space of the Lab and in the town itself, a heightened sense of security is normalized, and this was particularly evident to me, given my status as an outsider to both the Lab and to Oak Ridge. In short, national security is constructed in the town’s narratives about its history.



**Figure 5: Oak Ridge residents celebrating the end of the war.**

<sup>29</sup> “Oak Ridge didn’t open its gates to the public until 1949, the same year it was officially placed on the state and national maps.” “Security,” Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau, accessed Nov. 28, 2013, <http://oakridgevisitor.com/history/secret-town/security/>.

Image 1: When visiting the Lab, the giant photograph is hard to avoid (see figure 5).<sup>30</sup> It is plastered on the wall at the Visitor's Center as well as at multiple open locations on campus. The people in the mostly (if not all) white crowd (the campus was segregated) are grinning if not laughing, many with their hands in the air, waving at the camera. As the newspaper headline proclaims, "War Ends." These are the workers who, for months if not years, were unknowingly working on the uranium enrichment needed for the atomic bomb, and this particular photograph cannot be missed by anyone looking into the public history of Oak Ridge: it is not just displayed at the Lab but is also on the home page of the city tourism website and at the American Museum of Science and Energy, among other places in town.



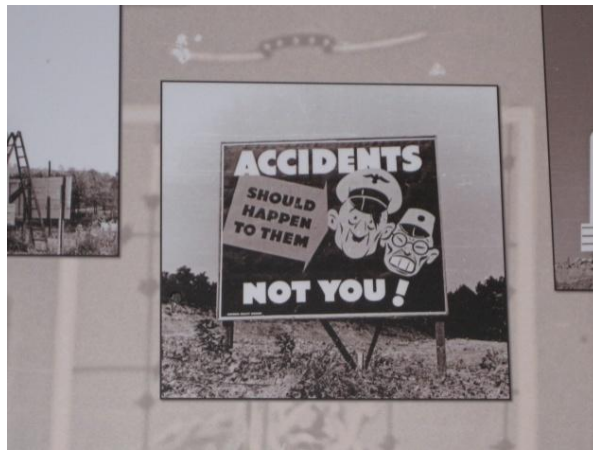
**Figure 6: exhibit at the American Museum of Science and Energy, Oak Ridge.**

Image 2: Another visual captures my attention during my first visit to the American Museum of Science and Energy. A permanent installation on the Manhattan Project features a collage of images, most of them photographs or portraits. At the bottom

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<sup>30</sup> Photograph taken by Ed Westcott in Oak Ridge on August 14, 1945. Yates, ed., *Through the Lens of Ed Westcott*, 77.

left corner of the collage is a print of *The Knoxville Journal* headline, “Power of Oak Ridge Atomic Bomb Hits Japs” (see figure 6).<sup>31</sup> The pejorative term elicits a double-take from me, though I shouldn’t be surprised, given the time period. But also, aside from a text-heavy newspaper print, it is the only newspaper headline featured in the collage. Like the “War Ends” image, it, too, will frequently appear in places commemorating the history of Oak Ridge. I see it again at the annual Secret City Festival, too, on unapologetically enlarged images of the cover page of a newspaper: “Japs Accept Terms, Tokyo Radio Says.” It is on display at the front table of the designated history area, in the midst of a two-day festival featuring arts and crafts, music concerts, and the South’s biggest World War II re-enactment.



**Figure 7: Framed photograph on display at the American Museum of Science and Energy.**

Image 3. Back at the museum as I make my way through the permanent exhibit, pictures line the top of the walls, some in color, some in black and white. They are pictures of billboards that appeared throughout the “Oak Ridge reservation” in the 1940s. One gets me to do another double-take: “Accidents should happen to them,” points the

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<sup>31</sup> Photograph taken by the author in 2011.

caption (see figure 7).<sup>32</sup> “Them” is, of course, Hitler and Hirohito. But the Japanese emperor fits the bill differently: he is now the bucktoothed, squinty-eyed Oriental, a look that persists in political cartoons and in popular culture through the course of American history. Other than this, Asians seem absent at the museum. The effects of the bomb in Hiroshima, for example, are unseen, unheard. As museum studies scholar Arthur Molella notes about this Oak Ridge museum, “A display about the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that rose from Tinian Island to drop the Bomb on Hiroshima, stops short of the Bomb’s actual detonation over the city. A plaque lists overall casualties in World War II, but is appallingly silent on deaths in Hiroshima or Nagasaki.”<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 8: Photograph of the World-War-II-era Oak Ridge campus.**

In their historical study of Oak Ridge, Charles Johnson and Charles Jackson analyze the formation of the “top secret community” of Oak Ridge, the first of three sites to develop the atomic bomb. Compared to Hanford and Los Alamos, Oak Ridge had the

<sup>32</sup> Taken by the author in 2011, this framed photograph is on display at the American Museum of Science and Energy. The actual photograph was most likely taken by Ed Westcott, the “official photographer for the Oak Ridge site of the Manhattan Project” from 1942-1946. Yates, “The Coincidence of Ed Westcott and Oak Ridge, Tennessee,” 12.

<sup>33</sup> Molella, “Exhibiting Atomic Culture,” 215.

highest population and was “the most intricate in community organization.”<sup>34</sup> Displacing about a thousand families, the U.S. government began construction on land that spanned seven by seventeen miles.<sup>35</sup> National security was front and center from the start (see figure 8)<sup>36</sup>: according to Russell Olwell, “in Oak Ridge the identification of the city with national security was more direct than in other parts of the nation, as military necessity had given birth to the city itself.”<sup>37</sup> He further notes:

Founded in wartime, Oak Ridge’s original character more closely approximated a military base than the rural village that predated it. The army administered Oak Ridge *without pretense of democracy*, and for the duration of the war, it allowed no local elections, free press, or freedom of assembly. Because Oak Ridge was owned and managed by the U.S. Army, *military work and civil society overlapped there, making it difficult to see where the former ended and the latter began*. The army’s security system created... a community developed in isolation from the rest of the country.<sup>38</sup>

Oak Ridge developed “a public culture that placed service to national defense goals above other competing values, such as civil liberties”; with the end of World War II and the start of the cold war, this “patriotic consensus re-cemented into place, surviving intact for decades.”<sup>39</sup> This extraordinary history has created a space that is riddled with complexity and contradiction. In the “city behind a fence” (as Jackson and Johnson called it, based quite literally on the fence that surrounded the campus), residents lived and

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<sup>34</sup> Johnson and Jackson, *City Behind a Fence*, xx.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Photograph of a “billboard in Oak Ridge,” taken by Ed Westcott on December 31, 1943. Yates, ed., *Through the Lens of Ed Westcott*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Olwell, *At Work in the Atomic City*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 (italics mine).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 5.

worked in military-like, highly regulated surroundings, giving up many rights as citizens in the name of national security. Thus, the eventual post-1965 arrival of Asian migrant scientists involves a set of extraordinary historical circumstances upon his or her decision to work at the Lab.



**Figure 9: photographs of security checkpoints in 2012 and in the 1940s.**

When entering the campus of ORNL, every vehicle must pass through a gate where guards check each person’s pre-issued badge or prior registration. This is reminiscent of wartime Oak Ridge, which also had a security checkpoint (see figure 9).<sup>40</sup> Still, employees at the Lab inform me that before the September 11 attacks, ORNL was an open campus. “Those gates are new, after 9/11,” I was told. The gates are placed near what were formerly the outskirts of the campus. In a more recent development, national security at the Lab in a post-9/11 world reinstates parts of the original culture of security.

The first time I arrived at the ORNL Visitor’s Center I was also struck by a few things: for one, the prominent “War Ends” photo was on the wall. Two, so was an enormous photograph of Albert Einstein, accompanied by the famous letter where he

<sup>40</sup> Photograph on the left was taken by the author in 2012. Photograph on the right was taken by Ed Westcott in 1945. Yates, ed. *Through the Lens of Ed Westcott*, 6.



warned the president about the development of atomic weaponry by enemy forces. And the last thing I noticed were the comparatively understated signs at two ends of the reception counter, “U.S. citizens” and “non-U.S. citizens.” Upon entering, the guest has to choose which part of the counter to physically approach in order to register. Thus, one of the first official in-person interactions a visitor has at ORNL concerns one’s citizenship status. This is, of course, no surprise at a scientific research facility of the DOE, but it was striking for me as a civilian. By the time I got to that reception counter, I had contacted my father’s colleague weeks in advance to arrange the visit, taken an online tutorial about security measures at the Lab, and shown my driver’s license at the security gate and checkpoint. Upon checking in at the reception, I was issued a green visitor’s badge to be worn anytime I was on the campus: I would have to show it at the security checkpoint on my next visit, and it would enable me to enter only certain buildings on campus. Different buildings at the Lab have different levels of security, too. Whereas one scientist left me in her office unattended so she could rush off to a meeting, another person, a male scientist, had to awkwardly escort me to the restroom (and wait for me outside!). In this way, these security measures and behaviors are normalized at ORNL, taken as everyday. As an outsider, a visitor, I felt a sense of uneasiness with these visits.

### **“As a Foreign Citizen, Working at a National Lab Is So Much Hassle”: The Red Badge of Foreignness**

The migrant scientists of ORNL especially become implicated in discourses of security once they enter the campus, regardless of whether they participate in classified research. As a Department of Energy institution, ORNL requires individuals to yield to

these security measures should they want to work there or even visit the campus. Many of my participants remarked upon the Lab's "expectation" or even "requirement" for its employees to seek U.S. citizenship (even for non-Q-clearance staff). Such is the historical specificity of DOE national laboratories. One interviewee spoke about the expectation to receive citizenship and how this is marked on the body:

J: Was there any expectation at work for you to become a citizen?

X: ...yeah, I think there is. Because what happens is that when you are employed as non-citizen, I think the Lab has to get approval from DOE every year, every other year, ok? And... it's a formality, but still a formality... Then you wear a badge right now. It's a red colored badge... *Luckily when I was there, it was white, okay?* You cannot distinguish the white from... the light blue background that much. *Now we can easily see the red: okay, foreigner.*

J: When did they change that?

X: *After 9/11. To make more prominent.* So nobody told me that you *have to* become a citizen to keep your job. Because if you required a clearance, then I would have to -- because you cannot get a clearance without being a citizen. But my job didn't require clearance. But there are other issues that, if you are not a citizen, there's an extra level of hoops that you have to jump through. If you go to another facility, you visit another national lab, you have to apply, you know, ten days ago before you can go. But if you are a citizen, you can tell somebody, "I'm coming tomorrow" and somebody will have a visitor's [badge ready for you].

In this passage, the respondent links the origins of the red badge to both the September 11 attacks and his workplace expectation to get legal citizenship. He notes with relief how fortunate he was when the non-citizen, "foreigner" badge was white during the time he was not yet a citizen, so as not to draw so much attention to his status. Others confirm the inconvenience non-citizens go through when being cleared to visit the Lab ("It's not as bad as some weapons lab, but still it's more difficult"). The badge color also dictates social interactions on campus:

J: do, do people notice you as a red badge?

X: Yeah. Yeah.

J: Does that have any effect on how you're treated?

X: I do not feel that. I do not feel that. But there is something like, like for example, it's very fundamental: entering the building. The citizen can piggy-back, so they don't need to swipe [the badge] every time. But for us [red-badge carriers], we need to swipe it, no matter if the door has been opened or not. We need to.

In other words, citizens can hold the door open for fellow citizens only. Red-badge carriers must always open their own doors by swiping the badge. Thus, everyday practices of "common courtesy" and hospitality are disrupted at the DOE lab setting, replaced by other practices in which "security" is the norm. Another scientist's level of self-awareness of having to wear a red badge turned into humor:

J: In terms of wearing a red badge, does that, is that just like an everyday thing to you?

X: yeah, to me, sometimes I joke about this, so for example, if you see my door it says, 'Alien at work.' ... instead of 'man at work.' ...yeah, so I mean you take it lightly, right? So if you cannot change it, then you have to suck it up. So that's my attitude: because as an immigrant, I always believe you have to work harder. And so that's part of the package.

Clearly, the notion of national security is omnipresent and unavoidable when entering the ORNL campus at the vehicle checkpoint, and clearly, national security and citizenship are deeply intertwined and even marked on bodies. In conceptualizing national security migration, "security" pervades not just the intellectual work at hand, but the physical space the occupational migrant works in as well as their actual body.

My intention is not to present Asian national security migration as an essential experience or as a phenomenon to be explained in positivist terms. Rather, it lies in the daily encounters and experiences of racialized subjects. Asian national security migration describes the experience of a racialized Other interpellated as foreign at best and as a spy at worst. This is not to say that there is no sense of agency, choice, or opportunity, however, because there is something the migrant may desire: to pursue a doctorate, to advance their careers, to receive funding and the requisite equipment to carry out desired research, to receive U.S. citizenship, for their children to have birthright citizenship. There are also those for whom working in the interest of a country not of their origin is a non-issue. In one case, for instance, a scientist who believed this also thought that working for a national laboratory was a big draw: he felt like “being able to do something directly for the DOE” factored into his decision to take a position at ORNL: “Being able to do something that actually makes a difference” is rewarding because “the kind of work we’re doing [in the interviewee’s specialized field] will very likely affect the U.S.”

Prashad writes of how “The U.S. state... tries to fashion immigration laws to draw in migrants for their labor and not for their lives.”<sup>41</sup> National security migration speaks to this unequal relationship, clouded by an immigrant narrative in which one contributes their labor in exchange for legal citizenship. Thus, the idea of national security migration problematizes this narrative of naturalized citizenship, which defines citizenship as providing more opportunity for social mobility, a way to attain the

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<sup>41</sup> Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 76. Prashad is referring to the Hart-Celler Act “since there was no expectation that the migrants who entered under the technical worker category would later use their citizenship to bring in their families.” *Ibid.*, 77.

American Dream and “a better life,” so to speak. Referring to the “ORNL leadership,” another Asian migrant scientist noted, “For their convenience, I became a U.S. citizen.” Among my interviewees, I heard varying responses to my questions about legal citizenship. For one person who arrived in the 1960s, “the intention to be a citizen was one of the requirements.” For some, related to the act of receiving citizenship is whether one would apply for Q clearance. Some matter-of-factly noted that Q clearance enables more funding, more research opportunities because “it opens doors for you.” For others, Q clearance meant something else entirely: “I didn't want to have to be secretive about my work.” Or, regarding defense-related work, “It violates my Buddhist principles.”

The persecution of Wen Ho Lee exposes the limits of naturalized citizenship and the boundaries – or *risks* – of national security migration for the migrants themselves. National security migration can involve a no man’s land of patriotism. In the case of Lee, catch-22 exists: had he retained his Chinese citizenship, he could not have applied for classified status. That is, he would always be a legal, foreign Other if he kept his Chinese citizenship. In this way, on paper, he would not be legally claiming American-ness and would therefore not be trusted to work on classified materials. In other words, the presumption is that as a Chinese citizen, he could be an enemy of the (U.S. nation-) state. On the other hand, when Lee successfully applied for U.S. citizenship, he was in turn renouncing his legal relationship to China and proclaiming his loyalty, so to speak, to the United States. From there, he successfully applied for Q clearance and was no longer a foreign Other by legal standards. However, by working in Q clearance, he also opened his loyalty up to scrutiny: that is, becoming a U.S. citizen (and gaining Q clearance) led to the accusation that he could be spying for China. This is the paradox of such legal

declarations of patriotism. Thus, the national security migrant can find herself being perceived as straddling the line between two countries and that there is a choice to be made about which country to serve. We see this ‘requirement to choose’ in Lee’s memoir, a book that is arguably an over-articulation of his loyalty to the United States.<sup>42</sup> This either/or framework denies the possibility of transnational identity, which is rendered unsafe and possibly symptomatic of disloyalty. Underneath all of this is another layer: the perception of a migrant scientist’s loyalty to the U.S. nation-state can shift according to relations between the United States and the migrant’s respective country of origin. National security migrants face these uneasy circumstances in which political currents can reverse course, going in a direction that may or may not be to their advantage. If, as Masco argues, the Wen Ho Lee case provided a glimpse into the nuclear complex’s implicit engagement with national belonging (including shifting definitions of national secrets), then Lee’s case demonstrates that when it comes to securing its own borders and national security, the U.S. nation-state will make clear the limits of naturalized citizenship. Attaining citizenship can facilitate more regulation and surveillance on the national security migrant.

An interview question about one’s country of citizenship elicited an interesting turn in one particular conversation:

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<sup>42</sup> As the book dedication includes, “This book is for all Americans, especially those whose prayers and support helped me through my ordeal.” This possibility of over-articulation is certainly debatable and may be an example of strategic essentialism. Anderson and R. Lee remind us of the radical nature of the Asian Americanist narrative: “In the face of the perpetual racial designation of Asian Americans as indelibly alien, the Asian Americanist claim to an American history ought not to be dismissed as merely assimilationist, but may be understood as a radical assertion of subjectivity and transformative of the nation itself. It is a recognition of the nation-state as the primary interlocutor of the Asian body in America and is, to borrow Gayatri Spivak’s term, a moment of “strategic essentialism.” “Asian American Displacements,” 8. The authors are referring to Spivak, “Subaltern Studies.”

X: Mmhm, I'm a U.S. citizen. And I changed as soon as I was eligible. Because it's just, traveling is so much easier. If I could, if China allowed dual citizenship, I would absolutely like to do that. But China doesn't do that. So I ended up giving up Chinese citizenship.

J: Mmhm. What is it, uh, in terms of, why would you want dual citizenship if that was an option?

X: that was mainly because of travel... But also, as a *foreign citizen*, working at a national lab is so much hassle. I changed, I think shortly after there was an incident you probably don't know about, with a scientist at Los Alamos of Chinese descent...

J: Mmhm. This is the Wen Ho Lee-

X: Right. There was a big uproar especially among science community. And it made us feel really uncomfortable. Right after the incident, there were a lot of new rules put in national labs, about double-checking foreigners. And because of the incident (and it's related to Asians) – the guards and security people, naturally they just – I mean, it's human nature, okay? They didn't mean to be profiling, but they can't help it. They look at Asians, they're going to pay extra attention! [laughs] Uh, so at that point it was just like, “Oh, I, honestly, I don't want to work here.” it would just be so much easier if I become a U.S. citizen. That was it.

J: When was that?

X: Um, Wen Ho Lee actually happened in '93, '94, right? I thought-

J: Oh, I think that might have been '99. But for you, I'm sorry, what I mean is, your citizenship?

X: For me, I became a U.S. [citizen] in '97.

In this passage, the respondent speaks to a number of issues. For one, their discussion of the inconvenience of having non-U.S. citizenship was echoed by almost all of the other individuals I interviewed. Though it is unclear whether “double-checking foreigners” is code for checking on Asians specifically, the respondent’s description of their status — they are a “foreign citizen” — is illuminating because it speaks to the recognition and admission that though they are a legal citizen, they will always be presumed foreign. And

lastly, I find fascinating that the respondent not only does not think I would know about the Wen Ho Lee trial, but they actually mistakenly remember the circumstances of their decision to become a citizen. They attribute their reason to apply for U.S. citizenship to the convenience of traveling, further noting that it was also because of the Wen Ho Lee case. And yet, as the passage later reveals, they applied for citizenship well *before* the 1999 Lee trial. This mistaken memory shows how Lee's case reverberated and continues to reverberate through the Asian American scientist community — that is, in the act of remembering, this respondent brought up the Lee trial as one of the reasons to apply for citizenship. Lastly, the mistaken memory also reveals that even before the Lee trial, it was still a lot of “hassle” for foreign-born scientists to work at the Lab.

### **Conclusion**

Spanning several decades, the persecution of Qian Xueshen *and* Wen Ho Lee have a common denominator: the racialized Asian scientist who is working and Othered in the interest of U.S. national security. These are arguably extreme circumstances, perhaps used as examples of ‘worst case scenarios’ for Asian Americans. They are cases that speak to how loyalties are questioned in heightened, visible ways for Asian Americans. National security migration centers the idea that the racialized Other is viewed with suspicion and may undergo some form of surveillance. The catch-22 surfaced in the 1950s for Qian Xuesen, the father of Chinese rocketry: only *after* he applied for U.S. citizenship was he suspected to be a spy. This paradoxical undercurrent is what marks these cases as examples of the risk associated with national security migration. The possibility of being seen as a threat escalates once one declares and gains legal U.S. citizenship. In short, the most trusted is the most suspected. As one of my



interviewees said, “I have a job at a place that really depends on foreigners to survive.”

The syntax of this statement produces a double meaning. The first involves the speaker’s intention: the survival of the Lab rests on foreigners. The second reading is my own: the Lab needs foreigners who *are able* to survive.

## Chapter 5

### “They Assume that I Get It”:

#### Language Barrier(s) and Habit Patterns in Methodology

"For now, I would just have it known that the alinearity is intentional, even crafted, that there is a logic. I am never *just* emoting, never *just* displaying the free associative workings of a mind."

-Victor Villanueva, *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*<sup>1</sup>

“Do I Like Them Too Much?”

-Valerie Yow, on the “Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter functions as a theoretical rumination about methodology and method.<sup>3</sup> In the traditions of ethnic studies and feminist studies scholars who call for self-reflexivity, the following thought piece focuses on how my own social locations inform the research methods and methodologies, particularly with respect to the personal interviews I conducted as well as the transcription practices that followed. Considering

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<sup>1</sup> Villanueva, *Bootstraps*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Yow, “Do I Like Them too Much?,” 55-79.

<sup>3</sup> I echo DeVault’s discussion, where she draws from “philosopher Sandra Harding’s (1987) suggestion that we distinguish between ‘methods’ (i.e., particular tools for research), ‘methodology’ (theorizing about research practice), and ‘epistemology’ (the study of how and what we can know).” DeVault, *Liberating Method*, 28. DeVault is referring to Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology*.

questions about self-reflexivity in the interviewing process certainly runs the risk of being charged with “navel-gazing.” Alice Yang Murray alludes to this charge and calls for oral historians to contextualize their sources by exploring the implications of the sources themselves (e.g., to explore what it means to have a ‘reliable’ oral historical source, and to explore how the researcher’s positionality affects the interview data itself). Yang Murray asks, “How much space should we devote to acknowledging how much we influenced the creation and interpretation of our sources?”<sup>4</sup> Given the value placed on sources gathered through interviewing, I contend that devoting considerable space to this question is not about navel-gazing so much as exploring how a researcher's subject-positions influence the research itself. As Victor Villanueva also explains in his autobiographical "mixed genre" book, "I am never *just* emoting, never *just* displaying the free associative workings of a mind."<sup>5</sup> Villanueva then interprets Paolo Freire's work on praxis:

[Freire talks about] generalizing, theorizing, and questioning the systemic based on the personal. This is what he calls *praxis*: reflection and action through language. Praxis is what I'm attempting to do here, more than providing a self-serving story, either glorious me or woe-is-me. What I'm attempting is to provide a problematic based on sets of experience: an experience which leads to a theory, a theory that recalls an experience; reflections of speculations, speculations to polemics to reflections – all with an aim at affecting what might happen in classrooms, the sites of actions.<sup>6</sup>

Villanueva's audience is fellow English teachers; my audience involves a broader community of scholars. We both write from within and to the academy, a place critiqued

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<sup>4</sup> Yang Murray, “Oral History Research, Theory, and Asian American Studies,” 116.

<sup>5</sup> Villanueva, *Bootstraps*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii. Villanueva is drawing from Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

to be part of a "soul-battering system" that limits creativity in knowledge production and how we write about it.<sup>7</sup> The interviews I collected for this project pose a particular epistemic problem: as revealed in the aftermath of my research trips, the act of transcription is also a highly value-laden process that begs to be contextualized and examined, something I take up in the second half of this chapter. In short, to borrow from Karla Padron, this chapter is an exploration of the inevitable "epistemological violence" of my research.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Note on Writing and Voice**

Thus far in the dissertation, I have looked at two sites of the Asian American South: the Friendship Bell and the experiences of Asian migrant scientists. The discussion that follows will reflect an intentional break in writerly voice for two primary reasons: for one, I engage the critical significance of language (an analysis that must precede the arguments in Chapters 6 and 7); and second, my abrupt change in structure and voice demonstrates the necessity of exploring the politics of knowledge production in this research. To riff on Beth Boquet and Michele Eodice, my intention is to employ a writing practice that involves "deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns," in this case, the habit patterns in academic writing.<sup>9</sup> The authors warn:

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<sup>7</sup> According to Schmidt, in order to succeed, professionals/ academics become "ideologically disciplined thinkers" (in direct contrast to actual critical thinkers) in which "professional training tends to kill off natural creativity." I think of this in the context, too, of writing in the academy. Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, 40-41. See also Day and Eodice's discussion about how their proposal to formally co-write a dissertation was denied by university administration. (*First Person*)2, 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> Padron, "Legal Injuries."

<sup>9</sup> Boquet and Eodice, "Creativity in the Writing Center," 8.

Habits form when we rely on what we perceive to be successful routines. Successful routines, in and of themselves, may not necessarily be bad, but they can lead to a “competency trap,” occasions when actions become “automatic and not even accessible to ordinary recollection and analysis... long after [we] have ceased to be able to provide an account of their purposes.”<sup>10</sup>

In this way, the option to relegate this methodological rumination to an appendix or to footnotes would be a habit pattern I wish to not enact. Thus, placing this methodology chapter in the middle of the dissertation signals an interruption in voice and simultaneously serves to set up the remaining chapters. The interruption in form mirrors an interruption experienced in my research process, one that became a game changer, altering my approach to the project.<sup>11</sup> Other academic publications that break form demonstrate that such a decision must be consistent *and* specific to the nature of the research topic: in other words, the interruption is successful only if it is intentional in every aspect of the research and writing process.<sup>12</sup> I hope that by the end of this chapter,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. The authors are also quoting Barrett, “Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations,” 608.

<sup>11</sup> I think here of literary scholar Catherine Prendergast’s advice to students of writing: “Let’s say you’re in the middle of writing up your argument when you find a piece of information that simply does not fit, one that weakens the argument you were working to build. Your first impulse will be to delete this outlier from your draft. Don’t. You have just found the game changer...” Analogously, this suggestion about making an argumentative turn is very applicable for researchers who are rethinking methodology. Catherine Prendergast, “How to Turn a B Paper into an A Paper: Look for the Game Changer,” *First Year Comp* (blog), Oct. 13, 2011, <http://firstyearcomp.com/2011/10/13/how-to-turn-a-b-paper-into-an-a-paper-look-for-the-game-changer/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ironically, I understand that to further legitimize this writerly move, it helps to discuss others who have made similar breaks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the fields of composition, rhetoric, and writing center studies present strong examples of risk-taking. Day and Eodice intersperse their study of academic co-authorship with “snippets” and “reflections” about their own collaborative writing as it relates to the book itself. Denny, too, in making a case for the recognition of social locations in one-to-one mentoring, largely centers his own voice and experiences, and in his effort to decenter himself (for “I fear suggesting my experiences are foundational or somehow transcendent”) his book-length work has “interchapters” that feature the written reflections of others in order “to check or bracket them [Denny’s experiences] and to complicate my narrative.” Day and Eodice, (*First Person*)<sup>2</sup>, 11; Denny, *Facing the Center*, 28-29. For studies that also break form in terms of typesetting as well, see also Davis, *Breaking Up [at] Totality*; Boquet, *Noise from the Writing Center*.

the purpose and form of the chapter will be obvious (and made even more clear by the chapters that follow).

### **The Trouble with Feeling Humbled: Insider/ Outsider Status and Positionality**

Shigeko Uppuluri is a woman who is always smiling. Over the course of a few house visits, she greets me with great warmth, always offering me slippers, hot Jasmine tea in a dainty teapot, and cute little snacks carefully arranged on straw basket trays. The interviews take place in the open living room that overlooks a backyard shaded by trees twice my age. The house itself is tucked in a small, unassuming cul-de-sac. Its interior has sculptures, prints, and picture frames that are clearly Japanese and Indian, showing her personal history, for her late husband Ram was an Indian migrant. Toward the back of a crowded dresser stands a miniature replica of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. In contrast to one disappointingly stereotypical account of her as a woman with a “delicate nature,”<sup>13</sup> Shigeko turns out to be a talkative, jovial interviewee, becoming – in the best way possible – another Asian female elder in my life who seems unstoppable. I like Shigeko at once: she is honest, thoughtful, and has a desire to effect change. Shigeko was, of course, one of the leaders behind the Friendship Bell in the 1990s, an initiative that sustained strong opposition that was at times leveled through personal attacks toward her and her late husband, Ram. In my most memorable moment with Shigeko, she tells me about how she performed at a recent sister-city (Oak Ridge-Nakamachi) event, and I ask her if she’d mind playing for me: “Sakura Sakura” is the song (“cherry blossoms,” she explains), and my cheap little recorder picks up the tune, distorting the sound of her

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<sup>13</sup> Lollis, “The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell,” 347.

voice and the discordant stringed instrument in a tinny way – like it’s coming from an old record. The sound is nothing short of endearing, and my eyes water when I hear it again later: pushing through my critical lens, the memory of the moment is humbling.

With Shigeko and others who have generously welcomed me to their homes for these unabashedly personal glimpses into their lives, I cannot help but feel touched. It is a tricky thing, this idea of a researcher feeling humbled. We read it in the acknowledgments of scholars’ books: academics talk about how grateful they are to their interviewees, how they unexpectedly form friendships, and how generous particular individuals are.<sup>14</sup> At times, these scholarly books are also dedicated to the research subjects themselves.<sup>15</sup> These ideas elicit for me an emotion that turns out to be deeper than I anticipated. I cannot help but describe it as an embodied feeling of warmth that comes back every time I think about my interviewees’ generosity or in random moments in the process of dissertating: I remember how this one scientist launched into the big bang theory and simply concluded, "So we just try to find out how the universe works." This passion and absolute "nerdy-ness" are endearing, inspiring. It is something that I cannot compartmentalize into an acknowledgment or preface to the dissertation, and as a feminist Asian Americanist researcher, these feelings of warmth, of inspiration, of endearment – and with these emotions, my tendency to romanticize – are simultaneously very troubling. Echoing oral historian Valerie Yow’s question, “Do I like them too much?” I have found myself turning to feminist studies for help, and while I agree with

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<sup>14</sup> This seems more common than not. See, for example, Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*; Kibria, *Family Tightrope*; Perez, *The Near Northwest Side Story*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Maira, *Missing*; Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*.

Kami Day and Michele Eodice, who assert that "[feminist] research methodology *itself* has generative power,"<sup>16</sup> there is also the concurrent idea Judith Stacey has pointed out: "Indeed, the irony I now perceive is that ethnographic method exposes subjects to far greater danger and exploitation than do more positivist, abstract, and 'masculinist' research methods. And the greater the intimacy – the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship – the greater is the danger."<sup>17</sup>

These embodied emotional responses inform the methodological questions, concerns, and decisions I have made through the course of my research. My field notes from my first research trip attest to the need for reflection:

I am quickly realizing that a lot of the trust that my participants may or may not have in me is predicated on three things: one, that they may be associated with my dad; two, that I'm the kid of a former employee, and three, I am Chinese (if they are Chinese). This latter point, I think, has been key: they seem to see me as someone who understands their isolation. And with the people who aren't Chinese, they pretty much deny that they feel any isolation and are more guarded about their feelings. This is all anecdotal, of course, but it is interesting to think about. [Asian Americanist historian] Bob Lee once half-jokingly told me how he is sticking to archives because everyone is already dead and he doesn't have to worry about possibly upsetting people with his findings. I think I see his hesitation. These folks are incredible: extraordinarily brainy, science geeks who are willing to share so much with me. I feel humbled by this experience, and I realize that whatever work I produce will have some bearing on how this community is perceived. Especially since I am from here, I feel a sense of protectiveness of these folks, something that I did not anticipate.

This feeling of protectiveness is both troubling and reassuring. Marjorie DeVault observes, "[F]eminists suggest making the researcher visible in any product of research.

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<sup>16</sup> Day and Eodice, (*First Person*)2, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" 114. Based on Stacey's description of ethnography as "intensive participant-observation study that yields a synthetic cultural account," perhaps my methods do not reflect classic ethnography, but her warning undoubtedly applies to this research project. I am careful not to disidentify with ethnography so as not to distance myself from important ethical questions raised by ethnographers themselves. *Ibid.*, 112.



This call for visibility involves viewing the self, in Susan Krieger's (1991) terms, as resource rather than contaminant."<sup>18</sup> DeVault's study of feminist methodologies begins with an autobiographical chapter, a "gesture of disclosure" that attests to "the feminist idea that knowing a speaker will deepen one's understanding of her speech."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Jennifer Pierce shows how self-reflexivity is connected to group membership: "ethnographers move back and forth in continuous tack between the statuses of insider, outsider, and... an 'outsider within.'"<sup>20</sup> Pointedly, "the concepts of insider and outsider are not static and dichotomous categories, but fluid, layered, and changing."<sup>21</sup> Pierce then productively reflects on several statuses, demonstrating how she moved in and out of, between, and among these roles as a researcher. Evelyn Hu-DeHart complements this call for self-reflexivity, contending that "Ethnic Studies scholars should also dispute the assertion that good scholarship is necessarily 'objective' and nonpolitical, again in contrast to values in traditional disciplines."<sup>22</sup> Hu-DeHart's assertions (regarding self-reflexivity in scholarship, critiques of positivism, and the recognition of a project as political) describe the methodological underpinnings of my project.

Taking a cue from Pierce, my social locations intersect and inform this study in significant ways: I am an agnostic-bordering-on-atheist, straight, cisgender, able-bodied,

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<sup>18</sup> DeVault, *Liberating Method*, 41. DeVault is drawing from Krieger, *Social Science and the Self*.

<sup>19</sup> DeVault, *Liberating Method*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Pierce, *Gender Trials*, 191. Pierce's reference to "outsider within" is from Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within." Pierce looks to "challenge the positivistic value on the erasure of self in the research process." *Gender Trials*, 190.

<sup>21</sup> Pierce, *Gender Trials*, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Hu-DeHart, "Ethnic Studies in U.S. Higher Education," 106-107.

bilingual, second generation Thai Cantonese American female doctoral student born and raised in a middle to upper-middle class community in east Tennessee, and each aspect of my identity would have some bearing on the research. Over the course of the interviews, I was in my late twenties and early thirties – significantly younger than most interviewees. Being a child of and within the Asian American South, I began my project by interviewing my father, employing a snowball technique. The people who were suggested to me as potential interviewees fit my father’s profile: a migrant – most often male – who was born in an Asian country, who received an advanced degree (a PhD, if not a master’s) at a U.S. (sometimes Canadian) university, and who eventually found their way to Oak Ridge National Laboratory and to U.S. citizenship. And yet, my social locations as a Tennessee-born daughter of a post-1965 PhD ORNL migrant do not make me a complete insider, for I am *not* an Oak Ridger. I grew up in the affluent community of Farragut in nearby Knoxville, a city with a civic identity (if there is one) that predictably does not seem to exhibit any spillover from the comparatively more isolated community of Oak Ridge: instead of field trips to Oak Ridge’s American Museum of Science and Energy (a museum that is one of a host other “atomic museums” that “express a common ideology based on an unquestioned belief in the nation’s nuclear mission”<sup>23</sup>), we Knoxville schoolchildren went to the Museum of Appalachia every year. The U.S. Department of Energy “government ‘company town’” of Oak Ridge was not on my radar, so my observations as a researcher are somewhat informed as an outsider

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<sup>23</sup> Molella, "Exhibiting Atomic Culture," 214.

looking in.<sup>24</sup>

The interviews took place most often in offices. The staff member typically met me at the Visitor's Center, or, later on when I was more familiar with the Oak Ridge campus, I met them at a building at their actual office. At times I went to the person's home. Whatever the case, the interviewees donated their time and energy to me, to my research. My acute awareness of their generosity – and in most every case, their warmth and expressed interest in my research – elicit a host of questions that the self-reflexive researcher must confront.

#### **“Should I Call Him ‘Doctor’?”: Questions on Age and Authority**

After a series of successful snowball contacts, it became clear that being the child of a former employee was my “in” with these individuals. I made my status known in my initial correspondence with potential interviewees (see appendix 1), and this fact emerged in the interviews themselves. It was not uncommon for interviewees to make assumptions about me or my family: as one said, “See, I came to this country probably like your parents, oh, with two suitcases and borrowed 300 dollars in my pocket.” This is my connection to these individuals, and the inherent respect I was raised to have toward elders (as well as those in traditional positions of authority) carried over in my interactions with my interviewees. In one case, my interviewee pointed out they knew my brother and me years back, of which I had no recollection: “I knew you guys growing up. I saw you with May and Jabo,” referring to my parents. To add to this, my status as a graduate student well-versed in performing the hierarchies of academia complemented

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 219. Ruth Carey, an Oak Ridge resident whose calls Knoxville her hometown, describes the difference as the “Knoxville-Oak Ridge dichotomy.” Carey, “Change Comes to Knoxville,” 216.

my deference, one that may have appeared uncritical: most everyone I interviewed is a PhD and is most always well-published, if not nationally or internationally renowned, in their respective field. It is as if the baseline level of academic achievement is the doctoral degree itself: one woman half-jokingly told me that being “a housewife is very boring! So I started to pursue my PhD!” I am reminded of Ping-Chun Hsiung who discusses the limitations of a binary construction of power in the context of her ethnographic fieldwork in factories in Taiwan: “...it is simplistic to assume that the only power relation is that which exists between the researcher and the researched – the powerful and the powerless, respectively.”<sup>25</sup> Hsiung does not necessarily advocate a role reversal, but her configuration resonates with me because my interview subjects occupy varying positions of authority as research scientists at a prestigious institution.

These positions of authority emerged in different ways. A couple observations from my field notes demonstrate this:

She [had] looked up American studies [my program] at the U[niversity of Minnesota], and she [had] also looked up [my dissertation advisor] Erika Lee. She mentioned something about American studies and History. I was really surprised that she did her research on me.

And, in another field note: “[After we finished the interview, he kept saying,] ‘I’m a research subject. I’m a subject. I’m a subject.’ I could tell that he doesn’t like to be on the other side of the research being done. *He’s* used to being the researcher.” Toward the end of one interview, another person began to offer advice on research methods:

For your project I have just a quick idea. If you dig into one family, if you know a lot of what happened to the family members, you could probably create a whole story and reflect on many aspects of Chinese life. Of course, you can visit many

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<sup>25</sup> Hsiung, “Between Bosses and Workers,” 123.

more families and make them into one family's story. I think that would be good for your dissertation.

Indeed, my interviewees often offered unsolicited, paternalistic advice even on my choice of research topic: "You really should study the Chinese in Surinam," one said. Implying that my dissertation project is not that compelling, he continued, "Now *that* would be an important project where you could *really* make a contribution to your field. You could stay with our [mutual] family friend. Go down there one summer and do research." This scientist presumed to know what was good for me in my own discipline, perhaps speaking to how science is valued over the humanities. And still, even in cases when I interviewed postdocs who were roughly my age, I was still given unsolicited advice (e.g., one told me how I need to both build my relationship with my advisor and also network at conferences for job prospects). Thus, in many cases, my subjects assumed authority over me, likely facilitated by my demonstrated respect for them as well as my status as a younger female doctoral student.

The age difference compounded my so-called natural deference to these PhDs. As I consider how age factored in my interactions, I think of Valerie Matsumoto: "it is harder for me to evaluate how much I responded to them as a Sansei [third-generation Japanese American] woman seeking approval (mostly from elders) and trying to 'fit in.'"<sup>26</sup> As an "ABC" (American-born Chinese), this surfaced in how I even addressed my subjects: as if transferring my upbringing of calling elders "uncle" and "auntie," I addressed everyone formally ("Dr. Chan"), unless I was told otherwise. I could call it natural inclination, but my form of salutation was also something I had carefully arrived

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<sup>26</sup> Matsumoto, "Reflections on Oral History," 166.

at. In those moments, I wanted the person to know that I was aware of their position of disciplinary, educational, and occupational authority. I thought that these scientists deserved a show of respect that they may not otherwise get in a work environment in which a PhD degree was the norm. The deference that I was taught to give elders surfaced in my interactions with interviewees. But noticeably, this changed when I interviewed non-PhDs. With one fellow ABC, I was definitely on a first-name basis: to preface their last name with “Misses” or “Mister” (e.g., “Mr. Tang”) seemed wrong – too *Western*. It did not “feel” Chinese. Thus, this question of authority elicited from me a personal understanding and opinion of what felt more culturally appropriate. Admittedly, this notion of defining what “feels” “Chinese” or “American” forces me into a rather uncomfortable alignment with a culturally essentialist framework, one I most always avoid. What I *can* effectively conclude is that when it came to authority and positionality, my interviewing experience attested to the critical importance of examining questions of power. As Matsumoto notes about her interviewing practice:

[My practice involves] the effort to be mindful of the historical inequities and struggles that have shaped the material conditions of ourselves and our subjects, female and male. This includes... attention to the complexity of race and interethnic relations... It also means trying to cultivate an awareness of social stratification and privilege and the ways in which they may affect the process of oral history interviewing.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, it would be remiss to claim that my interviewing was free of these thorny questions.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 161.

### ***Whose Language Barrier?: Self-Reflexivity and Language "Fluency"***

Back in Minnesota from each research trip, I would begin listening to the recordings. Each time, I felt like I was brought back to the moment of the interview itself. I could envision the personal touches in people's offices: one person had a stuffed animal on a bookcase because it reminded them of their child, and another had their daughter's prom photo displayed on a shelf. But as I began the act of transcription, something didn't *feel* right: word for word, sound for sound, the words on the computer screen seemed to cheapen (or not do justice to) the significance of the interviewees' spoken words. Not seeking the verbal and nonverbal nuances required by some conversation analysis or critical discourse analysis scholars, my initial, crude attempt at a verbatim<sup>28</sup> transcription would, for example, typically yield a passage as follows:

J: How did your parents feel about you going to graduate school in the U.S.?

X: Well, actually, at that time, even the country was kind of like, it's not easy, it's only the, actually, they [the interviewee's parents] were very happy I was able to leave because I was come here for study. We know at that time – we all knew that the western countries are more advanced than China, even though that's 1982, I think, everybody realized, well also in school we were also told, well, that the western countries were more advanced than China and we want to come study there and the best technologies advanced in science, so actually it's an honor actually to be able to come abroad to study. They were very happy to me, they were actually proud because, not, there were only a few people was able to do that and the, actually, I was sort of selected from the students once I graduate, to be presented by the government, I was sponsored by the government to study at [a highly-selective American university].

Susan Tilley talks about the richness of interviews, and how this richness is lost in the transcripts themselves: "The transcripts seemed dry and brittle compared to the

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<sup>28</sup> I am using the term "verbatim" here in a general way, knowing that the idea of a verbatim transcript would vary across disciplines.

conversations captured on tape, and as I listened to the voices again, I was reminded of my responsibility to re-present these women's words respectfully, while understanding somewhat the difficulties inherent in such a task."<sup>29</sup> These notions of respect and responsibility surface for me, particularly intersecting with questions about the way I might re-present the interviewee's grammar, sentence structure (via punctuation), usage, and other vocalizations and pronunciations.

If transcription involves "the ways we re-present speech as written text,"<sup>30</sup> then Daniel Oliver, Julianne Serovich, and Tina Mason make a strong case for self-reflexivity specifically regarding interview transcription methodology, a move I followed in desperation. They suggest that researchers should enact "an intermediate step [between the recording and the transcription process]: a period of reflection that allows researchers to contemplate transcription choices and assess how these choices affect both participants and the goals of research."<sup>31</sup> My discussion here reflects an ongoing attempt to enact this suggested period of reflection. In light of transcriptions like the example above, one question resonates with me: to borrow from Emanuel Schegloff, "To whom do the words in a transcript belong?"<sup>32</sup> Thus, the way I quote my interviewees has very deep implications concerning the production of knowledge: as a researcher, I experienced a

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<sup>29</sup> Tilley, "Conducting Respectful Research," 325.

<sup>30</sup> Mishler, "Representing Discourse," 259. Also, it is important to note the frequent conflation of spoken and written English, although my focus is not on the linguistic specificities of these distinctions. See Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent* (14-20), for a discussion of the differences between written and spoken language.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver, Serovich, and Mason, "Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription," 2.

<sup>32</sup> Schegloff, "Whose Text? Whose Context?," 6; quoted in Oliver, Serovich, and Mason, "Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription," 6.



period of time where I felt frozen by this theoretical impasse of how to transcribe the recordings. How can one be as accurate as possible while not claiming objectivity (by which I mean “value-free research which requires the elimination of researcher intrusion”<sup>33</sup>)? And what does “accuracy” mean for a transcript? Oliver, Serovich, and Mason illuminate this conflict well; the following passage reminds me that my end goal does not concern objectivity:

The focus [of naturalism] is on presenting data in its natural environment, that is, objectively and precisely. Only after this, according to Schegloff (1997), was it appropriate to apply theoretical filters. To do this [i.e., to apply theoretical filters] before valid data collection is to commit, according to Schegloff (1997), “a kind of theoretical imperialism... a kind of hegemony of the intellectuals... whose theoretical apparatus gets to stipulate the terms by reference to which the world is to be understood – when there has already *been* a set of terms by reference to which the world was understood – by those... involved in its very coming to pass.”<sup>34</sup>

Some may believe that this “theoretical imperialism” is avoidable, whereas I understand it to be inevitable in any research. Furthermore, in posing the question, “Can there be a feminist ethnography?,” Stacey notes, “I find myself wondering whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation.”<sup>35</sup> How, if at all, can one lessen the impact of any potential “exploitation”? This becomes more complicated if, as in the tradition of ethnic studies, I look to center the agency of racialized communities and individuals.

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<sup>33</sup> Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much?,” 1.

<sup>34</sup> Oliver, Serovich, and Mason, “Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription,” 6; Schegloff, “Whose Text? Whose Context?,” 167.

<sup>35</sup> Stacey, “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?,” 113.

Moreover, if, as a researcher, my investment is to center the voices of my interviewees, then the most glaring contradiction with respect to language and transcription is my inability to converse in the native language of the interviewee. In most cases, this concerned my inability (as a Thai Chinese American who grew up learning Cantonese and English at the same time and who took college Mandarin) to conduct interviews in Mandarin. One interviewee, in response to my question about his comfort level with speaking in English, said, “Well, to you, I probably can speak [Mandarin] Chinese. But I thought English would probably be better.” My interviewee could not be more wrong about my Chinese language ability (and more right about how much better it would be for me if he spoke in English!). As I wrote in my field notes one day, “I also see how the Chinese scientists that I interview use references with me, in Mandarin. It is really interesting that way. *They assume that I get it.* Most of the time, I do, but sometimes I do not. It will be hard to transcribe sometimes.” And at my request (and thus, in my effort to take on the challenge), at one point in interviewing one individual, we conducted the short interview in Cantonese and English, but even that was difficult for me. For that particular interviewee (who is fluent in five languages), using English or Cantonese probably would not have made a difference, but the fact of the matter is, I never asked him what language *he* preferred to communicate in. And in another case, my field notes document my awkwardness with switching languages:

Just had a conversation with [name of interviewee] who called me after I emailed him. He left me a message in Cantonese, and when I called him back, he used English. And then I switched it to Cantonese, and he followed. What followed was me going to Chinglish. And he followed suit, switching between Cantonese, English, and sometimes saying words in Mandarin, too. It was really interesting.

And, in another exchange with a scientist:

X: At home we speak Mandarin.

J: And any other dialects?

X: Well, when I speak to my mother, I speak Cantonese.

J: Oh! Okay. I speak Cantonese. [begins speaking Cantonese] *I speak Cantonese. My mom is from Hong Kong.*

X: [in Cantonese] *Oh, is that right?*

J: [switches back to English] So, [I do] not [have] enough practice. So.

X: Well, you're very good.

J: Oh, we'll see. Did your son learn?

In this final line, my switch back to English and my nonsensical "we'll see" reveal my discomfort, further augmented by my inability to take a compliment, leading me to take the focus off of my language skill. In short, *the biggest "language barrier" in my interviews concerned my own.*

For many of my interviewees, I as a researcher was asking them to share their personal experiences with me in a language they did not necessarily feel comfortable expressing themselves in. For example, one of my standard interview questions was about how many languages the interviewee speaks (see appendix 2). Most everyone said they spoke at least two languages. Many learned English in grade school: "We didn't speak English, but we learned English," one person who grew up in Taiwan noted. "We don't speak," another said. "They just give you tests! 'What's wrong with this?' Oh, 'because you missed an *s* here [for subject/verb agreement]." Upon asking about all the languages one knew, I would then awkwardly ask the interviewee about their comfort level when speaking English or whether they felt there was a language barrier. In the case

of the interviewee who kept self-consciously proclaiming, “I’m a research subject, I’m a research subject!,” he also told me that after over thirty years of living in the United States, he is “not comfortable at all [speaking English]. Still, at this time, I don’t feel comfortable speaking with a lot of people.” I followed up, asking:

J: So if you had to, on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the most comfortable), where do you think-

X: I would say I’m still at 6 right now. I mean, naturally, I don’t really, you know, I don’t know. Some people feel very comfortable, but naturally, the older that I grow, even though I can present myself a little bit better, I... you know, the less that I like speaking in English.

This particular interviewee was so disengaged from our interview that he played computer games during the entire course of our session. I could not help but wonder if his disengagement came from discomfort that also had to do with language: both his discomfort in speaking English, and my own inability (or perhaps lack of confidence) to conduct the entire interview in Cantonese. And still, with some of the interviewees who felt comfortable using English, there was still hesitation with the language. For example, I asked one person how comfortable she felt speaking English:

Very comfortable, but I still realize my limit, you know. There are times I feel the expression is not accurate or I’m sure I mispronounce words and I realize sometimes my accent is heavy. And especially when I listen to my own recording! I’m like, “Oh, that’s me?!” [laughs. J laughs.] And then also, my kids are correcting me, so then I sort of, I just go, “Oh okay. It’s never going to improve anymore. That’s it.” [laughs].

Lest I totalize all my interview subjects as being uncomfortable with speaking in English, there were also many who were completely at ease communicating in English as well.

J: How comfortable do you feel speaking English?

X: Very comfortable, I think. [both laugh]

J: Thank you. And, I'm just trying to cover everything here.

X: What do you think?

J: I – completely fluent. Are you kidding? Yeah, totally, um. When you, in terms of living here, do you feel like you belong here?

This exchange illuminates my awkwardness and discomfort in even asking the question, as seen in my abrupt change of subject in the final line. At times this question was probably inappropriate: most interviewees were Chinese, having learned English sometimes as early as elementary school. Also, for an interviewee from, say, the Philippines, my question was likely insulting: "It was the medium of instruction in the Philippines," my respondent made clear.

One interviewee's responses indicate how she is situationally comfortable with English:

J: So, there, you really didn't have any language barriers by the time you came here, having been to school in the States for a long time?

X: No, that's probably because I still studied my original field. I didn't change fields, so it's not difficult. If we gave a presentation or anything, there's no problem. Hold a meeting? There's no problem. But I feel very comfortable – even though I feel very comfortable in my area – I would say that if you want me to sit down and give a talk on a different topic, I don't feel very comfortable... I can say something, but I don't feel I would deliver a good talk on other topics, not like my kids: they pretty much have no problem at all. If people ask me a question about radiation or any related question I can give it, no problem, ten minutes, one hour, two hours, no problem. But if you say, "Okay, you write an essay, for example, on a bicycle," then I'll say, "Oh, bicycles have two wheels, some big and tall, some short, or have a..." That's pretty much it, I cannot write a whole page.

J: [laughing] I don't think people could!

X: But I think my kids, when they were in high school or something, I'd look at their essay. Oh, very nicely written. I cannot do that because I just don't have that many – even though I know those vocabulary or phrase – but I cannot probably put everything together, even when I read like my radiation-related journal, oh, no problem at all, but if I read something I still need to look at the dictionary.

J: Right. I think I probably need to use the dictionary for something like *Scientific America*!

As seen in this passage, for this interviewee, the issue of English language fluency is connected to fluency in her discipline or area of expertise. Thus, this scientist's comfort with speaking in English depends on the topic at hand. And my responses to her statements (regarding the idea that she could not write an essay on a bicycle but could fully comprehend the highly disciplinary language in a radiation-related journal) indicate my twinned discomfort: for one, I am uncomfortable with how self-deprecating she is; and two, as a native English speaker, I myself would never be able to comprehend the scientific journals she reads. In the last line, I don't even get the name of the magazine *Scientific American* right. Clearly, my responses in this excerpt are indicative of the methodological tensions inherent in interview transcription.

Transcription methodologists have definitively established that the transcript is highly value-laden: like any other source, it is not – and can never be – a neutral document. This distinction leads to different options when transcribing. Mary Bucholtz notes that there are two ways to consider transcription. First, transcription is an interpretive process and concerns content (*what* is transcribed): “What does the transcriber hear on the recording and include in the transcript?” Second, transcription is also a representational process in the context of form (*how* it's transcribed): “How does the transcriber write down what she or he hears?”<sup>36</sup> From these distinctions of context and form (the *what* and *how* of transcribing), we might think of a transcript as being “naturalized” or “denaturalized,” according to Oliver, Serovich, and Mason. In

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<sup>36</sup> Bucholz, “Politics of Transcription,” 1441.

naturalized transcription practice, “utterances are transcribed in as much detail as possible,” including “the spatial organization of dialogue and the notation of speech.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, naturalized transcription method may also lean more toward the empirical. In arguable contrast, “denaturalized transcription” involves the process of eliminating “idiosyncratic elements of speech (e.g., stutters, pauses, nonverbals, involuntary vocalizations).”<sup>38</sup>

Within the context of my study, it has become clear that a denaturalized transcription practice would be most appropriate: Oliver, Serovich, and Mason advise that one’s “methods should reflect [his or her] research questions.”<sup>39</sup> For example, if “[t]he focus of conversation analysis is *how* these ideas are conveyed in dialogue rather than the ideas themselves,” then, placed in such a context, my focus is in interviewees’ reflections about their experiences in the South, not necessarily in *how* they went about expressing these ideas (e.g., through stutters and pauses).<sup>40</sup> I am, however, opting to still include “response tokens,” such as “Hm” or “Mm.” This decision is predicated on the idea that, “Many researchers, particularly conversation analysts, have argued that by disregarding tokens one may fail to fully grasp the intricacies of dialogue. That is, tokens such as a thoughtful *Hm* or wistful *Mm* can serve as useful markers in speech, indicating

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<sup>37</sup> Oliver, Serovich, and Mason, “Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription,” 3. This practice is common in conversation analysis.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

participant discomfort or other affective states (e.g., distress, happiness, pride, etc.).”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in the act of reflecting on my transcription practice, I ultimately have decided to employ a denaturalized transcription method in which stutters, for example, are removed, while the *Hms* are left in.

Despite these careful decisions, the question of grammar and usage lingers. For example, in the first passage I quoted from a transcript, the issue of verb tense appears: “Actually, they [the interviewee’s parents] were very happy I was able to leave [China] because I *was come* here for study.” From the standpoint of “conducting respectful research,”<sup>42</sup> I experience a type of researcher anxiety as I see the incorrect verb conjugation in print. Quoting a research subject “verbatim” (hence, a naturalized transcription) in this way seems disrespectful, especially given my own language issues (i.e., my lack of confidence or fluency in languages other than English). My anxiety is based on instinct and is completely embodied: something does not “feel” quite “right.” However, this discomfort is not just a feeling: I contend that it is located in critiques within Asian American studies about the historical mockery of Asian Americans speaking English.

**“All Transcripts Take Sides”<sup>43</sup>: Toward a Feminist, Asian Americanist Transcription Methodology?**

This mockery has roots in anti-Asian sentiment and the construction of Asian Americans as racialized Others - as perpetual foreigners - in mainstream discourse. In his

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>42</sup> Tilley, “Conducting Respectful Research.”

<sup>43</sup> Bucholtz, “The Politics of Transcription,” 1440.



pioneering study *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki alludes to this mockery; he quotes the 1879 play *The Chinese Must Go*, explaining that in the scene below, “Two Chinese characters conspire to destroy white labor”<sup>44</sup>:

Ah Coy [character #1:]. By and by white man catchee no money; Chinaman catchee heap money; Chinaman workee cheap, plenty work; white man workee dear, no work — sabee?[<sup>45</sup>]

Sam Gin [character #2]. Me heep sabee.

Ah Coy. White man damn fools; keep wifee and children — cost plenty money; Chinaman no wife, no children, save plenty money. By and by, no more white workingman in California; all Chinaman — sabee?<sup>46</sup>

As Takaki notes, “the racial anxieties of white workers were acted out on the stage.”<sup>47</sup>

Krystyn Moon further explains that the use of “Chinese dialect, a common device used to ridicule Chinese immigrants and their inability to speak English competently” spoke to these anxieties<sup>48</sup>: “The most common device for distinguishing between Chinese and [non-Chinese] Americans on the stage was a combination of pidgin English and gibberish...Nonsensical gibberish...was another device used to demonstrate the inferiority of Chinese immigrants and their inability to speak English coherently.”<sup>49</sup>

“Chinese dialect,” as referenced in Moon’s study, was in fact a mockery of Canton

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<sup>44</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 104.

<sup>45</sup> Moon explains, “The term ‘shabee,’ . . . was derived from the Spanish verb saber meaning ‘to know’ or ‘to understand.’ This doubling of pidgin English with Spanish demonstrated the complex notions of difference in the Far West and the fluidity of prejudice from one despised minority to another.” *Yellowface*, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 104.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Moon, *Yellowface*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Moon, *Yellowface*, 42. Moon associates this use of “Chinese dialect” with yellowface.

English: as Robert Lee explains, “Canton English was only one of many languages spoken in nineteenth century California. This pidgin English attributed to Chinese speakers in California was in actuality a trade language, with its own linguistic and symbolic codes, syntax and vocabulary rules.”<sup>50</sup> In her analysis of the popular culture portrayals of Chinese Americans that led up to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Moon argues that the racial caricature John Chinaman “functioned much in the same way as did Zip Coon or Jim Crow, and he became a common image of Chinese immigrant men that played on differences such as religious practices, eating habits, and English proficiency.”<sup>51</sup> This portrayal of Chinese Americans’ lack of language acquisition and fluency was therefore a significant component of the construction of Chinese Americans as racial Others.<sup>52</sup> The connection is clear: in the public escalation of anti-Asian sentiment that would culminate in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the cultural depravity of the Chinese would be connected to their linguistic depravity, too – one that was manifested in a way that “diminished the status of Canton English as an important commercial language and infantilized its speakers.”<sup>53</sup> This mockery was infused in anti-Chinese sentiment in U.S. popular culture. A political cartoon from a San Francisco-based newspaper published at the start of the Chinese exclusion era reveals this well: as the sign posted at the gate of San Francisco notes, “No Tickee – No Landee” (see figure

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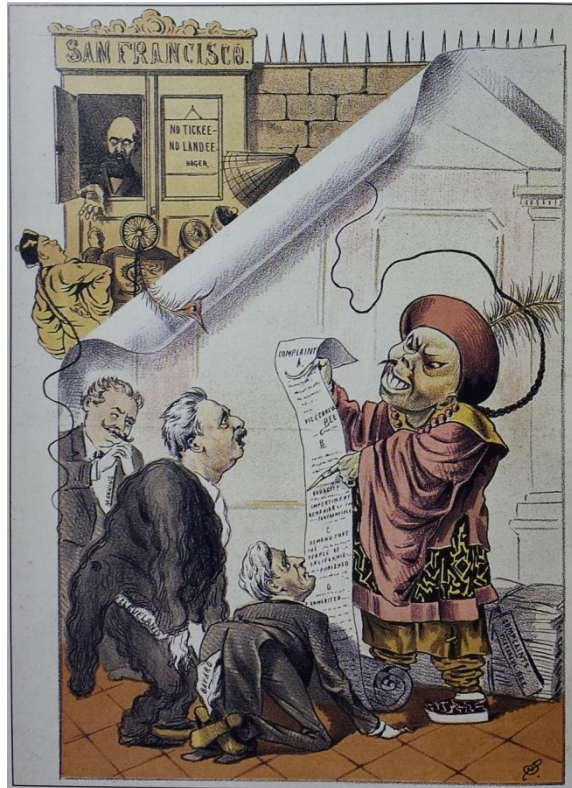
<sup>50</sup> R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Moon, *Yellowface*, 32.

<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, “The minstrel construction of Chinese racial difference around cultural excess focused on three such natural symbolic systems, each closely related to boundary crises: language, food, and hair.” R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 36.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

10).<sup>54</sup> Language is historically connected to the anti-immigration sentiment directed at the Chinese.



**Figure 10: A political cartoon from the Chinese exclusion era that uses linguistic mockery.**

Moreover, this mockery extended beyond fictional renditions or political cartoon representations and into “factual” accounts. Takaki explains:

Chinese men were seen as sensuous creatures, especially interested in white women. A writer for the *New York Times* reported [in an article from 1873] that he noticed “a handsome but squalidly dressed young white girl” in an opium den and inquired about her. The owner replied: “Oh, hard time in New York. Young girl hungry. Plenty come here. Chinaman always have something to eat, and he

<sup>54</sup> Cartoon, artist unknown, published in *The Wasp*, April 17, 1886. Cited in Choy, Dong, and Hom, *The Coming Man*, 15-16. This particular cartoon reflected the fact that “In the process of negotiating treaties and drafting the exclusion laws, those...who conceded the slightest compromise to the Chinese were castigated... Those politicians who were pro-China trade were singled out and ridiculed as subservient by kowtowing to the Chinese.” Also, in the cartoon, “Hager” is a reference to a Judge Hager who is criticized in the corresponding editorial of the cartoon. *Ibid.*, 148, 152.

like young white girl. He! He!”<sup>55</sup>

Examples like these are endless: this so-called verbatim quoting of English-speaking Asian Americans has often been linked to the construction of Asian Americans as racially inferior and is linked to anti-Asian sentiment that, in these cases, involves labor and sex, powerful constructs that helped established the perceived necessity of the Chinese Exclusion Act to the American public.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century,<sup>56</sup> and one may wonder, “what do these portrayals have to do with transcription methodology?” I suggest that Asian Americanist transcription practices must consider this historical context: English-speaking Asian Americans inherit this history, and the act of re-presenting my interviewees (of transcribing their spoken words) therefore also inherits the historical context of the mockery and denigration of Asian Americans. This connects to linguist Elaine Chun’s work as she advances the notion of “mock Asian,” which involves “a stereotypical Asianness that unambiguously mocks Asians, rather than being characteristic of ‘realistic’ impersonations of Asian speech.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, as we consider questions about “conducting respectful research,”<sup>58</sup> we have to critically examine the contexts and social locations of the research subjects themselves. This is in addition to considering our own positionality as researchers, particularly those of us who are either monolingual or not

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<sup>55</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 101.

<sup>56</sup> To be sure, contemporary examples of mockery abound in popular culture. See, for example, Davé, *Indian Accents*.

<sup>57</sup> Chun, “Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery,” 269.

<sup>58</sup> Tilley, “Conducting Respectful Research.”

able to speak the preferred language of the interviewee.

The transcription of interviews with racialized subjects in the United States can raise uncomfortable questions about what constitutes “standard” versus “nonstandard” English (a topic that becomes even more thorny when considering the history of scholars perpetuating racial Othering when studying communities of color). In her work concerning African American Vernacular English (AAVE), linguist Mary Bucholtz asserts that if one “standardize[s] nonstandard linguistic forms, ... such revisions can imply that the original is inadequate.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, to clarify how I conceptualize “English,” following the lead of Laura Greenfield and other linguists, the notion of “Standard English” or “Standard American English” must continue to be problematized in research methodology. This act of problem-posing has taken many forms: for example, Greenfield employs the term “standardized Englishes” instead of “Standard English” in recognition of the existence of various Englishes, as well as the problematic of setting a “standard”<sup>60</sup>; Geneva Smitherman also opts for “White American English” to acknowledge the racialized dimensions of language.<sup>61</sup> I therefore work from the presumption that while the notion of Standard American English is problematic and is in fact inaccurate, it remains a powerful construction, as seen in both the daily lives of the

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<sup>59</sup> Bucholtz, “The Politics of Transcription,” 1453. Also, for a compelling look at the implications of using AAVE, see V. Young, “Can Writers Use They Own English?”

<sup>60</sup> Greenfield proposes to “replace the term *Standard English* with the term *standardized Englishes* to make visible the fact that humans actively select which Englishes will be privileged and to emphasize that *many Englishes secretly enjoy this designation.*” “The ‘Standard English’ Fairy Tale,” 43, emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> Smitherman is cited in Ozias and Godbee, who describe “the term as “an alternative to ‘standard English’ to highlight the racial and racist projects of which language is a part within the United States of America.” “Organizing for Antiracism in Writing Centers,” 153; Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin, The Language of Black America*; Smitherman, *Word from the Mother*.

Asian migrants of my study *and* in the way I carry out my study. The notion of "correcting grammar" is another theoretically loaded act; like "Standard American English," it is a construction that has long been troubled and deconstructed by scholars of language.<sup>62</sup> Rosina Lippi-Green summarizes: "Linguists and non-linguists both see grammar as a set of rules which must be obeyed, but they differ on the nature and origination of those rules. When linguists talk about grammar, they are thinking about the rule-driven structure of language."<sup>63</sup> Thus, by "grammar," I want to make clear that I am working within the notion of grammar as socially constructed, thinking about how "the concept of socially motivated [or socially constructed] grammaticality" is distinct from linguistic grammaticality.<sup>64</sup> How I can apply the critique to research methods is perhaps the most challenging question of all, leading me to an important consideration: Would changing things like verb tense or pronouns be a value judgment that reinscribes the notion of language inadequacy among English-speaking Asian Americans (the very construct that I critique through the "correction" of the grammar in the first place)? *Yes*. Making a value judgment, I believe, is inescapable. Put another way, to use Bucholtz's words, would my denaturalized revisions "imply that the original is inadequate"? *Yes*, quite possibly, if not inevitably.

However, I contend that to do otherwise (that is, to enact a naturalized, so-called direct transcription method) can reflect both an inattention to the historical context, as

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, the landmark 1974 "Students' Right to Their Own Language" resolution passed by the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

<sup>63</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-13.

well as a problematic assertion of objectivity. I am not necessarily drawing a parallel here between AAVE and Canton English: the similarity I wish to call attention to is the recognition that AAVE and Canton English are both legitimate languages. Lee notes that in the context of Asian American racial formation in the nineteenth century, “The common use of pidgins and creoles threatened to subvert the hegemony of Anglo-American English-language-based culture and undermine its teleological myth of nationhood”<sup>65</sup>: acts of standardizing English (as manifested in different transcription methods) are indisputably hegemonic and embedded in constructions of national identity and belonging. Furthermore, to use a naturalized method (i.e., the verbatim transcription) may reinforce English as the norm, denying the possibility that another language could be the chosen medium for the interview.

To further build on the case that denaturalized transcription method is more suitable for my study, I turn to more linguists and rhetoricians: Angela Reyes and Adrienne Lo, who, in making the case for a study “toward a linguistic anthropology of Asian Pacific America,” draw from pioneer Asian Americanist Elaine Kim:

As Elaine Kim observed (1975), stereotypic representations of Asians in the media... still have a profound impact on the ways that the English spoken by APAs [Asian Pacific Americans] is viewed... Labeling this “Yellow English”... Kim calls our attention to the all too common stylizations of Asian (American) speech as a type of foreign accent... [T]he English spoken by APAs is often interpreted in terms of an accent or interference from another language, rather than as evidence of dialectal features of English.<sup>66</sup>

Oliver, Serovich, and Mason’s assertion that the “methods should reflect the research

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<sup>65</sup> R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Reyes and Lo, “On Yellow English and Other Perilous Terms,” 6. The authors are referring to Kim, “Yellow English,” 44-63.

question” is a guiding principle in my study. The ethnographic component of this project is focused on the experiences of Asian Americans, not on how they articulate these experiences. Thus, even though the next chapter (which focuses on accent) does involve language, my interest is in my interviewees' reflections on language, not on *how* they verbally express such thoughts. I am decidedly denaturalizing the transcripts because it is beyond the scope of this study to demonstrate “evidence of dialectal features of English” or to look at linguistic or rhetorical practices of Asian Americans.<sup>67</sup> This question of scope is furthered by the fact that my interviewees' stated first languages range from Hindi to Tagalog to Japanese to Mandarin to Cantonese to Taiwanese, and so on. Thus, in a research project that is not focused on rhetoric and linguistics, a naturalized (“verbatim”) transcription risks being interpreted as “Yellow English” or “mock Asian.” This methodological decision of denaturalizing is – no doubt – imperfect, but I contend that it is the better option. Furthermore, to continue applying Oliver, Serovich, and Mason’s discussion about this relationship between methods and the research question, my close reading of the stand-up comedy performance of the southern-accented Asian American Henry Cho places voice and body at the center, a centering that concerns the implications of how his accent and use of southern expressions can be read. Thus, in chapter 7, I pay more attention to how Cho expresses himself.

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<sup>67</sup> Many studies demonstrate the possibilities of exploring questions of rhetoric, linguistics, language, and Asian America: for example, Mao makes the case for a Chinese American rhetoric in *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie*: reflecting on the title of his book, what may seem like a grammatical misstep (leaving out the definite article “the”), he reflects, “In a way, I am almost yoking English and Chinese or their two very different syntactic preferences together in a new, creole-like form.” *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie*, 5. See also M. Young, *Minor Re/Vision*; Mao and Young, eds. *Representations*; Chun, *The Meaning of Mocking*.



There are risks to both naturalizing and denaturalizing transcriptions, and despite deliberately and carefully making these methodological decisions, it is important to note that transcription practice is imperfect and subjective. For example, I do not know if my interviewees would unequivocally agree with these transcription choices. As researchers, we cannot search for a truth in transcription or for the perfect method: Bucholtz reminds us that “a preoccupation with accuracy may prevent us from examining the equally important question of what is at stake in a particular transcription.”<sup>68</sup> What is certain is that the act of transcribing is most certainly a political act. It can be “not only editorial and practical but social and political.”<sup>69</sup> Day and Eodice also observe how a particular method of interviewing in their study “might be criticized as a weakness of the study... but we are willing to acknowledge that weakness in the interest of a more ethical project.”<sup>70</sup> I locate my methodology in ethical and political acts.

In conclusion, my transcription methodology is rooted in the importance of considering the historical and political context of English language usage by – and portrayals of – Asian Americans, anchored by two crucial considerations: one, that I am unable to conduct an interview in the first language or preferred tongue of my research interviewees; and two, that this is a pan-Asian American project that involves several languages. Michelle Mouton and Helena Pohlandt-McCormick assert, “If, in the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, a relationship of mutual influence is

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<sup>68</sup> Bucholtz, “The Politics of Transcription,” 1446.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 1451.

<sup>70</sup> Day and Eodice, (*First Person*)2,8. They are referring to team interviewing, as opposed to individual interviewing.

assumed, then every oral historical narrative is a creative work produced in the meeting of two people.”<sup>71</sup> To narrow this further, oral historical narratives drawn from transcripts and the transcription process are deeply informed by the respective social locations occupied by my interviewees and me.

Through this lengthy discussion of the implications of knowledge production, these epistemological questions must continue: that is, employing ethical, respectful research methods should be an ongoing question for all of us, especially those of us in academia. Kamala Visweswaran describes and makes a case for the "feminist ethnographer as trickster":

Here I argue for a suspension of the feminist faith that we can ever wholly understand and identify with other women (displacing again the colonial model of “speaking for,” and the dialogical hope of “speaking with”)... This requires a trickster figure who “trips” on, but is not tripped up by, the seductions of a feminism that promises what it may never deliver: full representation on the one hand, and full comprehension on the other.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, "representation" and "comprehension" cannot be achieved, even through a feminist lens. Visweswaran urges us to consider the "fictions" and "failures" of feminist ethnographic methods and methodologies.

And lastly, in their call to “make commitments actionable,” Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins identify and problematize “originary confessional narratives,” which “often trap people into thinking of racism as primarily located outside of themselves and solvable by completing specific tasks (along the lines

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<sup>71</sup> Mouton and Pohlandt-McCormick, "Boundary Crossings," 46.

<sup>72</sup> Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, 100. After the first sentence, Visweswaran references Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*.

of a checklist).”<sup>73</sup> While the authors contextualize their argument within racial justice and the teaching of writing, their critique is applicable to considerations of methodology. If self-reflexive rumination, as I have done in this chapter, is a characteristic of confessional narratives, then my discussion is inescapably confessional. And still, the authors dare us to “move...to articulations of commitment that are paired with reflective action.” The challenge, perhaps, is not how one can learn to “get over” or resolve questions and make checklists about transparency and ethics in the research process: it may be about how “to let go of the need to ‘get everything right.’”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins, “Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable,” 2.

<sup>74</sup> Kale Fajardo, email message to author, Dec. 27, 2011.

## Chapter 6

### **"They Have to Say, 'Excuse Me?', and I Have to Say, 'Excuse Me?':**

#### **Foreign/ Southern Accents and the Sounds of Belonging**

The preceding chapter's focus on methodology involved the implications of language use and fluency, allowing me to now turn to an analysis of language that continues to highlight the overlapping nature of regional, national, and international analytical frames. Stephen Nagle and Sara Sanders have noted that the American South is "a region where for so many people speech is at the core of their southern identity."<sup>1</sup> In this way, my discussion turns to what is seen to be one of the strongest markers of southernness: that of the southern accent. Working from critiques of "standard language ideology,"<sup>2</sup> this chapter focuses on how Asian Americans in the South interface with the southern accent. The following discussion considers the implications of how accent emerges in the experiences of my research subjects. At the center of this exploration is the question of intelligibility: who is deemed "intelligible," and who is not? I argue that if Asian migrants are rendered unintelligible by U.S.-born speakers of English, then these multilingual Asian migrant communities recover some agential ground in rendering white southerners unintelligible as well. This negotiation is tricky and necessitates an exploration of the nuances and messiness of agency through accent. I begin by contextualizing accent itself, particularly those that are perceived to be foreign and/or

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<sup>1</sup> Nagle and Sanders, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 10.

southern. I pointedly am not situating this analysis of foreign and southern accents amid a backdrop of “globalization”: this chapter implicitly critiques dominant narratives that construct globalization as a recent phenomenon. I work from the assumption that the South – and the United States – have always been “global’ or “globalized.” Thus, in discussing how the foreign accent and the southern accent match up with (and sometimes, against) one another, this meet-up should not be read as a moment of first encounter. It is part of an ongoing set of relationships through the course of U.S. history – between whites and Asians; southerners and non-southerners; American-born and the foreign-born; and so on.

For this chapter, I also turn to a few key sources beyond the environment of the Lab. For one, while most everyone I interviewed worked at the Lab, I also met with a couple prominent leaders within the Asian American east Tennessee community who, if they were not the spouse of a Lab staff member, were intimately aware of the impact of ORNL on the formation of Asian American communities in the area. Their voices are woven throughout this chapter. The next and final chapter will then turn to the comedy performance of Henry Cho, who is a U.S.-born son of an ORNL staff member. These individuals are not directly connected to the Lab as employees, but their stories, when taken together with those of Asian migrant scientists, demonstrate how this playground of language and communication can reconfigure how we imagine the U.S. South and Asian America. And still, this is not to flatten the social locations and sociohistoric specificity of Asian migrant scientists, either: looking at accent reveals a host of social hierarchies that Asian Americans contend with in the South, and this is made even more complicated by the fact that these are Asian national security migrants at a workplace of high social

prestige. Accent is also a productive site of analysis because it is seen as a marker of *both* southernness *and* foreignness.

### Two “Others”? Accents at the Margins

According to Davé, “Most scholars identify two different types of accents, the foreign accent and the regional accent.”<sup>3</sup> Regional accents are associated with American identity because they “are recognized as American English.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast,

With regards to immigrant culture, accents are identified as foreign because the manner of speaking English is identified as not recognizably American. For the foreign-born and immigrant culture, the emphasis on accent is not only used as a means of ‘othering’ within the community but also as a means to solidify a singular notion of American identity... The introduction of a foreign accent implies that even though someone may live in America, they are in fact *not fully American*.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, true to what Krystyn Moon argues, language (in this case, the way it sounds) becomes a way to construct Asian Americans in the United States as racial Others. Accent is deeply connected to other social identities: for example, Alene Moyer notes, “Bias toward accent is predicated on listener attitudes vis-à-vis the familiar categories associated with language variation: social class, race and ethnicity, age, education, regional background, gender, religion, etc. It has often been said that accent is a proxy for discrimination on those grounds.”<sup>6</sup> Importantly, spoken language and accent are inextricable from the physical body: for a person of color, their body in combination with (what is perceived to be) a nonstandard variety of English involves two forms of

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<sup>3</sup> Davé, *Indian Accents*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* (italics mine).

<sup>6</sup> Moyer, *Foreign Accent*, 6.

marginalization: corporeal and linguistic.<sup>7</sup> That is, a person of color who is perceived to be speaking non-accented English can still experience language prejudice or language-related racial microaggression, attesting to the "borders of the body."<sup>8</sup>

The southern accent occupies a low status among regional U.S. accents. The denigration of the southern accent is arguably linked to the denigration of southerners and of the region as a whole. A narrative in Southern studies argues that the U.S. South as a region has been subjected to a form of imperialism and even orientalism. Michael O'Brien, for example, characterizes "Northerners" to be "the most imperial force in American culture, who compelled the South back into the Union at the point of a bayonet."<sup>9</sup> David Jansson talks about how the marginalization of the South represents a form of "internal orientalism" in which the South therefore becomes a scapegoat for the rest of America<sup>10</sup>: simply, it is a dumping ground for everyone outside of it to funnel their racism.<sup>11</sup> Edward Ayers observes:

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<sup>7</sup> In Greenfield's words, "... a stigmatized person will rarely lose her stigmatization *completely* by adopting – or speaking as a home language – a language of prestige because her body still carries with it the racialized markers people have used to relegate her to the margins to begin with." "The 'Standard English' Fairy Tale," 50.

<sup>8</sup> Racial microaggressions are "Commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults." Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," 278. Secondly, the "borders of the body" are discussed in J. Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 215.

<sup>9</sup> O'Brien, *Placing the South*, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Jansson, "Internal Orientalism in America," 297, 311; quoted in Cobb, *Away Down South*, 3. Also, though I believe this is a misappropriation of orientalism, the idea that Americans' "undesirable traits" are pushed on to the South, to southerners, is an important point.

<sup>11</sup> If the Lost Cause ethos reflects an attachment that the imagined South has to the Civil War, then southern literature has also interrupted this narrative by centering the post-Vietnam War Vietnamese American communities in the U.S. South, thereby reframing how we conceive the pairing of war and the U.S. South. For a close reading of such works, see Nahem Yousag and Sharon Monteith, who further note, "To

Ever since the [Civil] war, many of them [white Northerners] have tended to see themselves as the chosen, the redeemed, the real nation; black freedom seems a good not only for its own sake but as an emblem of a larger national destiny and freedom. This role has served to sanctify the North and the West and to make the South a sink of iniquity, a focus and explanation for what is lacking in the country in general.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, the South is marked as an aberration to the nation-state, as Richard Gray argues.<sup>13</sup> The southern accent also experiences this marginalization. If the region is considered to be "the least desirable place in the United States to live,"<sup>14</sup> then this "concept of an undesirable South" carries accent along with it<sup>15</sup>: this is how the notion of the southern accent occupies lower social prestige. Lippi-Green goes on to point out the common perception of southerners as dumb and how this is associated with accent: "One of the primary characteristics of the stereotyped Southerner is ignorance, but it is a specific kind of ignorance – one disassociated from education and literacy."<sup>16</sup> If southern accents are equivocated with a lack of education, what happens when the non-U.S.-born model minority enters the picture (especially one with a PhD in hand and who also happens to work at a prestigious institution)? There are moments in which the southern

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'deterritorialize' the South is to read the region through an American war that took place on foreign soil." "Making an Impression," 215.

<sup>12</sup> Ayers, "What We Talk about When We Talk about the South," 79-80.

<sup>13</sup> Gray, *Southern Aberrations*.

<sup>14</sup> Ayers, "What We Talk about When We Talk about the South," 63; quoted in Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 217.

<sup>15</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 217.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 223. Ayers also notes, "A Southern accent is often understood, inside the South as well as beyond its borders, as a symbol of poor education, low ambition, and reactionary politics." "What We Talk about When We Talk about the South," 71.



accent and foreign accent are aligned, and others where the power dynamics shift back and forth.

In the following exchange with an Asian migrant scientist, my question “Do you identify as a southerner?” prompts a response that directly links southern identity to the accent:

X: No. Absolutely not. I don't feel like a southerner.

J: Why not?

X: Because I don't know any southern traditions or crave any southern tradition. And actually, I want to steer my children away from having a southern accent. [laughs]

J: First of all, what does, why, why do you want to steer them away, like?

X: From the southern accent?

J: Yeah.

X: I guess it's implied through what I know: that southern accent is considered not educated. Plus, I guess in general, you want to speak accent-free. I'm not even sure if that is a good expression. You know, for example, when I was in China, I don't want to speak Sichuan dialect. I want to just speak the general Mandarin. You know, when you are out doing business.

The association of the southern accent with the South comes through in this excerpt, and so, too, does a negative attitude of the southern accent. My respondent, ascribing to the myth of non-accent, believes that her U.S.-born children have the ability to “speak accent-free,” but here her concern is how the southern accent can influence one’s perception of the speaker. Similarly, another respondent talked about how his spouse stayed home with the children: “My children got the most benefit because of [my spouse's] dedication. You know, so now they don't have southern accents.” This distancing move from southern accent is arguably specific to the fact that most all of my

interviewers place high value on educational attainment, not because of “cultural values” per se, but in light of their own status as PhDs.

While the southern accent is a site of marginalization in considerations of regional American identity, it is also a point of ambiguity. Scholars of language and linguistics frequently note the difficulties of defining southern accent: “Linguistic research cannot... identify any common denominator that can safely be termed a ‘southern accent’ or a ‘southern dialect.’”<sup>17</sup> George Dorrill, for example, admits that “no single explanation can be given for what it means to sound southern.”<sup>18</sup> Still, scholars agree that some expressions and pronunciations are historically marked as “southern,” whether or not they can actually be linguistically traced to the South. A few of the more well-known characteristics of southern speech involve the use of “y’all” and the pronunciation of “pen” as “pin.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there are numerous southern accents.<sup>20</sup> My respondents' own descriptions of southern accents were varied, reflecting both the diversity of southern accents in the South, and the different ways regional accents are perceived. For example, one scientist compared regional American accents to those in Taiwan:

They kind of speak a little different from people in the [U.S.] North, but you get used to it. In Taiwan, there's also people who speak a dialect of the locals, so that's nothing peculiar... You miss a few words because their accents are different. For example, we call it “duck”... but some local people call it, “duhhhk.”

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<sup>17</sup> Montgomery, “English Language,” 761; quoted in Dorrill, “The Phonology of English in the South,” 120.

<sup>18</sup> Dorrill, “The Phonology of English in the South,” 120.

<sup>19</sup> Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 221.

<sup>20</sup> I move in and out of the plural and singular forms, using the singular when all southern accents are seen as one and the same. I understand that my singular use runs the risk of rendering southern accents as one monolithic accent. For a fuller discussion of various southern accents, see Bernstein, Nunnally, Sabino, eds. *Language Variety in the South Revisited*; Nagle and Sanders, *English in the Southern United States*.

Furthermore, East Tennessee geographically includes the Smoky Mountains and Appalachia, influences of local speech in the area. These distinctions are not lost on my interviewees, either, for they pointed out their interactions with people from the Appalachian community:

I could hardly understand him. But he was just so, so friendly, and, you know, he'll be saying he will do something -- I couldn't quite understand -- and the next time, he brought me the nice plant. I said, 'Ah, that's what he was telling me.' [Both X and J laugh.] Just super friendly, just really nice. They have this really, very thick mountain accent, from back wherever they live.<sup>21</sup>

In the U.S. cultural imaginary, southern accents have often been collapsed into one singular form; recognizing the variations within, my interest here is in the interplay of the categories of foreign and southern accents: this interplay is fraught with many layers of racialization. Southern accents, including the historical association of southern speech with African American vernacular English, are not to be totalized.<sup>22</sup>

While southern accents are often rendered as one monolithic way of communicating, it is perhaps not as easy to totalize the different kinds of "foreign" accents. Certainly, Asian accents are not always received in the same way and are racialized differently, particularly when considering the inextricability of the body from voice. For example, I could not deny this particular distinction during one of my trips:

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Hazen and Fluharty, "Defining Appalachian English," 17-21; Mallinson, Childs, Anderson, and Hutcheson, "If These Hills Could Talk (Smoky Mountains)," 22-28.

<sup>22</sup> Although my discussion focuses on the interplay between southern and foreign accents, it is important to note the category of the South is always changing. For my interviewees, their reflections on southern accent most always involve the way they as Asians interact with whites, the dominant racial group. And still, perceptions and understandings of southern accents should also take into account the histories of other racialized communities. For example, Spanish-speaking Latino migrants are said to be changing the linguistic landscape of the southeastern United States. Cullinan and Wolfram, *Spanish Voices*.

going to the southern restaurant chain Waffle House with a south Asian migrant engineer, I was taken aback when the white waitress turned to me and asked me to clarify what my lunch companion, a resident of the United States for over thirty years, just ordered. Although this is just anecdotal, the exchange made me think about the question of intelligibility: who is rendered intelligible, and who is not? Furthermore, as a language insider to Chinese, it is clear to me, for example, that there are different accents employed by English-speaking Chinese people (e.g., a Hong Kong Cantonese accent sounds markedly different from a Mandarin accent, not even taking into account the different Mandarin accents). And also, individuals, of course, have different degrees of accent. Despite these differences, however, Asian Americans are often monolithically interpellated as speaking English in accents, as seen in the well-known racial microaggression, “But you speak English so well!” Moyer also talks about how “non-native speech” is received:

[N]on-native speakers... must negotiate a way to be heard for *what* they say rather than *how* they say it... What is really in question when an accented speaker is deemed ‘hard to understand’? This is a question that must be asked given that a foreign accent—even a strong one—does not necessarily render a speaker incomprehensible.<sup>23</sup>

It is not unusual for the English spoken by Asian migrants to be labeled as unintelligible or incomprehensible.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Alene Moyer, *Foreign Accent*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> This is especially seen in education regarding teaching assistants who are international students, a subject of many studies. Donald Rubin has observed, “The NNSTA [nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants] ‘crisis’ is one of the relatively few instructional issues in higher education that has captured the attention of the popular press.” “Nonlanguage Factors Affecting Undergraduates’ Judgments of Nonnative English-Speaking Teaching Assistants,” 511.

### **“They Say Our English Is Not Good. Whatever”: Accents at Work**

It is said that non-linguists tend to conflate spoken language and written language, two very different forms of communication with important theoretical distinctions, and yet, when analyzing accent, language, and power among Asian migrant scientists, it would be negligent to not discuss how language surfaces in their daily work lives and with respect to their professional well-being. If the Asian migrant scientist is perceived by non-Asian (primarily white) colleagues to have a foreign accent, my respondents often brought up the very real consequences of sounding/ speaking "different." Thus, if, as Davé contends, the regional accent still lies within a realm of national belonging while the foreign accent does not, then this idea comes through loud and clear in how my respondents' accents are received at work. These highly trained Asian Americans speak *and* write in highly specialized language at work. Here may be where the Asian migrant scientist recovers some voice and agency: if they are on the edges of racial/ linguistic belonging in everyday life, then at work they retain their status as experts in their respective fields – disciplinary fields in a town that has a deep-rooted history of respect for science.<sup>25</sup> This is tricky territory because it is at the intersection of professional rank and class hierarchies: on the grounds of the Lab, Asian migrant scientists work alongside predominantly white PhDs, but also, the technicians at the Lab are reportedly often whites from the area. Professional rank (and its relationship to gender) emerged in my own field notes about dining in the ORNL cafeteria one day:

Every time I go to that cafeteria, I feel like people are looking at me because most everyone is male. The gender thing is huge. There are local technicians (I can tell

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<sup>25</sup> Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings, "The Role of Collective Identity In Inhibiting Mobilization," 55.

because they're in outdoor, work clothes versus pressed collared shirts), mostly white [racially], and there are also the scientists and engineers, who are honestly an extremely diverse group. I think, I presume, that everyone has badge. You need one to get back into your work building. It's really weird how I can't remember if people have a badge on. I sure notice when it's red, though... I saw this one Asian dude, with a Japanese name on the badge, and the badge was red. So red. Overall, the environment/ atmosphere is mostly men... I generally see a lot of east Asians, presumably Chinese people.

My field notes highlight the badges everyone wears, but also, that the differences between scientists and non-scientists are very visible on campus. In this case, rank and class intersected with race and gender very clearly as well. Class privilege and professional rank surfaced in other ways. For example, one female interviewee noted, "I would invite my secretary to my parties [at home]. They hardly ever show up. Or technicians. They hardly ever show up. I'm not sure if it's because of the rank, because the people who show up mostly have PhDs." And even among those who show up, it's the "foreign national friends" [not the "American" friends] who stay the latest, my interviewee observed. How migrants notice, perform, or assert power over these predominantly white technicians is a choice they make on their own; regardless, the workplace is where Asian migrant scientists can thrive and be experts of a highly specialized language and field of study. As another stated, "My job is to publish as many papers as I can." One exceptionally high-ranking female migrant scientist laughingly said, "Well, some people might say, you know, that 'her English is not so good' or something. *But*, I publish more than anybody else! So I don't worry about it." In this case, the interviewee emphasized how gender supersedes race in her work environment: "*You* want me to be treated differently because I'm Asian," she said to me. "But the most detrimental thing is to be a woman!" I think we can read this interviewee's experiences

more intersectionally at the crossroads of race and gender, as seen in her recognition that others perceive her English as "not so good." She felt like she gained respect from her male colleagues through her extensive record of publications. However, her admission that her non-Asian colleagues do not think highly of her English skills reintroduces accent into the picture.

These migrants' fluency and expertise in the highly technical languages of their fields cannot be missed. An explanatory statement that was met with silence on my end, one interviewee described to me as simply as possible, "My work here is to develop advanced ion sources for the production of radioactive ion beams." A title of one of my father's earlier publications involves, "Monte Carlo Shielding Calculations Using Event-Value Path-Length Biasing."<sup>26</sup> One scientist authored a textbook and showed it to me during the interview, a book filled with equations and sentences I could not understand in any capacity. Disciplinary language is not just restricted to the written language, of course: I have memories of tuning out phone conversations my father would have with colleagues about how to do specific calculations. In an interesting twist, one scientist who finds it "impolite" when fellow Chinese migrant colleagues speak Chinese at work, noted that English is the language of choice, since "my scientific training was all done here... A lot of the jargon is technical, so I don't even know the jargon in Chinese. To me, when you switch the language, it slows down the thought process." What is clear is that these scientists are in their element, communicating in ways that are likely inaccessible to those outside the discipline.

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<sup>26</sup> Tang, Hoffman, and Stevens, "Monte Carlo Shielding Calculations Using Event-Value Path-Length Biasing."

Adding to this equation is the perception of Asians as smart but who speak in accents and are therefore always foreign, coupled with the perception of white southerners as dumb both because they are from the South and because they speak in a southern accent. The southern accent can be marginalized in scientific and academic settings. An Asian migrant scientist shared with me the ostracism a white colleague at the Lab experienced due to having a southern accent: "This friend, he's a good researcher, but every time he goes to a meeting, people almost directly link his southern accent (a very strong southern accent) to stupidity. Almost like speaking southern equals low IQ." Accordingly, this colleague "stopped giving talks at conferences" because he felt that people would reactively attack (or just not listen to) his ideas. While southern-accented scientists do not escape this form of accent stereotyping, Davé reminds us that for those with regional accents, their "citizenship would not be questioned."<sup>27</sup> This is a critical distinction when considering the national security workplace of a national laboratory.

Asian migrant scientists may experience a type of accent prejudice that points to the possibility of glass ceiling discrimination. Despite their demonstrated expertise and obvious mastery of disciplinary language, many shared with me concerns about a glass ceiling based on perceived language ability: discussing the low percentages of Asians in management, one Asian migrant scientist speculated on why this was the case: "You know, 'Chinese are not interested in management positions.' ... And they also say our English is not good. Whatever." This particular scientist lamented about how he wanted to contribute more to making scientific advances in this country by being more involved

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<sup>27</sup> Davé, *Indian Accents*, 5.



in managing projects. He outwardly speculated that maybe he was “too sensitive” about these issues of a glass ceiling related to those he called “Asian Pacifics.”<sup>28</sup> Still this possibility of a glass ceiling surfaced in several conversations. At the start of one interview, for example, the scientist handed me a packet of literature on glass ceiling discrimination for Asian Americans. Even among those who felt that fellow Asians were legitimately not suited for management, the grounds of this were based in language: “Why do Asian Chinese not want to pursue that kind of thing [management]? I think it's our training, mostly. We are trained as scientists and often there's a language [issue] – you always feel there's a deficiency. So you cannot really argue in an effective way for political issues than what we can do for science.”<sup>29</sup> Still, a sense of being marginalized emerges in the transcripts in a way that discursively infuses the felt experience of accent prejudice with national security. For scientists who are also involved in ethnic community organizations, for instance, it would not be uncommon for them to associate the persecution of Wen Ho Lee with concerns about racial prejudice in the workplace, especially regarding the possibility of glass ceiling discrimination.

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<sup>28</sup> While anecdotally, my interviewees felt that Asian Americans were underrepresented in upper management positions at the Lab, whether or not glass ceiling discrimination is a legitimate conclusion to draw is beyond the scope of this study. A few interviewees informed me of an internal report conducted at the Lab. I did not get access to this report, and they also did not know if it had any effect on actual hiring and promotion practices. For more on glass ceiling discrimination, see Joyce Tang, “Career Attainment of Caucasian and Asian Engineers,” 467-496.

<sup>29</sup> By “Asian Chinese,” I believe my respondent was referring to fellow Asian colleagues, most of whom are Chinese.

## **“I Cannot Understand a Single Word”: The Foreign Accent Meets the Southern Accent**

Within and beyond the Lab and Oak Ridge, it is also productive to consider the power dynamics involved when the foreign accent interfaces with the southern accent. That is, if foreign and regional accents are different because they are at extreme ends of national belonging, this distinction gets further complicated when the accents interact with one another. The playground of southern and foreign accents involves two primary overlapping sites: one of fusion and another of confusion. My mother’s “What m I gon’ do?” in her Cantonese and southern accent is perhaps the best example of the former. Confusion, however, occurs at the question of intelligibility. While the Asian foreign accent is often rendered unintelligible, so might the southern accent: “The southern accent?” one respondent said. “Sometimes, I just don’t understand.” This inversion of intelligibility provides a way for the multilingual Asian migrant to recover some ground:

When you talk to those technicians, those carpenters or those electricians [at the lab], the way they talk is different from people in the North. Yeah, the accents, now, I’m more familiar with. I remember the first couple years, my daughter, she can tell a story with a south accent, versus a north accent [laughs]; it’s very fun, yeah. I cannot say it, but I can definitely hear differently. So sometimes it’s very difficult to say, ‘Oh, excuse me, excuse me,’ you know, when we first talk to those technicians. Yeah, *they have to say, ‘Excuse me?’ I have to say, ‘Excuse me?’* because of my accent, my Asian accent or something, and they have a southern accent.

For in this remark, race and class surface very distinctly: it is the PhD-wielding migrant interfacing with the “local technicians,” an exchange complicated by the scientists’ institutional standing and class privilege. William Kretschmar alludes to the intersection of class privilege and accent, where accents can be seen as curiosities: “People believe that accents contain such curiosities, and especially audiences with a higher education

believe that accents consist more particularly of other people's curiosities. *Us*, we're OK, and it's *them*, who live elsewhere, who say funny things."<sup>30</sup> (Un)Intelligibility is now turned on the traditional southerner.

These exchanges are rich sites of analysis that bring to light the nuances of occupational Asian migration to the U.S. South. Comparing his experiences living in Tennessee versus New York, one interviewee talked about the east Tennessee accent: "There are some people that I cannot understand"; in this case, *intelligibility is predicated on the interviewee having lived in another region, not just another country*. Another interviewee distinguished the difference between language barrier and accent, noting that she did *not* feel a language barrier but rather that "maybe a few accents need some getting used to": when she was interviewed at ORNL almost thirty years ago, "I noticed he [the interviewer] always had to spell it out... I think it was because he was very heavy accented, the South, that kind of thing." Another scientist described the southern accent as full of "R" sounds. Laughingly, she clarified, "Their *tongue* is much bigger than the northern speaker's!" One might say that nothing marks the South quite like the accent (aside from the Confederate flag, perhaps). Accent, then, becomes a way to interrogate Asian southerner identity: the presence of Asian Americans forces a reconceptualization of southern identity.

Below, I quote at length an exchange I had with an interviewee, an exchange with several instances that reveal the implications of language – including the southern accent, Chinese accent, and the Cantonese and English languages employed between the

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<sup>30</sup> Kretzschmar, "Languages in the Deep South, 15.

interviewee and me. This passage necessitates a closer look at the interplay of race and accent, and of southerners and non-southerners. Some context: this non-ORNL Asian migrant (who works in the healthcare industry) mentioned that his workplace has many white colleagues from outside the South. I asked the interviewee why this was significant:

X: well, it's just my experience: it so happens that [of] the ... colleagues I worked with, only one person comes from east Tennessee [chuckles] ... Of course when I work with patients, many of them are from around here. And sometimes I might have to imitate how they talk.

J: Oh really? How so?

X: Well, I mean, people make fun of the people from Maryville<sup>31</sup> because of their accent. And the reason is that the people I work with came from other parts of the country. They cannot understand [laughs]. So I become, I turn out to be the interpreter.

J: [You are the interpreter] for the other people in your company: they're not Chinese?

X: They're not Chinese. They're the white folks from Philadelphia.

This migrant is a Chinese American who has lived in Tennessee for over three decades. To his Philadelphia white folk colleagues, he becomes the language insider to the South. These northern co-workers cannot understand Maryville residents. It is an interesting, unexpected moment where an Asian migrant has mastered the South, where difference hinges on regional accent, and the racial Other becomes an insider to the American phenomenon of the southern accent. The exchange continues:

J: So how do people from Maryville ["Meh'-ruh-vill"] sound?

X: Maryville ["Muhr'-vull"]

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<sup>31</sup> Maryville is south of Knoxville and is not nearly as affluent. In a class-based move, Maryville is considered to be more "country" than Knoxville or Oak Ridge.

J: "Muhr'-vull"

X: And you know, and I work in different level [now], when I...worked for my tuition in the summer, and you run into different classes of people: white collars, blue collars and they can be from the, well, they call it 'hillbilly.' They make fun of me, but I make fun of them. But they're friendly, friendly, no intention to do anything.

J: When you say you guys make fun of each other, you mean about how you sound?

X: Yeah, yeah. And they try to imitate as if they are talking in Chinese. And I imitate while they're talking in redneck [laughter in his voice].

J: [laughs] In red-? This is like a long time ago or now?

X: Oh, a long time ago.

J: [laughs] So uh, just now when you say that sometimes you can imitate to your colleagues, or you're interpreter, do you, are you saying that sometimes if your patients are say, from, Maryville, do you take on their accent or?

X: yeah. I can pick out their accent. And then I can translate to my Philadelphia white folks colleagues and say, 'This is what he means.'

J: Because he literally cannot understand it. *Really?*

X: well, give you an example. A piece of wire? They don't say 'a piece of wire [WY-er].' They call it "wahr."

J: "Wahr."

X: "Wahr." And then they sound like, "Take that thing out of your mouth and say it again."

J: Uh huh. *Mm sic tang* ["[People] don't understand" in Cantonese], yeah. 'Wahr'

X: "Wahr." "I'm gon' kill you, boy."

J: [laughs] That's pretty good!

In this continued exchange, my interviewee clarifies how he "translates" what locals say.

"Talking in redneck" also became his response to southerners who mocked him; for the

interviewee, this double mockery equalized the exchange. In this, too, I read a refusal to

take on the classism usually asserted over poor white southerners ("They call it 'hillbilly'": the interviewee does not necessarily claim the term.) Lastly, I find fascinating that the example of "I'm gon' kill you, boy" is used to explain southern accent. That he chooses to use a violent phrase to illuminate the southern accent is hard to miss, especially one attached to the gendered (and at times racialized) word, "boy," one that is often a vocal power play, a verbal assertion of dominance. In the moment of the interview, I, too, as a researcher miss the violence behind the term, instead going the other way and praising my interviewee for the accuracy of his rendition of a southern accent. The other fascinating aspect of the excerpt is how my Cantonese creeps in, as I sense and articulate kinship with the interviewee. As the line of questioning concludes:

X: So but you work with them, and then you imitate them and they find it funny. And you turn it around, teach them a few Chinese...

J: [laughs] What do you teach them?

X: well, I mean... I'd teach them Cantonese. That's all I know...Usually you teach them something bad. So, *seui jai* ["bad kid"].

J: [laughs]

X: [laughs] But that's how they make fun of each other, so.

J: Right, right.

X: But it's all friendly jokes.

This entire exchange is emblematic of the questions around language and accent of this project, both in terms of methodology (my Cantonese language inadequacy or lack of confidence) and in analyzing the lived experiences of Asian Americans in the South. In the case of this particular interviewee, jokes and mockery on both sides equalize such

exchanges with white southerners, and this is also made possible by his class privilege.

This is in contrast to, say, other interviewees who still feel on the outside of southern identity – so outside that they do not have the option to claim to know anything: "[People say that] this is redneck country. You know, I don't know anything about rednecks because I'm a foreigner anyway [chuckles]." We can detect traces of this outsidership in a set of experiences another scientist shared with me, in which we once again see some sort of alignment between southern and Chinese accents:

X: Yes, I have a language barrier. I remember we went fishing in Concord Park, right? ... The English they speak in the south is different from the English they use in the north. I don't understand why... I just, I *cannot* even understand a single word, what a woman tried to tell me. [laughs] I think she was trying to tell me how to catch a catfish... but my son had no problem at all... And actually, in the school, I don't know if this happened to you or not, actually, they call it "southern accent" or something like that, right? In the school, they discourage students, you know, my son has a classmate. He speaks in a southern accent and the teacher had a special session for him to, you know, correct this.

J: Really?

X: Yes. They don't want him to speak – I don't understand why. Don't ask me, I don't understand why... and also I [thought], 'Teacher, hey, maybe you can put me in that program so you can correct my Chinese accent!' [laughs]

In this passage, the respondent, having received his PhD in the northeastern United States, has a hard time understanding southern American English. He then learns that the southern accent is marginalized to the point that his son's teacher conducted accent reduction lessons with a child who sounds too southern.<sup>32</sup> And also, this scientist jokes that he should request lessons as well, revealing his insecurity with his own spoken

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<sup>32</sup> Lippi-Green discusses the fallacy of accent reduction, which has an industry of its own. *English with an Accent*, 228-231.

English skills and also sympathizing with his son's classmate. Again, the southern and foreign accents are aligned.

Lest we equivocate the southern accent and foreign accent, however, they do have major distinctions. Taking after Davé, at issue is that southern accents (and other regional accents) are markers of national belonging while foreign accents, by definition, are just the opposite: markers of difference outside the nation-state. One scientist, a second-generation Chinese American, at one point mentioned the idea of being “100% American,” and when asked to clarify, responded, “Well, I guess it has to do with speaking just like an American would speak, let’s say. No trace of a foreign accent.” Though the South - and its accents - can stand at the margins of U.S. national identity (Othered, orientalized, marked as aberration, it has been said), the southern accent is still, in contemporary times, distinctly interpreted as an “American” sound. Moreover, language and accent are a source of pride among many southerners. Lippi-Green talks about how “covert and overt prestige” is associated with southern accents and southern identity *among* southerners: “In the South, distinctive language features are cultivated by many.”<sup>33</sup> A 2001 survey revealed how respondents “who considered themselves Southerners were far more likely to claim a strong or noticeable accent.”<sup>34</sup> In contrast, my multilingual interviewees talked about their awareness of their accent and how it negatively affects their interactions with non-Asians. The southern accent’s marginal

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. The study was conducted by the Center for the Study of the American South.



status occupies a different space than does the “foreign” accent that may come from multilingual Asian migrants.

Disavowal, too, is also one of the consequences of the interplay of foreign and southern accents. Even if we consider Asians as southerners, what happens when they disavow southern identity through the act of abhorring the southern accent? Time and again, my respondents talk about how, if you leave Oak Ridge, you can run into close-minded more “country” people (e.g., “Among colleagues here, I mean, it's fine. But once you go out of Oak Ridge or even the Knoxville area, you go to very rural areas, some people are not that friendly”). The Asian migrant scientist is Othered outside the Lab, as my interviewees frequently talked about the idea of Oak Ridge as an “island. People working here come from all over the world.” In contrast, “in some areas [of Tennessee], people are very conservative. They don't like Asian people, period. But Oak Ridge seems to be more tolerant.”

Thus, among the Asian migrants of my study, there are those who assert their high educational attainment in reaction to the perpetual foreigner stereotype, distancing themselves from southern identity. This is particularly seen in two ways: first, by pointing out how Oak Ridge is an “island” in which multi-generational Oak Ridgers are more of an anomaly and second, by making sure their children do not sound southern because it sounds “uneducated.” This supposition is fraught with many layers: while the town of Oak Ridge thrives on its historical uniqueness, I would contend that this type of exceptionalism is rendered differently by Asian migrants: while many other white Oak Ridgers may contend that Oak Ridge is unique because it built the bomb, the Asian migrant Oak Ridgers of my study often cited the town as unique because it is

"cosmopolitan," is international, and is full of outsiders, of non-locals. For my interviewees this means that people are more open-minded and accepting of outsiders, particularly of foreigners. For Asian migrants, this may create a special community.

There are people in my neighborhood that I can tell, even some of the very old people (I think they are in their 70s) sometimes they talk differently, you can hear them. They have a particular accent. They are white. So they are probably from Europe. So I guess people probably get used to foreigners in Oak Ridge. But I don't know about other places.

To be sure, exceptionalism exists in both the town of Oak Ridge and the Lab itself, although these two elements are often conflated (and perhaps they are inextricable).<sup>35</sup> There is arguably more to this idea of a unique community of the foreign-born: I think that the workplace of the Lab allows possibilities of ethnic solidarity and even pan-Asian community formation, most clearly seen in the existence of an Asian Pacific organization among Asian American lab employees. Racially speaking, moving from being one in a hundred (in the wider Tennessee community) to one in ten (at work) was hard to miss for me as a visitor of the Lab. With this in mind, many Asian migrant scientists' perception of Oak Ridge as exceptional or cosmopolitan is predicated on the opportunities for building community and general everyday camaraderie at work. That is, the workplace can simultaneously be a place that heightens one's racial/ linguistic difference *and* also potentially relieve a bit of the racial isolation one might experience outside of work. Thus, the distancing moves that some Asian migrant scientists make (distancing themselves from southernness and/or from the southern accent) may be acts of classism

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<sup>35</sup> Also, scientists pointed out there are different dynamics in different spaces at the Lab. One person's workplace, for example, in a building that is not within walking distance to the main campus, was described as "much more of an international place, a very diversified workforce, with people coming from all over the world," even more so than the rest of the Lab.

or elitism, *and* also acts of survival, as coping mechanisms: denigrating the southern accent may also come from a place of being racialized. As one migrant shared with me, "I accepted I was a second-class citizen many years ago."

### **Conclusion: Asian Southerners?**

Shilpa Davé argues that despite the absence of a definable foreign accent among the Asian American protagonists in the popular *Harold and Kumar* films, "others will continue to hear them or see them as exotic others."<sup>36</sup> The next chapter involves an extended case study of racial performance that pushes the boundaries and narratives of accent: what happens when the Asian American subject not only "sounds" like a native speaker (as in the case of the Harold and Kumar characters), but employs a regional accent that is one of the quintessential markers of American identity? Furthermore, for the most part, many of my interviewees do not identify as southerners (for various reasons), but what *would* it mean to identify as both Asian and southern? The next discussion looks to a U.S.-born Asian of the South, pushing my focus on accent even deeper by turning to a member of the second generation, as I consider accent within a de-essentialized notion of Asian southerner identity. If the accent is a sound of regional and national belonging, the performance of Henry Cho still grapples with the perception of the Asian body as foreign and unfamiliar – so foreign, in fact, that this stand-up comedian's success rests on the perceived juxtaposition of a southern accent to the Asian body.

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<sup>36</sup> Davé, *Indian Accents*, 150. Davé describes the 2004 *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* as a "pan-ethnic buddy film. The Korean American and Indian American protagonists "no longer have a foreign accent and, instead, speak with American accents that are normalized in relation to the people around them." *Ibid.*, 112.

## Chapter 7

### “A Tennessean in an Unlikely Package”:

#### The Stand-Up Comedy of Henry Cho

“My name is Henry Cho. I am full-blooded Korean. I was born and raised here in Knoxville, Tennessee. So I’m South Korean.”<sup>1</sup>

“I’m an Asian with a Southern accent. To a lot of people, that right there is funny.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter reflects a methodological turn from an analysis of lived experiences to one of popular culture, further complicating this examination of accent. This distinct shift in source material is crucial to note, lest we conflate the two. Popular culture (in this chapter's case, performance) concerns the politics of representation: as Coco Fusco observes, "a strong impulse persists to erase the distance between an artist's representation of his or her own cultural identity and a self-conscious aesthetic inquiry into the social and psychological construction of difference from a dominant culture."<sup>3</sup> In other words, there is a distinction between how one chooses to artistically represent herself, and how that artist examines what it means to be different from the norm. While it is critical to be mindful of this distinction, turning to art, performance, and popular

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Cho, *What's That Clickin' Noise?*, directed by Alan C. Blomquist (Nashville: Warner Brothers, 2006), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> “Henry Cho: Actor, Comedian, Rancher,” *Cho Industries*, accessed April 1, 2008, <http://www.choindustries.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 103.

culture is particularly instructive especially when thinking of "Stuart Hall's definition of popular culture as the site of power relations that are often representative of social systems and indicative of American national and individual experiences."<sup>4</sup> If this project began with the question, "What does it mean to be Asian in the South?", then this chapter gets at this question from another avenue, another source.

I first heard Henry Cho over ten years ago at a Seattle comedy club. When Cho, who is Korean American, started his set, I was doubly struck by the sound of his voice--first because of his thick southern accent, and second because of its very familiarity. The setup to his opening joke then revealed that we shared Knoxville as our hometown, and I was completely floored. When I later introduced myself, Cho immediately asked, "What's your last name?," a reflection of how few Asian American families there were in east Tennessee during our respective upbringings. It also turns out that Cho is also the child of an ORNL Asian migrant scientist. Years later, Cho released a comedy special, and his stand-up material continues to make me think about how Asian Americans from the U.S. South are seen as strange or out of place in the cultural imaginary and even among other Asian Americans.

Drawing from the comedy special *What's That Clickin' Noise?* and news publications about his work, this chapter takes seriously the comedy of Henry Cho, examining how he performatively manages his social location as a racialized Asian American of the U.S. South. While Leslie Bow examines "the intermediate space between white normativity and black abjection" occupied by Asian Americans in the

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<sup>4</sup> Davé, *Indian Accents*, 3.

South during Jim Crow,<sup>5</sup> the Asian American southerner like Henry Cho is caught in a contemporary web of liberal multiculturalism and discourses of colorblindness in a region of the country that is not typically associated with Asian bodies. Moving away from *anomaly* and *aberration* as a framework for viewing racialized subjects in cultural representation, Philip Deloria calls for a shift toward *frequency* and *unexpectedness*.<sup>6</sup> Something is unexpected when it has not happened that often; *someone* is unexpected when she or he seems to be a numerical minority. Cho's performance operates as a representation that refuses to be dismissed as an anomaly in the South and in Asian America.

Although Cho has been performing as a stand-up comedian since the 1980s, his career has especially been gaining ground over the last few years.<sup>7</sup> *What's That Clickin' Noise?* – his debut DVD comedy special – was filmed in Knoxville and released by Warner Brothers in 2006, premiering on the Comedy Central network. Cho regularly brings his stand-up comedy on tour to various cities around the country and has been

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<sup>5</sup> Bow, "Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the 'Partly Colored,'" 6.

<sup>6</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 3-14.

<sup>7</sup> Cho has been doing stand-up comedy since 1986. H. Y. Nahm, "Comedy's Southern Squire: Henry Cho's Jaw-Dropping Accent was the Springboard for a Roaring Comedy Career," *Goldsea: Asian American Daily* November 19, 2007, <http://goldsea.com/Personalities/Chohenry/chohenry.html>. Also, in September 2011, the Great American Country network premiered *The Henry Cho Show*, a sketch comedy show featuring Cho hosting and starring in a production reported to be "a modern day version of 'The Carol Burnett Show' and a clean take on 'Saturday Night Live.'" At the time of this dissertation's completion, there have been no additional episodes. The inability for the show to continue beyond the pilot can arguably be attributed to several factors (for example, perhaps Cho's forte lies more in stand-up, not sketch, comedy), and while *The Henry Cho Show* is beyond the scope of this chapter, its articulation of Asian southerner identities is worth further examination. Terry Morrow, "Henry Cho to Headline Pilot for GAC Series," *Tele-Buddy's Tinseltown Tales* (blog), Knoxville News-Sentinel, August 8, 2011, <http://blogs.knoxnews.com/telebuddy/archives/2011/08/knoxville-celebrities-henry-cho-standup-comedy-tv-series.shtml>.

featured on late night television shows.<sup>8</sup> He has also signed a deal with a major television network to produce a sitcom about a Korean American man from Tennessee in which “the pilot...will center on Cho’s status as a Southerner who still sometimes feels like an outsider in the South.”<sup>9</sup> Known for his “rare family-friendly” comedy,<sup>10</sup> Cho’s style is based on observational humor about his family and friends, alongside his “Southern-fried humor” and brief jokes concerning his racial subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> As he has stated, “My act revolves around my life.”<sup>12</sup>

A self-described “Tennessean in an unlikely package,”<sup>13</sup> Cho was once told by the creator of *The Tonight Show*, “Henry, ... you know the old saying that there’s no such thing as a new joke, well, Kid, you’ve got about 12. No one has ever come from your angle, no one, ever. They’ll show up down the road now that you’ve established yourself, but you are an original.”<sup>14</sup> This notion of being “original” can be predicated on Cho’s anomalousness, but originality can also rest on unexpectedness. Framing Cho’s performance in this way is not only grounded in geographic unexpectedness but also in

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Cho’s Myspace page, accessed November 19, 2007, <http://myspace.com/henrycho>.

<sup>9</sup> “Henry Cho Presents Comedy for Everyone,” *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, October 15, 2009, <http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2009/oct/15/henry-cho-presents-comedy-for-everyone/>.

<sup>10</sup> David Jeffries, review of *What’s That Clickin’ Noise?*, directed by Alan C. Blomquist, *All Music*, accessed July 15, 2008, <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:fzfixqwldfe~T0>.

<sup>11</sup> Terry Morrow, “Hometown Comic Says His Humor’s So Clean Even Grandma Would Approve,” *Knoxville News Sentinel*, November 4, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Terry Morrow, “A Clean-talking Cuss: In 19-year Career, Knox Comic Says He’s Never Relied on Racy Material,” *Knoxville News Sentinel*, December 2, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Christina Shams, “Stand-Up Sit-Down: Henry Cho,” *NBC Dallas-Fort Worth*, June 4, 2010, <http://www.nbcdfw.com/around-town/events/Standup-Sit-Down-Henry-Cho-95630584.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Allen, as quoted in Nahm, “Comedy’s Southern Squire,” 2.

the unexpected coupling of the physical body and the vocal sounds coming from it--that is, his accent. Additionally, moving Cho from anomaly to unexpectedness signals a focus on agency. Cho's performances as a stand-up comedian and as an actor, in addition to his remarks in numerous interviews, insist on dismantling the dichotomous constructions that render him as Asian and as southern. As one article notes, "By birth, he's Korean-American, but he's also a dyed-in-the-wool Southerner raised in Tennessee."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, while Cho's performance reflects a simultaneity around the articulation of Asian southerner identity, *What's That Clickin' Noise?* also troubles the black/white racial binary that is often attached to how we imagine the U.S. South. Thus, Cho's material speaks to a racial inbetweenness that pushes the boundaries and master narratives of not only what is American, but also what is southern and, notably, what is Asian American. Cho's management of his racial positionality is also quite fraught and full of contradictions, revealing the messiness of this negotiation. This chapter considers the implications of the Asian American in the "unexpected places" of the South, particularly with respect to the formation of Asian southerner identities.<sup>16</sup>

### **“Just to Get Past the Obvious”: The Function of Expected and Unexpected “Asian Jokes”**

Cho begins and ends his comedy special with relatively predictable jokes that are explicitly related to his racial and ethnic social identities; his comedy often refutes stereotypes of Asian Americans through his Asian southerner identity, one that is

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<sup>15</sup> Anthony Sclafani, "Columbia Arts Fest Has Henry Cho, for Starters," *Howard County Times*, May 7, 2009, <http://www.explorehoward.com/news/61815/columbia-arts-fest-has-henry-cho-starters/>.

<sup>16</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*.



inextricably embedded in the jokes themselves.<sup>17</sup> For example, Cho's first joke is about being Korean in the South and therefore, "South Korean."<sup>18</sup> Cho appears to use "Asian" and "Korean" interchangeably,<sup>19</sup> as he then sarcastically launches into how he "loves the Asian stereotypes," sharing his childhood experiences: "It's different growing up here [in east Tennessee], man. A lot of Asian people live here now. When I was growing up, I was it. I was the only one, man. Made it kind of tough when I was a little kid. Do you guys remember playing army when you were a kid? Pretty much hated that game, man." At this point the comedy special cuts to a shot of the audience, where it is hard not to notice a white male viewer laughing heartily. Cho then finishes the joke with, "All my buddies [were] goin', 'K, Henry, it's the neighborhood against...you.'" Yet this finishing statement is unnecessary: the man and his fellow audience members already know why Cho "hated that game."

What is happening in the editorial choice to feature a spectator's reaction to the army joke? The force of the man's unchecked laugh throws his head and upper body back into his seat. In the predominantly white audience of the Tennessee Theatre, this army joke appears to be very well-received, provoking widespread general laughter. It is perhaps a laughter of white guilt--of the audience members' discomfort about their own

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<sup>17</sup> I am choosing to use "Asian" and not "Asian American" because Cho describes himself in this way. I am also using "southerner" as well, based on how he describes his background and how news sources describe him.

<sup>18</sup> In numerous recordings of him online, Cho uses this as his first joke. For example, see Henry Cho, interview by Sonia Baghdady, *Wtnh.com*, October 5, 2007, <http://www.wtnh.com/Global/story.asp?S=7174360>.

<sup>19</sup> When the joke has to do with Korea or the Korean language, he mentions his ethnicity. In most other jokes he uses "Asian." Hereafter I will base my usage on Cho's own articulation of his experiences as an Asian southerner and/or Korean southerner.

assumptions of Asians as foreigners, perhaps even a recognition of the absurdity of how racial differences and hierarchies are rendered in a children's game. Cho, born in the 1960s, grew up in a Vietnam War and post-Vietnam War era where Asians were visibly portrayed in U.S. popular culture not just as foreigners, but as enemies.<sup>20</sup> If it's a painful memory, then Cho masks it effectively. As sounding southern is a distinct way of sounding "American," Cho exposes the absurdity behind the idea that he could be an enemy, begging the question, how could someone with a southern accent be a foreigner, much less an enemy?

In this regard, the chuckle that results from watching Cho in action is fraught with many layers of meaning that ultimately speak to Cho's agency in the context of both Asian southerner identity and in deconstructing and further complicating the Asian American's state as a "forever foreigner" in dominant discourses. Deloria troubles the phenomenon of laughing – of "the chuckle": what makes people laugh, and who is laughing? Especially as it relates to minoritized subjects, the chuckle reveals the hierarchies of power inherent in the chuckler and the one being chuckled at. When it comes to cultural productions, the chuckle in response to Cho and other Asian American performers often draws upon Orientalist practices that render Asians as racial Others. Deloria underscores the connection between the chuckle and a "history [that] contains a full share of malice and misunderstanding,"<sup>21</sup> but in *What's That Clickin' Noise?*, Cho is in control of the chuckle, creating it, provoking it, and ultimately using it in a way that

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<sup>20</sup> See R. Lee, *Orientalism*, 11, 180-203.

<sup>21</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 4.

articulates his identity as an Asian southerner. The genre of stand-up comedy also ensures this sense of control. Sometimes, the chuckle comes at the expense of Asian Americans, and at other times, it involves a recognition of racial stereotypes. While he inevitably speaks from his social locations as an Asian or Korean southerner, Cho's performance does not feature many stories that are explicitly concerned with him as a Korean American. As he states through the Comedy Central website, "I'll do some Asian jokes up front . . . just to get past the obvious. Then I move on--maybe throw in another one in the middle – and then I close with a story about my dad and me."<sup>22</sup> Transitioning to other, less "obvious" (read: less "Asian") jokes, Cho manages his social locations on his own terms while disrupting essentialist readings of his work.

#### **"It's Not a Character, It's Me": The Incongruity of Body and Accent**

From the moment he steps on stage, Cho's performance exhibits a seemingly mismatched embodiment of sight and sound. Aesthetically, the stark simplicity of the physical setting highlights Cho's Asian body.<sup>23</sup> *What's That Clickin' Noise?* features a bare stage with red curtains in the background; Cho is in a black dress shirt and blue jeans. His microphone and a glass of water on a stool are the only other noticeable objects. With a skillful comedic timing that is extremely measured yet effective, he is

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<sup>22</sup> "Henry Cho," *Comedy Central*, accessed April 1, 2008, [http://www.comedycentral.com/comedians/browse/c/henry\\_cho.jhtml](http://www.comedycentral.com/comedians/browse/c/henry_cho.jhtml).

<sup>23</sup> Recognizing that the notion of an "Asian body" is a social construction, I use this term to point out how Cho is racialized because of his physical appearance. Cho's stand-up comedy performance perhaps speaks to Josephine Lee's discussion of the "borders of the body": analyzing plays by Asian American playwrights, she notes how the "characters wrestle with the perceived limits of the body and its inability to pass beyond the barriers of race and ethnicity as categories defining and confining the body." In this chapter, I also employ the term body in a way that is distinct from "voice" and "accent" (i.e., other forms of embodiment) because descriptions of Cho's stand-up comedy frequently suggest a juxtaposition of his southern accent to his Asian body. J. Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 215.

comfortable on stage, and his slow-paced delivery and lack of physical humor also signal how laid back he is. This relaxed style, coupled with his accent, marks him as southern, and the focus is on his body and his voice. Thus, Cho's Asian body and the southern accent that comes from it force the audience to visually and aurally recognize his positionality as an Asian southern comedian. In the context of race, voice, and the body, Shilpa Davé and Sean Brayton, in their respective work, look for ways to decenter the privileging of the visual, pointing to the implications of considering both sight and sound in race and representation.<sup>24</sup> Henry Cho's stand-up comedy illuminates the inseparability of the body and voice. One California-based news article describes how Cho's southern accent in combination with his Asian body provokes a type of laughter that is predicated on the imagined corporeal dissonance of the visual and the aural:

A Korean comic with a Southern accent released an album on a Country label [Warner Brothers Nashville]. Sound unlikely? Not to Henry Cho. Having grown up in East Tennessee, this fast-rising standup comic hasn't met a stereotype he couldn't debunk. Onstage and off, Cho has made a career of defying expectations...[T]he combination of his Asian countenance and distinctly Southern way of speaking has been surprising people and making them laugh since his college days.<sup>25</sup>

Cho's "distinctly Southern way of speaking" does not reflect a "style shift," which, in Brayton's formulation, can involve the act of donning Asian ethnic accents in performance.<sup>26</sup> Thus, unlike English-speaking Asian comedians who affect accents in

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<sup>24</sup> Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice"; Brayton, "Race Comedy and the 'Misembodied' Voice"; Brayton, "Race Comedy and the 'Misembodied' Voice."

<sup>25</sup> Peter Cronin, "New Artist Spotlight: Henry Cho," *California Chronicle*, October 14, 2006, <http://www.californiachronicle.com/articles/viewArticle.asp?articleID=14855>.

<sup>26</sup> Brayton, "Race Comedy and the 'Misembodied' Voice," 97.

their humor,<sup>27</sup> Henry Cho's southern accent is his own, raising new questions about sound and authenticity in the study of Asian American performance and racial formation.<sup>28</sup>

For instance, upon hearing (and perhaps chuckling at) Cho's accent in the comedy special, one might wonder whether Cho's distinct accent is "real." This act of questioning the authenticity of Cho's accent accentuates his status as a racially in-between subject. As Cho once remarked, "We met these girls from Michigan and they thought I was mocking my buddies with my southern accent."<sup>29</sup> The question to ask is not whether Cho's accent is an affectation or a style shift. Rather, *why* do we pose this question in the first place? This is particularly compelling when we compare Cho to the enormously successful comedian Larry the Cable Guy, who fits every stereotype of the southerner: with his standard attire of a baseball cap and plaid flannel shirt with cut-off sleeves, his accent is extreme--the archetypal country accent. Yet Larry the Cable Guy is actually Dan Whitney, and in one stand-up comedy performance from years ago, Whitney has no distinctive southern accent and is introduced as himself, a native of Nebraska.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, "Larry the Cable Guy" is a character who comes alive on stage or in the movies: he is a persona developed and perfected by Whitney. This fact is well known, and in an

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Brayton analyzes the style shifting of Margaret Cho and Russell Peters.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Krystyn Moon has noted how language, including accent, was one of the "theatrical practices" that Chinese and Chinese American vaudevillians used to manage white expectations of their performances. Moon, *Yellowface*, 151.

<sup>29</sup> Nahm, "Comedy's Southern Squire," 1.

<sup>30</sup> "Larry the Cable Guy, also known as Dan Whitney," accessed April 1, 2008, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=VR0n7ZvVoW8>.

interview with the news program *60 Minutes* where he reflects on his success as a comedian, Whitney's accent is still distinctly southern but less pronounced than "Larry's":<sup>31</sup> Whitney's use of a stereotypical and suggestively derogatory "redneck"-sounding southern accent for "Larry" marks a careful distinction that also implicitly evokes questions around the southern working class. I am not necessarily calling into question the authenticity of Whitney's accent. It's more about the quizzical look of disbelief that many experience in reaction to Cho's southern accent: as Cho explains, "A lot of people say, 'You've got a great character.' Well, it's not a character, it's me."<sup>32</sup> This disbelief clearly comes from the unexpectedness of a southern accent attached to an Asian body. Cho is invested in making clear that even when he is on stage, he should be read as "authentic."

### **"I'm a Southern Boy All the Way": The Implications of Identifying with the South**

The inextricability of being simultaneously Asian and southern leads Cho to moments of uncertainty that emerge in multiple forms often around class and gender, beginning as early as the thematic choices in the comedy special's DVD menu. In its attempt to connect Cho to Blue Collar Comedy, the menu reveals a moment where, to cite Bow, "the need for reassurance [of Cho's southernness] unveils tenuousness."<sup>33</sup> The DVD menu takes as its theme the prototypical cowboy, an image that implicitly sets in motion normative constructions specifically around American masculinity. The menu

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<sup>31</sup> Larry the Cable Guy, interview by Bob Simon, *60 Minutes*, CBS, April 15, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4948849n>.

<sup>32</sup> Glenn Doggrell, "Comedy: Henry Cho: Never out of Character," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1994, [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-04-28/news/ol-51374\\_1\\_henry-cho](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-04-28/news/ol-51374_1_henry-cho).

<sup>33</sup> Bow, "Racial Interstitiality," 17.

features a still shot of Cho set in a country-themed background with corresponding font and an instrumental country song titled “Guns of Laredo.” Thus, the art direction situates Cho in this regionally ambiguous conflation of the South, the Southwest, and the Wild West; the net effect is that Cho is in an unexpected place for Asians.

Another section of the DVD menu then draws a connection between Cho and other purportedly southern comedians, specifically those of Blue Collar Comedy fame. Placed shortly after the opening credits of Cho’s performance, an animated sequence begins with still headshot photographs of Blue Collar Comedy headliners Larry the Cable Guy, Jeff Foxworthy, and Bill Engvall. In this short sequence, the trio is giving Cho a ride to the theater: incorporating his trademark phrase, Foxworthy proclaims, “If you’re late for your own comedy special, you might be a redneck.” Cho then steps out of his (animated) car, and the scene switches to the actual lobby of the Tennessee Theatre. This brief animated sequence legitimizes Cho’s credibility with mainstream audiences (especially those familiar with Blue Collar Comedy). With comedy “so clean even grandma would approve,” Cho, however, seems distinctly out of place.<sup>34</sup>

Originally featuring four white comedians (including the trio in the sequence),<sup>35</sup> the Blue Collar Comedy brand, given its literal identification with the working class, evokes a sense of southernness among its audiences through the comedians’ southern

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<sup>34</sup> Morrow, “Hometown Comic Says His Humor’s So Clean.”

<sup>35</sup> The fourth is Ron White, who eventually left the group. This discussion refers to the first (and most well known) generation of Blue Collar Comedy, a brand that involved a highly successful tour; the *Blue Collar TV* sketch comedy television show, which lasted two seasons; and three films, including the 2003 *Blue Collar Comedy Tour: The Movie*.

accents and “redneck” humor.”<sup>36</sup> The brand, especially with respect to Larry the Cable Guy, is marked by its crassness (e.g., “fart jokes”) and deliberate lack of “political correctness” featuring uncouth humor through the hypermasculinity of heterosexist and misogynistic jokes.<sup>37</sup> Blue Collar appears to resonate with audiences that feel slighted by the multiculturalist turn in mainstream discourse, especially in such liberal phenomena as “political correctness.” Furthermore, by aligning itself with whiteness, the racial politics of Blue Collar Comedy come through in how its comedians – “four good ol’ boys”<sup>38</sup> – have performatively positioned themselves in contrast to the extremely successful tour and motion picture, *The Original Kings of Comedy*, which is based on the stand-up comedy of a team of four African American male veteran comedians, including Steve Harvey and Cedric the Entertainer.<sup>39</sup> In one racially coded segment of *Blue Collar Comedy Tour: The Movie*, the four white comedians, in a brazen attempt to mock “the Kings,” don flashy suits, an exaggeration of what Steve Harvey and his colleagues wear

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<sup>36</sup> Andrea LeVasseur, “Blue Collar Comedy Tour: The Movie,” *All Movie*, accessed June 15, 2010, <http://www.allmovie.com/work/the-blue-collar-comedy-tour-movie-270865>. Blue Collar Comedy is often perceived to reflect a southern identity, whether or not this is made explicit in the comedy itself. For example, one review states, “While Cho’s reflections on his Tennessee upbringing might endear him to the Foxworthy and Larry the Cable Guy crowd, he’s not nearly as obsessed with Southern living.” Although I would contend that “Southern living” is a central component of Cho’s performance, this review nonetheless makes clear that Cho, Foxworthy, and Larry the Cable Guy, for example, are distinctly associated with the South. See Jeffries, review of *What’s That Clickin’ Noise?*

<sup>37</sup> As Larry the Cable Guy has remarked, “The only people who are uptight at my shows are politically correct white people.” Regarding his fan base, “Larry” notes, “My crowd is good, honest, hard-working Americans. . . . They don’t hate anybody, they just want to enjoy themselves, and they’re not into that PC crap.” “Larry’s” act has included intense, no-holds-barred displays of homophobia, in addition to mocking other minoritized subjectivities such as people with disabilities. See Gavin Edwards, “Larry the Cable Guy Bared: The New King of Comedy Plugs into Red-State Fervor,” *Rolling Stone*, April 26, 2005, [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7277749/larry\\_the\\_cable\\_guy\\_bared](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7277749/larry_the_cable_guy_bared).

<sup>38</sup> Rodney Ho of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*; quoted on the DVD front cover of *Blue Collar Comedy Tour: The Movie*.

<sup>39</sup> Bernie Mac and D. L. Hughley are the other two. The movie was released in 2000.



in their own film. Thus, the two films share the same genre, but the similarities end there.

*Blue Collar Comedy Tour: The Movie* has also been described in contrast to *Kings*:

“Along the same lines as *The Original Kings of Comedy*, but marketed toward a radically different crowd, this comedy concert headlines the top names in so-called ‘redneck’ humor.”<sup>40</sup> Through their marketed juxtaposition to the Original Kings of Comedy and through the stand-up material itself, Blue Collar Comedy caters to southern white male audiences.

What does Henry Cho’s stand-up comedy have in common with the Blue Collar comedians? In preparation for the night that the comedy special was filmed, one article notes, “The Blue Collar/Jeff Foxworthy-type comedians have won over both the red and blue states. Cho says comedy is cyclical, and, at the moment, audiences are yearning for something less racy and more relatable.”<sup>41</sup> In terms of comedic style, the connection between Cho and Blue Collar is not quite convincing: if Cho’s comedy is marked as “family-friendly,” Blue Collar is quite the opposite.<sup>42</sup> As one of Cho’s longtime friends has remarked, “He has found a way to be successful without going the blue-[collar] comedy route.”<sup>43</sup> Blue Collar’s identity as not “clean,” though, surpasses “fart jokes,” and is directly related to its politics: it is difficult to overlook the misogynistic musings featured in Blue Collar Comedy performances by Bill Engvall, for example, or the overt heterosexism that Larry the Cable Guy relies on. Blue Collar Comedy and Henry Cho do

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<sup>40</sup> LeVasseur, “Blue Collar Comedy Tour: The Movie.”

<sup>41</sup> Morrow, “A Clean-talking Cuss.”

<sup>42</sup> Jeffries, review of *What’s That Clickin’ Noise?*

<sup>43</sup> Morrow, “A Clean-talking Cuss.”

at times participate in constructing various images of southerners, a common thread that persists alongside Blue Collar Comedy's intense misogyny and heterosexism. The Blue-Collar-Cho link appears to situate Cho's comedy in southernness, reflecting the need to establish his southernness in the first place and speaking to the unexpectedness of Cho's identification with the South. As he has also made clear elsewhere, "I'm a southern boy all the way."<sup>44</sup>

In *What's That Clickin' Noise?* Cho's identification with the South among non-Asian southerners can be contradictory: while he critiques racial stereotypes through what he calls "Asian jokes" (e.g., playing army), at other times Cho paradoxically employs stereotypes about Asians. Cho wrestles with his state of racial inbetweenness in a performative back-and-forth that also brings to light his discomfort as an Asian southerner among Asians. For example, Cho tells a story in which he ridicules someone who ignorantly assumed that all Asians must know--or want to be friends with--one another. Yet later in the comedy special, he jokes about his first trip to Korea: "Here in Knoxville, when I was growing up, we were the only Asian people. My dad's the only Asian man I'd ever seen before I went to Korea. So I'd always pick him out of any crowd like *that* [snaps fingers]. Well, this reversed on me in Korea. We got off the plane, he walked twenty feet away, and I just *lost* him." In this joke, perhaps a sense of Cho's insecurity is revealed and projected on the Asian body. While the joke may truly speak to his felt experiences of being part of a numerical minority in the U.S. South (he jokes

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<sup>44</sup> "Meet Henry Cho: America's Favorite Comedian," *Georgia Asian Times*, September 20, 2007, <http://gasantimes.com/sept07/q&asept15.07.htm>.

about being the “only Asian guy in, like, four states”<sup>45</sup>), it also appeals and plays to the predominantly white audience at the Tennessee Theatre. A double move is performed: white audiences are relieved of their guilt in not making the effort to tell Asians apart, speaking to a “myth of interchangeability.”<sup>46</sup> The joke also allows Cho to implicitly proclaim to his southern audience, “I’m one of you,” as though he is insecure about where he stands. As he has shared elsewhere, “I don’t really have any water. People always say you’re a fish out of water. I don’t fit in 100 percent with my southern buddies, and I don’t fit in 100 percent with Korean people so I’m kind of an enigma with no water. People always say, ‘Are you Korean or Tennessean’ and I always say ‘I’m a Tennessean in an unlikely package.’”<sup>47</sup> The “I lost my dad in Korea” joke, where Cho performatively acknowledges how he is more comfortable around whites than other Koreans, reveals a contradictory moment of tenuousness where Cho straddles and augments the false dichotomies constructed around his Asian southerner and Korean southerner social locations.

At the same time, when Cho clearly imitates his father’s accent, the messiness ultimately ends with a joke that does contest the Korean/southerner binary. In one such instance of style-shifting, the joke lands well--almost too well, as Cho, shaking his head, puts his hand up with his palm toward the audience. As if to both cut short the laughter and move the joke forward, he says, “I’m not making fun of my dad. My dad is a brilliant

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<sup>45</sup> Doggrell, “Comedy: Henry Cho.”

<sup>46</sup> J. Lee, *Performing Asian America*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Shams, “Stand-Up Sit-Down.”

man. He speaks five languages. He just dudn't speak any of 'em any good."<sup>48</sup> Through the use of a local and perhaps regional version of the word "doesn't," combined with the idiomatic phrase "any good," the joke also brings the South back into the picture when it comes to language, suggesting that "speaking well" goes both ways – for Koreans as well as southerners. For a brief moment, the Korean accent and southern accent are aligned: Cho's status as a Korean southerner is at the heart of the joke.<sup>49</sup>

### **"I Was a Bachelor My Entire Life before I Got Married": The Model Minority in the South**

In Cho's move to claim the South, narratives around masculinity and the model minority converge. Using his male privilege, Cho tells many wife-and-kids jokes that articulate his overstated role as a domesticated husband to his spouse. Although these seemingly run-of-the-mill jokes are not unique in the world of comedy, Cho's performed status as the all-American "family man" serves a different purpose if we consider his social location as a straight Asian American man.<sup>50</sup> It is not simply that Cho's jokes about his relationship with his southern white wife suggest the possibility of the Asian

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<sup>48</sup> Like many Tennesseans, Cho generally pronounces "doesn't" as "dudn't" in his show, but I spell out Cho's pronunciation here to demonstrate that a southern pronunciation of an English word may not be "correct," either.

<sup>49</sup> Cho has also stated, "I've turned down countless roles where they wanted me to speak broken English as a stereotypical derogatory character." Thus, Cho adamantly refuses "broken English" roles but also imitates his father's accent in his stand-up comedy. Although performing "broken English" may be different from affecting his father's accent, a contradiction remains in Cho's decision about whether to use accents that are interpellated as Asian or Korean. Shams, "Stand-Up Sit-Down." For a closer look at the implications of the performance of accents that are marked as Asian, see Chun. "Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery."

<sup>50</sup> Emily Steele, "Henry Cho--Funny Man, Family Man," *Dream Row Magazine*, June 1, 2010, <http://dreamrow.com/2010/06/henry-cho-funny-man-family-man>.

American man as a masculine, sexual being in the U.S. cultural imaginary.<sup>51</sup> Invariably interpellated as a model minority, Cho remains a “safe” and more desirable alternative to black/white interracial marriage to the mostly white audience, and whether he wishes to or not, his positionality serves to alleviate southern white guilt. With his “suave southern accent,”<sup>52</sup> Cho is clean-cut, physically appealing, and his jokes are distinctly not “racy,” earning him the nickname “Mr. Clean.”<sup>53</sup> In the face of historic antimiscegenation sentiment in the United States, Cho is far from a threat to the sanctity of the white woman and is in fact an ideal partner, and this is further achieved by the fact that he often jokes about his deference to his wife. As one reviewer has remarked, “Everybody likes relationship jokes and stand-up material about being married.”<sup>54</sup> Cho muses, “I want to win one argument before I die, one argument with my wife, just one . . . They could just put that on my headstone, you know, ‘He won one. This was it.’” Clearly, his wife is the dominant partner. To revisit Blue Collar Comedy, the *New York Times* has noted, “The comedian Jeff Foxworthy’s Southern shtick operates on the assumption that masculinity is an endangered commodity, under threat from feminists, gays and contemporary life in

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<sup>51</sup> I attended a performance where Cho directly stated that his wife is white. *Henry Cho*, by Henry Cho, South Point Casino, Las Vegas, NV, March 17, 2012. Also, in one interview, Cho is directly asked about whether his wife is also Korean American. He does not answer directly but notes, “She is from Arab, Alabama, which is a town of zero color--of any kind. . . . People ask occasionally how it is in a mixed marriage. I say it’s tough [’]cause she’s an Alabama fan and I’m a Tennessee fan--big college football rivalry. That’s the only part of our marriage that is ‘mixed.’” See Nahm, “Comedy’s Southern Squire,” 5. Lastly, Cho’s performance reveals that he is aware of the emasculation of Asian men in the United States, as revealed in an early joke about his childhood: “We used to play a lot of ‘Cowboys and Indians.’ Didn’t we, guys? Cowboys and Indians. You guess I hated this game, too, man. I was always the cook.”

<sup>52</sup> Shams, “Stand-Up Sit-Down.”

<sup>53</sup> “Meet Henry Cho,” *Georgia Asian Times*.

<sup>54</sup> Review of *What’s That Clickin’ Noise?*, directed by Alan C. Blomquist. *The Serious Comedy Site*, accessed November 27, 2013, [http://www.theseriouscomedysite.com/showreview.php?r\\_id=690](http://www.theseriouscomedysite.com/showreview.php?r_id=690).

general, and that relationships between men and women are based on deceit and manipulation.”<sup>55</sup> If Foxworthy works from a notion of an “endangered” masculinity, Cho’s brand of masculinity takes a racialized turn through his wife-and-kids jokes in which he consistently praises his wife and the value of marriage: in short, Cho’s palatable, downtrodden form of masculinity satisfies audiences. Cho is an Asian American of the South in a contemporary moment where mainstream racial discourse lies in colorblindness, when white audiences watching performers of color want to “see past race.” Although this is complicated by the fact that stand-up comedy often relies on jokes that do point out difference, the racially in-between Cho is posited as “innocent, approachable, and everyman,”<sup>56</sup> embodying a comparatively “safe” site of difference.

The model minority narrative is inevitably attached to Cho’s image, appearing in popular news sources and in his performance. As he jokes in a question-and-answer bonus track of the comedy special, “There are sixteen doctors in the family. I hate the family reunion.” If the notion of the model minority involves the idea of excelling in the educational system through arduous years of hard work based on some notion of Asian cultural values and work ethic, Cho’s success as a stand-up comedian puts a different spin on the narrative. Instead of being an overachiever in school, Cho opted for a completely different route. He is not only funny, but he is a college dropout. As a sixth-year college undergraduate in the 1980s, Cho entered a local comedy club competition:<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Stewart, “Just a Good Old Boy, Traversing Familiar Old Comic Territory.” *New York Times*, October 20, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Jeffries, review of *What’s That Clickin’ Noise?*

<sup>57</sup> “Meet Henry Cho,” *Georgia Asian Times*.

“When Cho walked off the stage, the owner of the Funny Bone Comedy Clubs offered him a spot hosting the show for the rest of that week. By Friday, he had decided to drop out of college.”<sup>58</sup> Cho has also acknowledged the unexpectedness of his career choice, citing his father as one of his “heroes”: “He [Cho’s father] came to this country as an eighteen year old who spoke no English, earned two doctorates ... one generation later I get to do comedy!!”<sup>59</sup> News features also often stress how Cho broke away from family expectations: an article entitled, “They Couldn’t Dub Him Dr. Comedy,” states, “He was without much of a career direction when he was a college student. Once he became a comedian, though, he says he was the first member of his traditional Korean family not to be a doctor.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, buried in the notion of how Cho is the anomaly of a “traditional Korean family,” another narrative emerges: the overachieving, dual-doctorate father enables the son to pursue his own American dream. In the end, these articles and interviews suggest that Cho, in departing from his “sixteen doctors in the family” background, is perhaps more “American,” different from his “traditional Korean family.” Cho, the college dropout, and his father, the dual-doctorate dad, are frequently referenced in news sources, a moment that exposes the persistence of both the model minority and forever foreigner narratives in Cho’s career.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “Henry Cho,” *Comedy Central*.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Cho’s Myspace page, accessed November 19, 2007, <http://myspace.com/henrycho>.

<sup>60</sup> Terry Morrow, “They Couldn’t Dub Him Dr. Comedy,” *Knoxville News Sentinel*, December 2, 2005.

<sup>61</sup> The forever foreigner narrative so often experienced by Asian Americans is not lost on Cho, following him into his career as a comedian. Cho has recalled that in one performance for a corporate audience in Tennessee, he was asked about his Korean language fluency before entering the stage. After responding that he is American-born and not bilingual, Cho then found out “that the audience was all Koreans and

Assuming a southern in-group posture, Cho performatively brushes off this model minority narrative by unexpectedly evoking its southern counterpart: the stereotype of the southern-accented southerner as dumb and uneducated. Later in the performance, he affectionately pokes fun at a southerner named J. B., notably as a cultural insider and as a friend to J. B., *not* as a nonsoutherner looking down on a southerner. Cho's embodied racial difference, in combination with the fact that he is at ease and commanding in his own skin, refuses the notion of "the Asian/Southern contradiction," as one newspaper calls it.<sup>62</sup> His body will be read as intelligent ("Asians are smart"), but his accent will not ("southerners sound dumb"). When a kindergarten teacher predicts that one of Cho's sons will attend an Ivy League university one day, Cho quips to the audience, "Well, I can't afford that. I've gotta keep him down. `Here's a Gameboy. Go learn a skill.'" Thus, this joke and other lines such as, "I was a bachelor my entire life before I got married," merge the smart-Asian/dumb-southerner juxtaposition, simultaneously drawing attention to and refuting the model minority stereotype through the performance of dumbness.

In-group humor also takes an unexpected turn, demonstrating how Cho aligns himself with the South in the midst of class stratification. Cho's stories about his friend J. B. further underscore this point. He talks at length about how "stupid" J. B. is, joking that because J. B.'s initials stand for no underlying referent names (it is his birth name), J. B. formally wrote "J. only, B. only" on his driver's license application, earning himself the nickname "Jonly" (pronounced "Jone-lee"). Thereafter, Cho refers to J. B. as "Jonly" or

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none of them spoke English." Saved by a translator, the performance was still a success. The forever foreigner narrative seems inescapable, but Cho manages to make do. Cho, "I Said What?," 166-167.

<sup>62</sup> Doggrell, "Comedy: Henry Cho."



“Jonly Bonly” (“Jone-lee Bone-lee”), and Jonly jokes are interspersed throughout the performance. Cho comfortably claims the South through Jonly, who is in fact a primary character in the show, and when channeling what Jonly says, Cho noticeably uses a heavier accent in imitation. Moreover, in a live recording, the sound of the nickname’s syllables articulated through Cho’s own southern accent has the inexplicable effect of provoking bigger laughs: we hear “the southern” come through loud and clear in what will lead to arguably the most well-received joke of the night, one that people frequently refer to on Cho’s fan sites: given *Star Trek*’s famous line, “To boldly go where no man has gone before,” Jonly is so “stupid” that he assumed “boldly go” is a place, a proper noun. He is now “Jonly Bonly from Boldly Go.” The joke is well executed and shows Cho at his best: he is not making fun of southerners as an outsider. Rather, he is poking fun at and chuckling with his own – with fellow southerners. In a moment of unexpectedness, audiences anticipate his “Asian jokes” but instead, they get southern jokes from an insider. While Cho turns anomaly into unexpectedness, he achieves this shift by relying on a classist stereotype that seems to match his voice more than his body. As he has noted, “My main audience is college kids and college-educated adults,”<sup>63</sup> and the imagined dissonance of his body and voice emerges again, as Cho asserts his southern status by incorporating and sometimes actually assuming the image of the dumb southerner – the southern “redneck.” Embodying a conflation of class status and the South, this figure further reflects Cho’s performative resistance to the Asian/southerner dichotomy. Reinforcing Cho’s status as a Korean southerner, one of the final jokes of the

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<sup>63</sup> Morrow, “A Clean-talking Cuss.”

night is Jonly's response to Cho's trip to Korea: "That's just like going to a different country." "Jonly Bonly from Boldly Go" is so central that the DVD is named after him: "What's that clickin' noise?" is what Jonly asked when Cho used the turn signal in his car one day. The fact that the DVD title comes from Jonly cannot be missed: Cho's hook is being "south Korean" because he's a "full-blooded Korean" from the South. The "Jonly Bonly" jokes drive home this point: the South is home. Through the use of a southern stereotype, Cho's performance reconfigures dominant narratives of the South and of southerners.

#### **"Bless Her Heart": Performing the Simultaneity of Asian Southerner Identity**

Like Deloria, who looks "to make a hard turn from anomaly to frequency and unexpectedness,"<sup>64</sup> Cho is able to use his visibly and aurally anomalous status as an Asian American from the South to counter the stereotypes and expectations placed on Asian Americans, carving out a space for himself as an unexpected Asian southerner. For example, once in Arab, his wife's Alabama hometown (pronounced, "A'-raab," as he makes clear), Cho recalls, "So just for fun, I took my whole family to Wal-Mart. And we just started walking around. 'What are you staring at? We just bought this place.'" We might read Cho's performance as somewhat self-exotifying; however, fully aware of his interpellated forever foreigner status, Cho breaks through in this Wal-Mart joke, as he turns it around on the white southern subject. Similarly, Cho relays that when ordering from the menu at a restaurant back in the United States, his father inadvertently mispronounces "quiche" as "quikie," and the audience erupts with laughter. Noticeably,

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<sup>64</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 6.

though, Cho trails off saying his dad now does it on purpose: “Of course to this day he still knows what it means, but he orders it the same way.” Like his son, the Korea-born father understands how he is interpellated and now plays with it, deliberately ordering “quickies” at restaurants. The sexual undertones are completely unexpected by the waitress and by the audience, particularly in light of the father’s own status as an elderly Asian male.

Cho’s unexpected articulation of his place as an Asian southerner reaches its performative height in a joke that concerns his southern mother-in-law. He prefaces the story by sharing that his mother-in-law taught him how the phrase “bless your heart” can be used to shield the abrasiveness of insults. Displaying a mastery of what might be marked as a southern expression,<sup>65</sup> Cho jokes that following an insult about someone with “bless his heart” excuses the meanness: “Look at that ugly baby. Bless its heart.” The story begins when he brings his father to Arab, Alabama, to meet the in-laws for the first time. (Throughout the performance, Cho references his wife’s hometown, Arab, characterizing it as “a little bitty town. All white people. All the time. Except the day we got married.”) As Cho tells the story, when the mother-in-law met Cho’s father, she haltingly shouted, “HEL-LO. MIS-TER. CHO! HOW. ARE. YEEW?!” Cho, without losing his southern accent, relays that his father then asked him, “What is she doin’?” speaking to the narrow-mindedness of the mother-in-law’s assumptions about the father’s

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<sup>65</sup> For example, one article about Cho begins with, “If you’ve lived in the south . . . for more than five minutes, you are familiar with the cardinal rule; you can say anything about anybody, no matter how rude or insulting, as long as you follow it up with the phrase, ‘Bless his heart.’ Seriously! As a bonafide Yankee . . . , I was used to verbally bashing people and leaving it at that. I had no idea that those three little words could absolve you of any guilt you might experience after having said such disparaging things, . . . [N]o one explains this protocol better than stand-up comedian, Henry Cho.” See Steele, “Henry Cho-- Funny Man, Family Man.”

English skills. Cho responds, “Well, she thinks she’s speaking Korean.” Amid the audience’s laughter, Cho then walks across the stage and takes a sip of water, shaking his head and punctuating the applause with his finishing line: “Bless her heart.” The audience explodes, and like the childhood army joke, Cho has exposed the absurdity of the situation (this time of his mother-in-law’s ridiculous affectations) to an appreciative audience, using the very expression that his mother-in-law supposedly taught him. As Cho concludes, “It’s a true story...She still yells at the man.” The success of the “bless her heart” joke demonstrates how Cho’s Asian and Korean identities are inextricable from his southern identity.

The final joke of the comedy special involves Cho’s trip to Korea, one that ultimately relies on Cho’s status as a Korean southerner. He recounts that an American woman asked him at the bus stop, “Is this the bus-EE that goes-EE down-EE town-EE?” Cho’s enunciation makes clear that the woman, perhaps in a stronger manner than the mother-in-law, spoke in a loud, infantilizing way. The woman’s question also exudes characteristics of “mock Asian,” Elaine Chun’s term for “an imagined variety of American English” that involves a mockery that makes no attempt to be “realistic.”<sup>66</sup> Cho then performatively refutes this condescending manner of speaking, responding, “I reckon so...bless your heart.” In this instance, Cho’s “bless your heart” subtly calls out the American woman’s silly and insulting way of speaking English to someone who, in her mind, would not understand her otherwise. Thus, Cho’s response may simultaneously express his unease about how he is not usually associated with southernness (“I reckon

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<sup>66</sup> Chun. “Ideologies of Legitimate Mockery,” 263, 269.

so”), as well as his control over the situation (“Bless your heart”). This Tennessee Theatre audience nods and claps heartily with approval. They appreciate his identification with the South: he not only responds to the woman in English (and in his own accent, of course), but he also uses what is arguably marked as a southern expression. Though we do not know if this woman is a southerner, it doesn’t matter for this hometown crowd: in this story, Cho is their man – the southerner – and that’s all that matters. With this, Cho thanks the audience and leaves the stage. The audience is left with the lasting impression of Cho as the southern-twangd Korean from the South.

Though it is his hook (“the best hook since Rodney Dangerfield,” he’s been told<sup>67</sup>), Cho does not wish to be known only as “the Asian southern comic. I wanted to be a comic.”<sup>68</sup> Cho has mentioned that his jokes about his so-called Asianness have decreased over time as he has gained popularity: “When I first started out I had many jokes and made many references to my upbringing. Nowadays I’ll do an hour show and not do any Asian jokes.”<sup>69</sup> He spends the first two minutes of *What’s That Clickin’ Noise?* on “Asian jokes,” distinctly ending this segment with, “There you go. There’s your three Asian jokes. Take ’em home with ya.” It is not that Cho avoids or minimally plays into Asian American subjectivity, however: his racial/ethnic subjectivity (as his performance often conflates the two) is embedded even in his anecdotal jokes, giving rise to a performance predicated on being an Asian southerner on his own terms. Cho also

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<sup>67</sup> Cho has stated, “As far as comedy though, being Asian and from Tennessee is the best hook since Rodney Dangerfield. That’s been said by many people in the industry.” Nahm, “Comedy’s Southern Squire,” 4.

<sup>68</sup> “Meet Henry Cho: America’s Favorite Comedian,” *Georgia Asian Times*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

resists being typecast as a “country comic,” as well.<sup>70</sup> Thus, in his interviews, Cho consistently has to contend with either/or constructions of being an Asian southerner.<sup>71</sup>

Cho’s resistance to this simplistic construction also surfaces in his work beyond stand-up comedy. For example, Cho turned down an acting role that demanded “broken English,” but he also accepted one that called for an exaggerated country accent. On a panel discussion on race and humor, Cho remarked:

I’ve been pitching shows for years, and I’ve heard networks say, “Why don’t you write a character like Ms. Swan into your show [played by a white actor in yellowface and speaking in Mock Asian, Ms. Swan was an Asian racial caricature on *MadTV*<sup>72</sup>]?” I’ve left the table every time. A few years ago, I had this great script in which Pat Morita would play my dad, a widower that I would teach how to date again. It was very funny. They said it’d actually be funnier if I spoke broken English. No it wouldn’t. It has nothing to do with it. So I walked. Pat called me and said, “I would have done it.” Trust me, if I was waiting tables and I had to do it to make a living, I may have sold out a decade ago. Fortunately, I was very successful at standup comedy, and I make a living doing what I love.<sup>73</sup>

Conversely, Cho plays a character in another film in which he speaks in an accent that is a distinct exaggeration of his own in real life: in *Say It Isn’t So*, Cho has a minor role playing a southern stereotype. His character, “Freddy,” is a troublemaker with an exaggerated country accent that easily and derogatorily marks him as uneducated and

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<sup>70</sup> Morrow, “A Clean-talking Cuss.”

<sup>71</sup> As he also notes in another interview, “I never wanted to be the Asian comic or the Southern Korean comic.” Nahm, “Comedy’s Southern Squire,” 2. Note: the spelling of “Corean” is the website’s editorial choice, not Cho’s. See “Corea and Korea?,” *Goldsea: Asian American Daily*, accessed June 30, 2010, <http://www.goldsea.com/Air/Issues/Corea/corea.html>.

<sup>72</sup> I use the term *yellowface* to also speak to how this *MadTV* character inherits a particular historical context concerning the portrayal of Asian Americans in U.S. popular culture. See Moon’s discussion about the contemporary uses of this term. *Yellowface*, 164-165.

<sup>73</sup> Neil Justin, “Can Race Be a Laughing Matter?,” *YellowWorld*, accessed June 15, 2010, [http://yellowworld.org/arts\\_culture\\_media/172.html](http://yellowworld.org/arts_culture_media/172.html).

“redneck.”<sup>74</sup> Why is “broken English” off limits to Cho while a stereotypical country accent is acceptable? Cho’s avoidance of Asian stereotypes at least in film and television comes through, but so does an implicit insistence on being seen as Asian and southern, all at once. When playing southern-accented characters, the interpellation of Cho as an Asian southerner is a given: his body is a site of racial difference. Unlike a role with “broken English,” Cho’s over-the-top character in *Say It Isn’t So* reflects the performed simultaneity of the Asian southerner that the comedy special also demonstrates.<sup>75</sup>

### **Conclusion: “Every Show I Create, I Have Control”**

Seeing and hearing Henry Cho in the flesh so many years ago has since become a fun memory for me. It would complete my anecdote to say that our families have known each other for years, but we never met in the east Tennessee landscape. The presence of Asian bodies in the South continues to evoke double-takes figuratively (and sometimes literally), and amid the perceived strangeness of Asian Americans in the region, Cho’s material in *What’s That Clickin’ Noise?* reveals that he is in control of his image through his performance: he has the last laugh, an agential chuckle that relies on his Asian southerner identity. He has remarked, “Every show I create, I have control.”<sup>76</sup> Cho’s representation of his racial subjectivity reveals how he carefully manages others’ expectations of him. The audience’s chuckling, which is simultaneously with *and* in

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<sup>74</sup> Starring Heather Graham, *Say It Isn’t So!* is a 2001 comedy about a man and a woman who fall in love, only to find out that they may be long-lost siblings. *Say It Isn’t So!*, directed by James B. Rogers.

<sup>75</sup> In the 2006 film *Material Girls*, Cho plays Ned Nakamori, a character who does not have a southern accent and is therefore not read as southern. The film is set in southern California. *Material Girls*, directed by Martha Coolidge.

<sup>76</sup> Shams, “Stand-Up Sit-Down.”

response to Cho, bridges the interpellated foreignness of his body with the demonstrated domesticity of the southern accent. The resulting tension that is produced by the unexpected coupling is alleviated by Cho's chosen performance genre – stand-up comedy – that actually facilitates the chuckle and encourages outbursts of laughter. The use of humor by a racialized subject in performance can mitigate discomfort about racial difference among mainstream white audiences.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the stand-up comedy of Henry Cho presents an especially rich site of study when we consider how accents and jokes operate as markers and articulations of belonging.

Cho's comedy – and the messy contradictions that come with it--attest to the challenges in pulling away from what Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn describe as the “pernicious either/or habit common in the formation of imagined communities” especially in constructions of the South, as they push for ways “to talk about region without talking about essential identities or `heritage.’”<sup>78</sup> My claims here represent a counterargument to the facile conclusion that Cho's identification with the South is overall in excess, is somehow inauthentic, or that it represents a forced sense of American and/or southern identity. It would also be too convenient to conclude that Cho's identification with the South signifies an escape from “Asianness,” so to speak. Cho's performative choices in *What's That Clickin' Noise?* reflect a “both-and” (not an “either/or”) approach to understanding his positionality. Cho's performance does not work to establish what it definitively means to be an Asian southerner: he does nothing to

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<sup>77</sup> For example, Moon analyzes how Lee Tung Foo, the Chinese American vaudevillian of the early 1900s, employed humor that in turn “soften[ed] the racial maneuvers” he was making in his performance. Moon, “Lee Tung Foo and the Making of a Chinese American Vaudevillian,” 38.

<sup>78</sup> Smith and Cohn, “Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities,” 8.



claim a representative voice for Asian Americans in the South. Thus, rather than argue for an Asian southerner subjectivity or authenticity, I hope this analysis speaks to a more productive site of inquiry: how the stand-up comedy of Henry Cho complicates and challenges dominant narratives of the U.S. South and Asian America.

## Afterword

I remember day trips to Atlanta. We'd drive the three and a half hours and go straight to a dim sum restaurant, then on to a couple of Asian grocery stores and stock up for the month with loads of goodies. My parents would pack up the oversized Igloo cooler in the trunk of the car and, too frugal to stay at a motel, would drive home in the dark. We were on our own back then, an isolation that emerged in shades – rarely ever in-your-face but existing in subtleties (or perhaps microaggressions, my inner cynic says). As one interviewee affirmed, "There's not enough cultural diversity [here in Tennessee]. I wish there were more Chinese or people of different cultures here. The life would be easy."

These days, I am told, the Knoxville area has its own big Asian supermarket, Sunrise over on Walker Springs. My interviewees tell me those Atlanta day trips aren't necessary anymore and are a thing of the past. I realize, too, that with each research trip back to Knoxville (for my family packed up and left in the late 90s), the operative word I find in my body is *nostalgia*. I never seem to expect it, and it hits hard every time. I left after high school, but I tell myself it's the dissertation that brings me back.

This project has four main contributions: it is a study of Asian Americans in an understudied region; it links science, national security, race, and migration; it explores regional particularity and Asian American racial difference through accent and language; and it suggests that certain methodological questions must be asked when working across and within languages. These contributions are made legitimate through my sources, which do all the work for me as I make my scholarly claims in my scholarly voice. I

suspect that this project also shows the volatile relationship I've had with east Tennessee, too. In some unexpected way I find myself referencing Faulkner, the quintessential southern writer, who wrote tales of hating the South, loving the South.<sup>1</sup> As an unexpected daughter of the South, I have found it crucial to not disavow the region while studying it. Asian America and the South are both constructs that are so bounded as to place the Asian American southerner in a cultural no man's land wherever they may be. The distancing move of disavowing the U.S. South, of dismissing the region, would be somewhat parallel to the act of marking the region as an aberration to the nation<sup>2</sup>: the dismissal performs a disservice to the subject and to the research, maybe showing an inability on the part of the researcher to confront inner conflict.

In the end, it is my body that confirms the contributions of this project. Each week I spend in Tennessee is punctuated by trips to Waffle House (my record was three visits in eight days): it's not just because the waffles have no equivalent, but it's also that they take me back to Saturday mornings when my parents did the one "typical" thing that they actually enjoyed, too. The U.S. South is said to be big on nostalgia (à la *Gone with the Wind*<sup>3</sup>). It turns out I have one of my own, one that is replete with loud crickets at dusk, driving too fast on narrow, winding roads, Jazzercise at a local church, eating grits at Krystal's (because there was no way Mom was making grits at home). And these memories are interlaced with others not-so-great: pressure to go to church, dirty looks

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<sup>1</sup> In Edward Ayers's words, "The South for these Southerners [African American southerners] is -- as it was for William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe -- a place to love and a place to hate, a place impossible to figure out." Ayers, "What We Talk about When We Talk about the South," 64.

<sup>2</sup> I thank my colleague and fellow southerner, Charlotte Karem Albrecht, for this crucial point.

<sup>3</sup> McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 39-94.

from my second grade teacher when I spoke Cantonese to my Chinese American best friend (we were the only two), the stares directed at my parents when they acted outside the social norms of southern white folks. I still have trouble saying I'm a "southerner": the claim feels fraudulent, like I'm an inauthentic subject. My interviewees teach me differently, though. I ask Shigeko one day, "Would you consider yourself a southerner?"

Shigeko: I'm a southerner, oh yeah [laughs]. I'm a southerner alright.

J: What does that mean?

Shigeko: Well, 'southerner' means... first of all, you care about the family... Southern people are family-oriented people, right? And then, you kind of have your own family traditions: your family does this, does that on such-and-such a day. Or maybe [during] Thanksgiving time, we cook this way, we cook that way. These kinds of traditions are here. And southern people are like that. And southern people are good to their neighbors. If the neighbors have a sickness or something, they take a little thing to them. This kind of kindness is among the southern people. So I'm called a "southern belle" now [laughs]. You saw that, right?

Here Shigeko is referring to "A Different Kind of 'Southern Bell,'" an article about a community award for her work on the Friendship Bell.<sup>4</sup> Shigeko's identification as a Tennessean, as a southerner, is a vast departure from the responses of most of my other interviewees, who either have never thought about whether or not they are southerners, or who completely feel outside of such a regional identity altogether. If I myself am somewhere in-between, then Shigeko's unapologetic certainty is a welcome contrast.

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<sup>4</sup> Uppuluri is a recipient of the 2008 Covenant Platinum Award. "A Different Kind of 'Southern Bell,'" *Covenant Health Passport News* 10, no. 3 (2010): 1; "Inner Peace, Outer Strength," *Oak Ridger*, Aug 8, 2008.

And if it's not my mother's southern and Cantonese accent, then it's other moments in the interviews where an unexpected Asian southernness emerges. A Chinese migrant shared with me her experiences when first arriving in east Tennessee:

X: Well, people in the South are kind of relaxed or something. That was the first impression... When we [first] came, we stopped by that new China Palace restaurant at Melton Lake [in Oak Ridge]... And that owner, they knew we just got in, and just befriended us. Very nice. And invited us to his house. [laughs]

J: Oh, that's so nice. [laughs]

X: So people are pretty nice, and in general, I guess that's what people say: people in the South tend to be more nice to people. Something like that.

This snippet stands out among others. We could call it slippage when this scientist says that southerners are nice and then goes into how welcoming one particular Chinese family was. But I want to read it differently, as an articulation of a Chinese *and* a southern hospitality (even while recognizing that the latter is especially discursive).<sup>5</sup> We cannot definitively know if my interviewee means to gesture toward some sort of hybridity.

And we are back to the original question, "What does it mean to be Asian in the South?" This project offers a glimpse of a story about Asian Americans in the South, but if I have built a bootstraps-style grand narrative of success through assimilation, then I have failed. There is in fact no real "ending" to this tale. But these moves – of a newcomer's act of stopping by a Chinese restaurant, of the restaurant owner's own warm welcome – these are not merely acts of hospitality: they are acts of survival.

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<sup>5</sup> Szczesiul, "Re-mapping Southern Hospitality," 127-41.

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## Appendix 1: Recruiting Interviewees

Interviewees for this study were recruited via the snowball method, beginning with my father, a former employee of Oak Ridge National Laboratory. I would ask an interviewee for a referral, and that person would then contact their colleague. From there, I would send the following letter to the prospective participant:

Hello,

My name is Jasmine Kar Tang, and I am currently a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at the University of Minnesota. You are receiving this letter because a family friend or colleague of yours thought of you as a possible participant in my dissertation project. I have asked him or her to pass along this letter to you.

Specifically, I am looking to locate Asians who have lived or currently live in east Tennessee. I'm especially interested in folks who have worked at Oak Ridge. My father, Jabo Tang, actually worked at X-10 for thirty years, and as a Knoxville-born Chinese American, I am now interested in studying the lives of people like you and my dad. I was born at UT hospital and graduated from Farragut High School in 1998. I moved away from Knoxville for college, and I now live in Minneapolis for grad school.

I know that you must be very busy, but I'm wondering if you might entertain the idea of sharing with me some of your experiences living and working in Tennessee. I will be in east Tennessee [insert dates], and I'm wondering if you might spare about an hour for an interview. My schedule is very flexible, and I can work with whatever your calendar allows. I also have a pass to come to ORNL, so I can meet with you at work if it is more convenient.

If you'd like, I'd be happy to share with you the type of questions I'd ask you to see if this is something you'd be comfortable doing. In any case, be assured that any information you share with me will be kept confidential, and names would be changed. I am bound by ethical obligations (set by the University of Minnesota) that would protect interview subjects. If you agree to consider this interview, I will have to undergo a simple but thorough process of obtaining your informed consent before the interview itself, which includes a 'consent form' that explains the details. You also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

You may wonder why I am interested in such a project, and I can tell you that as an Asian growing up in Tennessee, I always had a lot of questions about myself and my family. I hope this project will shed light about the presence of Asians in the South. I think that folks like you and my dad have an important story to tell that would create a new chapter on American history.

I really look forward to hearing from you, and I'd be happy to address any of your questions. Please feel free to give me a call or email anytime. My contact information is at the top of this letter.

Thank you!

Best,  
Jasmine

## Appendix 2: Interview Questions

After the interviewee responded to the recruitment letter, I would send a consent form, in which I would also ask for permission to audio-record the interview. At the interview itself, I asked the following questions (which I also provided via email upon request):

### Basic Background Information

1. When and where were you born?
2. How long you have been in the U.S.?
3. How long you have been in Tennessee?
4. Tell me your educational level and your schooling.
5. Where were your parents born? Did you grow up in the same place of their birth? Did they raise you with any particular religion or religious practices?
6. How did your parents feel about you going to graduate school?

### Questions about work

7. (If applicable) When did you begin working at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL)?
8. How did you get your job?
9. How did you find out about your job?
10. How did you find out about ORNL?
11. Why did you decide to work at ORNL?
12. How would you describe your occupation? What is your title?
13. How did you decide to become a [insert occupation here, e.g., nuclear engineer]? What led you to this line of work in general?
14. How much did living in Tennessee have to do with your decision to work at ORNL?
15. If you are able to discuss it, what is the nature of your work at ORNL?

### Living in Tennessee

16. When you moved to Tennessee, did you know anyone else in the area?
17. When you first came to Tennessee, what did you do in your leisure time? How did you spend your leisure time? Vacations?
18. What holidays did you celebrate? (e.g., did you celebrate birthdays and for whom?)
19. When in Tennessee, did you continue your religious practices?
20. Do you have family here? If you have a spouse, did you meet him or her in Tennessee? If not, where?
21. Do you have kids? When were they born? What do/did you like about raising your children here?
22. What were some factors in deciding whether or not to move to Tennessee? How did Tennessee factor into your decision?
23. Did you ever think about leaving Tennessee?
24. Have you enjoyed living here?

Questions about your sense of belonging in TN

25. How do you racially identify yourself?
26. How do you ethnically identify yourself?
27. What languages do you speak?
28. How comfortable do you feel speaking English? When you first came to Tennessee, did you experience a language barrier?
29. Did you come to the U.S. assuming you'd stay in this country?
30. What is your citizenship status? If you are a U.S. citizen, when did you become a U.S. citizen? What made you decide to become a U.S. citizen?
31. Were there things about living here in the U.S. or in Tennessee that ever made you feel uncomfortable?
32. When you first came here, how comfortable did you feel at your workplace?
33. How did you experience being in the South when you first came?
34. When you first came here, did you feel like you belonged here? What about now?
35. Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't?