On Social Formation

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For whatever reason, unlike women's and queer studies, which have significant bodies of writings on theory, ethnic studies has not for the most part been reflective of its theoretical formulations that frame, explain, and direct its projects. Mundane, daily survival in a generally hostile environment might have consumed much of our time and energies; race and racial formation might have loomed so large as to block alternate sources of light; identity, experience, and voice might have silenced external criticisms and proof demands. Of course, persistent questions about its legitimacy should have prompted compelling justifications for ethnic studies, including its pedagogical and intellectual merits and distinctions, and actual engagements with our communities and those who hold and wield power should have tested our mettle but also our assumptions and contentions. Even race and racial formation have been more referenced than acknowledged or subjected to rough scrutiny.[1] We thus welcome this albeit brief moment for critical reflection, and see this occasion as an opportunity to rethink with our colleagues our subject matters and the commitments that underwrite them for the purpose of reanimating our intellectual projects and our politics.

Our intentions, nonetheless, for this essay, despite its lofty ambitions, are quite modest. We recognize that many of our colleagues have made enormous contributions to the concept we herein call "social formation," and that fuller critiques of race-based ethnic studies and political practices, along with their accompanying baggage of nationalism and patriarchy, have been made by others elsewhere and to greater effect. We see this essay, instead, as a restatement of previous studies and as a work in progress, a clearing of ground for future wider and deeper engagements with theorizing and testing the idea and practice of "social formation." For despite a general, as we perceive it, recognition that race alone is inadequate to explain power—the subject matter of ethnic studies—and its transactions and consequences, persistent still is the foregrounding of race in institutional settings, from the U.S. Census to public and private entitlements, and popular and academic discourses. In addition, while adduced in various contexts, "social formation" has rarely been historicized or articulated as a theory, much less its relevance for ethnic studies claimed. Thus, we begin "On Social Formation" with a personal, presentist commentary on the beginnings of ethnic studies during the 1960s and 1970s, move on to posit

"social formation" as a concept and practice central to ethnic studies, deploy "social formation" in a reading of a literary text, and urge a vacating of race-based ethnic studies for social formation.

Staging Origins

Some ethnic studies scholars, when reflecting upon our field, are wont to wax nostalgic about the founding moment and originating fire of educational and social transformation. Back then, some might remember, we shared a common purpose and were energized by the injustices and inequities visited upon us and by the apparently expansive promise of U.S. democracy. These days, we might demur, our colleagues seem ignorant of or deny that genealogy, and they appear more intent on promoting themselves and their careers than the communities that constitute their subject matters and sometimes their benefactors, having carved out the very positions occupied by those latter-day "paper sons" (Salyer 44, 61-62; Odo 223-29; Lee 4-5, 194-95, 203-07). Fakes with fraudulent credentials, those fictive kin are not only oblivious to any familial obligation or debt, some of us confide, but they are also and more despicably crass opportunists, who hustle the academic marketplace for fame and fortune.

Now with hindsight, we must confess, our choice of subject matter and the politics that informed it were flawed, shortsighted, and even reactionary. Our beginnings were not all so golden. Some of us, the founders, figured race as the central object of study and racial politics as the means toward our liberation. We diagnosed the problem correctly insofar as hegemony, in the form of white racial politics, mandated and produced inclusions and exclusions in textbooks, the curriculum, the racial formation, and we pursued its counter, colored racial politics that sought inclusion even as it excluded more or less whites, the "inauthentic," the wider social formation of class, gender, sexuality, and nation. We have since had diffident relationships with those constituent parts of the social formation, wedded as we are to the racial formation.

Allow us to expand upon that a bit. We all know how ethnic studies began as a move of self-described "Third World" peoples for self-determination to smash colonialism both abroad and at home. We found strength in the solidarity of peoples of color within the U.S. and in the Third World. The Third World Liberation Front, proponents of a School for Ethnic Area Studies at San Francisco State College in 1968, stated in its "philosophy and goals": "The TWLF [. . .] has its purpose to aid in further developing politically, economically, and culturally the revolutionary Third World consciousness of racist oppressed peoples both on and off campus," the broadside proclaimed. "As Third World students, as Third World people, as so-called minorities, we are being exploited to the fullest extent in this racist white America, and we are therefore preparing ourselves and our people for a prolonged struggle for freedom from this yoke of oppression" (Umemoto 20). And revolutions in Africa and Latin America, the writings of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, and the iconography of martyrs Patrice Lumumba and Che Guevarra invited

veneration if not emulation. Asian Americans drew particular inspiration from the determined struggles of the Vietnamese peoples in their protracted wars for freedom and from the successful revolution in China, where Mao's little red book and his ideas of cultural and global insurgencies inspired dread among the empire builders and colonizers (Louie and Omatsu).

Despite those transnational origins, some of us, led by men, held nationalist agendas. We eagerly sought spaces within "our America," a self-constituting soil wherein our past lay buried like the roots of stunted trees. A few in Asian American studies imagined themselves Chinatown cowboys, wailed "aiiieeeee!" and yearned to find and name their homebase. Whether out of the frenzy of manly discovery or the sheer weight of shouldering the burdens of academy and community, many of us failed to pause to reflect upon our orientations and their consequences for the field we were so busily sowing. The compelling magnetism of nationalism, drawn from the constitutions of emerging Third World nation-states in anti-colonial struggles, was irresistible in our rhetoric and models of internal colonialism and the liberation of mind and body. That, in fact, is the most egregious limitation of the internal colonial hypothesis—the nationalist analog.[2] Patterned on European states, nationalism promoted homogeneity and repressed heterogeneities for the sake of union. Glossed were differences of race, gender, sexuality, class, and citizenship, and detailed were patriarchies dismissive of feminist critiques and aspirations. And we neglected to broadcast widely our disillusionment with the postcolonial state and its neo-colonial ties and replications of bourgeois social hierarchies and mentalities, which rendered bitter the fruits of freedom (Anderson; Hintzen).

The racist exclusion especially of Asians and Latina/os from U.S. discourses of nation prompted a resistant, racialized nationalism that insisted on inclusion, though not absorption, as equal members of the community. Often marginalized as perpetual immigrants and foreigners, Asian American and Chicano writers lay claim to the U.S. by virtue of nativity and contributions to nation building (Muñoz; Garcia et al.). To wit, the editors of *Aiiieeeee*! (1975) insisted that all of the writers in their literary canon be "American born and raised," and they found particularly offensive the white stereotype of Asian men as "utterly without manhood" and as "the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass" (Chin et al. ix, 14; Chan et al. xiii). To be sure, nationalism, while racialized, is simultaneously sexualized and gendered insofar as manliness and a normative heterosexuality are scripted and reconstituted through nationalism and imperial expansion as was openly flaunted in the U.S. empire of the late nineteenth century (Bederman; Hoganson; Nelson) and in our times under the Bush doctrine of unilateral, global dominance and pre-emptive wars following the tragic events of September 11, 2001 (*National Security Strategy*).

Although a feature common to all ethnic studies, inclusive of African, Asian, and Native American, and Latina/o studies, nationalism was not the sole paradigm in the field. Prominently, some African

American studies programs were conceived of as pan-Africanist and diasporic, but these too, like nationalism, followed a European exemplar. During the late nineteenth century, in the noonday of European imperialism, whiteness and white supremacy dissected and sutured narratives of nation by creating homogenizing and universalizing racialized distinctions of white and non-white to sustain the new world order of empire.[3] In resistance to that global whiteness arose negritude and pan-Africanism, the former, a reaction to an alleged European cultural superiority and the latter, a solidarity built upon the supposed unity of a race invented and dispersed by Europeans (Diop; Asante; Moses). In that way, although politically potent, blackness and Black Power mirror an essentializing whiteness and White Power, and therewith inherit the strengths and weaknesses of their original.

In 1966, when the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) turned from multiracialism to Black Power inspired by Stokely Carmichael's (Kwame Toure) call "to reclaim our history and our identity" for racial self-determination and liberation, estates demanded by ethnic studies, Bayard Rustin and Harold Cruse warned against what they characterized as an introspective turn to another kind of chauvinism. They argued that black racial politics would elide class oppressions and de-couple black poverty from white privilege. The black struggle, they urged, should transform blacks but also whites. We also note that Carmichael's Black Power was modeled after White Power, or the ethnic politics of the Irish and Jews (Carson 220, 227-28). Likewise, Paul Gilroy's influential and welcome corrective, *The Black Atlantic*, while liberatory is also confining as a construct reactive to a prior, white Atlantic civilization (Davis; Kraus). Africa, his version tells us, was integral to the European Atlantic world, Europe's modernity, and Europe's America (Gilroy), while we know that Africa's importance to world history rests both with and apart from Europe and prior to and coincident with Europe's modernity. And besides its Atlantic flank, the continent's Indian Ocean littoral and its dealings with Asia were longstanding and formative of African and Asian cultures (Oliver and Mathew; Harris).

Race-based ethnic studies, from its lineage of European imperialism and Third World anti-colonialism, is created by white supremacy. White racial politics, whether at home or abroad, sired its opposition, colored racial politics. Oppression, of course, occasioned resistance, but the form of that resistance need not have mimicked the master narratives and practices. As many feminists of color have pointed out, making the case against white feminization of colored men does not require deconstruction with the tools and attributions of white manliness. "Militant black men were publicly attacking the white male patriarchs for their racism," recalled bell hooks, "but they were also establishing a bond of solidarity with them based on their shared acceptance of and commitment to patriarchy" (hooks 98-99). And our work, an Asian American literary critic proposed, should not reprise the vocabulary and categories of oppression but move toward ideas of gender and race that are "nonhierarchical,

nonbinary, and nonprescriptive; that can embrace tensions rather than perpetuate divisions" (Cheung 127). Although often negligent of race and class, feminist interventions have offered some of the most profound and robust critiques of racialized/gendered politics, including the problematics and prospects of difference, identity politics, experience and truth, and Third World feminism (Spivak; Butler; Alcoff and Potter; Butler and Scott; Wiegman; Mohanty).

The once radical strategy of colored politics plays into the hands of the dealer—white politics—by reifying race and its assumed salience and solitude, by equating significance and democracy with numbers, and by erecting barriers to discourage and restrict border crossings. Patrols enforce divides and impose quarantines against pollutions of race, such as biracials, and of gender, sexuality, and nation. Even within the contrived category of race, hierarchies of color and religion install privileges and poverties, retarding alliances and the making of common cause such that "native" races resent "alien" races, Muslim "races" imperil Christian "races." And is it possible that racial politics and its self-appointed field of study, strategic essentialisms and the means for liberation have become, like other ideas, structures, academic disciplines, and politics, self-serving and perpetuating? Race-based ethnic studies, once efficacious, has driven us into a corner and is now at an intellectual and political dead end.

Although we recognize that our thinking and politics need not be reduced to either/or, isolation or engagement, but could and should be either/or, both, and all, we must acknowledge that our decision to reclaim our history, our America for our liberation has yielded us a putative revolution that has altered, but has also been complicitous with the designs of the ruling class. The journalist Robert L. Allen proposed over thirty years ago that Black Power or racial solidarity was a vehicle by which the black middle class maintained class privilege, exploited African Americans, and conspired with capital (Allen 14-17; Gaines). Black racial politics, he argued, advanced the interests of capitalism. And what George Lipsitz observed about the 1960s generally applies, we hold, to ethnic studies, another feature of the decade. The counter-culture, Lipsitz astutely noted, more closely resembled the system it claimed to be overturning than opposed it, replicating rather than resisting the status quo (Lipsitz 224, 227).

Race-based ethnic studies is essentially conservative intellectually and politically, for like nationalism, it arises from and is thus structured by binary oppositions as exercises of power and mechanisms of control. Tunisian writer Albert Memmi agreed with negritude's proponents that "the colonized's liberation must be carried out through a recovery of self and of autonomous dignity," according to existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre xxviii). And yet, Memmi observed, there was an intimate and "relentless reciprocity" between the colonizer and the colonized, and, he confessed, liberation from the colonial condition was fought "in the name of the very values of the colonizer," deploying his "techniques of thought and his methods of combat. It must be added," Memmi

importantly noted, "that this is the only action that the colonizer understands" (Memmi 128, 129).

The difficulty, it seems to us, rests not only in questions of methodology—"the master's tools," as was famously phrased by Audre Lorde (110-13)—but also in the social relations. Those who hold power determine the field of contest; they define the nature and terms of the engagement. Accordingly, responses in the only language acknowledged by the empowered are constrained by and limited to that vocabulary and structure. It is not surprising thus that white supremacy and (inter)nationalism are met and counterattacked by black or non-white supremacy and (inter)nationalism, or that white patriarchy summons non-white forms of patriarchy. Further, because of human agency, fields of conflict are never given or static but are inevitably contested and in perpetual motion. Hence, apprehensions of and resistance to oppression and exploitation elude easy capture. Within living memory, for instance, the Irish and Jews, once non-white, have become white, and whites discovered and capitalized on ethnicity in post-civil rights America, changing the dynamics of the U.S. racial formation (Roediger; Ignatiev; Brodkin; Jacobson). Likewise, Asian Americans, lighter-skinned Latina/os, and middle-class African Americans are dubious candidates for a similar, honorary elevation to whiteness (Foner; Rodriguez).

Not simply a moving target, as understood in racial formation, racializations are multiply constituted and constituting, we hold in our concept of "social formation," denoting not only racializations but also and simultaneously gender, sexuality, class, and nation. If true, the subject matter of race-based ethnic studies, racializations and racial formations, the historical necessity, cogency, and sharpness of its radical edges for its time notwithstanding,[4] produces partial, time-bound, and impoverished answers to the constantly evolving challenges of identity, inequality, and injustice. In addition to and not in place of racial formation, thus, we propose the centrality of "social formation" for ethnic studies, which is, from our perspective, the systematic study of power and its locations, exercises, and effects in human society for the advancement of justice, equality, and freedom.

Postulating Social Formation

Like racial formation, "social formation" is much cited and under-theorized. The term originates in the writings of Karl Marx to designate both the structure and stage of society, as in social organization and social development (pre-capitalist, capitalist, communist). Over time and with its spread into disciplines as disparate as anthropology, cultural studies, history, psychology, and religious studies, the term's usage and meaning acquired less precision. David Krasner, for instance, examines the "social formation" of cakewalking in his history of African American performance and theatre, while Ian Burkitt's "social formation" describes the development of human personality within society and its networks and

relations (Krasner; Burkitt) The "social formation" of landscape, according to art historian Denis Cosgrove, is shaped by European ways of seeing and representing themselves and their world, and Christopher Elwood conceives of the place of the sacred within society as its "social formation" (Cosgrove; Elwood). To African historians Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, "social formation" describes "the exact nature of the particular diversity and unity of economic and social relations which characterise a society during a specific epoch" (Marks and Atmore 38, fn. 9; Hindness and Hirst).

Zhongqiao Duan, in an informative study, traces the roots of Marx's "social formation" and its permutations, and proposes that Marx saw the term as descriptive of both the form and stage of society. In his *German Ideology* (1846), Duan reports, Marx describes the "form of society" as the product of human interactions, and "social formation" first appears in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851) to indicate a stage of social development (Duan 9-10, 11). The idea for "social formation," Duan speculates, comes from Marx's readings in geology as seen in his notes taken in 1851 on J. F. W. Johnston's *Lectures on Agricultural Chemistry and Geology*. Rock strata constituted "formations," the agricultural chemist explained, which possessed unique natures and revealed changes over time. Marx adopted those scientific ideas into his writings that followed his reading of Johnston as shown in the passage: "Just as one should not think of sudden changes and sharply delineated periods in considering the succession of the different geological formations, so also in the case of the creation of the different economic formations of society" (Duan 12). Intent on a "science" of history and society, Marx summoned geology to perform that work of authority.

By analogy, then, each stage of human history differs from and is yet linked to successive strata; each is thus unique, comprising a social formation, while providing the platform for the next layer, the next stage of development. The span of human history, then, embraces the sum of those evolving progressions. So while "form of society" represents a static construct, "social formation" connects society's stages over time. Accordingly, social formation specifies both the social structure and its evolution. Further, as the Africanists Marks and Atmore proposed, social formations are characterized by their mode of production, which is "the combination of forces and relations of production together with the mechanisms which make possible its continued functioning, and include within its definition economic, juridico-political and ideological structures" (Marks and Atmore 38, fn. 9). Marx classified the modes of production as Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern, and described them as the sum total of the relations of production that comprises "the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (Duan 15).

Without delving into the tangle of "mode of production" and the ideas of "structure" and "superstructure," we subscribe to Marx's

formulation of "social formation" as the structure of society in its totality and its changes, not necessarily as "stages," over time. And if the principal concern of ethnic studies is power and its expressions of identities, inequalities, and injustices, then "social formation" within our field specifies the location and articulation of power around the axes of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. Needless to say, "power" is itself suspect as a discrete category, and is an object of analysis in all of the humanities and social sciences. We consider a full explication of power or race, ethnicity, and so forth, along with the telos of development and historical stages, beyond the ability of this essay, although we maintain the possibility, indeed necessity, of identifying and locating power, its transactions, and its deeds. Our present purpose is not to offer a satisfactory theory of social formation but to posit its broad contours as an alternative to some of the race thinking in ethnic studies that continue to inform our academic labors and politics.

Social formation, then, marks the forms of society and their passage and changes through space and over time. For ethnic studies, the social structure is conceived and cultivated by power and its articulation around the bearings of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation as discrepant and intersecting constructions. Constituting a system, the forms and relations of society are designed by their creators to function as a whole to achieve certain ends. But because of human agency and ceaseless contestations, the social formation is neither self-regulating nor is its path or destination predetermined. The social formation, accordingly, is historical, specific to time and place but also subject to transformation and change. Therein rests the opportunity for ethnic studies. Social formation, in sum, attends to the multiplicity of forces at work in the locations and exercise of power. It demands a complexity in our thinking and politics to ascertain how social categories overlap, interact, conflict with, and interrupt each other. And it provides a rubric for unions among racialization, feminist, queer, Marxist, and critical theories, and for political coalitions among peoples of color but also among and across created divides of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.

Hisaye Yamamoto's canonical "Seventeen Syllables" exemplifies the efficacy of social formation as a reading practice.

Reading Social Formation

This reconceptualization of social formation demands a different kind of literary reading practice. Instead of the usual excursus that describes how the usual suspects of race, gender, class, nation, and sexuality appear and are represented in the text, social formation as a way of reading cultivates another kind of awareness, focusing our attention on how the text formally indicates the locations of power as the expression of relationships among race, gender, class, nation, and sexuality. Depending on the particularities of the specific text, certain elements will come to the foreground while others hover in the background; rather than highlighting one relationship

over another, social formation reconsiders the particular constellation of forces in the unique interaction that makes up the radically specific features of this one text and not another. Social formation brings a different kind of alertness to the forces at play, both formally and narratively, in the text before us.

First published in 1949 in *Partisan Review*, "Seventeen Syllables" is Hisaye Yamamoto's most widely reprinted story, and has appeared in numerous anthologies of women's literature, American literature, and Asian American literature. Set in California before the outbreak of World War II, the story relates the despair of an issei mother confined in a loveless marriage and the bittersweet sexual awakening of her nisei daughter. Told from the point of view of the daughter, Rosie Hayashi, it narrates her budding romance with Jesus Carrascos, the son of the Mexican family working for her tomato-farming parents. Glimpsed behind the main plot is the story of how Rosie's mother, Tome Hayashi, is forced by her husband to give up her dreams of becoming a poet, despite having won first prize in a haiku contest. At the story's climax, the father burns the prize, a Hiroshige print, and the mother tells Rosie the secret of why she married him, thus initiating Rosie into the disillusionment of womanhood. The story concludes with an extraordinary proposal: the mother asks the daughter to promise not to marry, a request to which Rosie gives her now characteristic equivocal response, "yes, yes."

Most critical readings of "Seventeen Syllables" focus either on race or gender, or some combination of the two, observing the story's feminist critique of Asian patriarchy or remarking on the racial formation of a Japanese American sensibility. Within Asian Americanist circles, the short story is generally understood to represent the emergence of an Asian American sensibility, framed as a feminist critique of the oppression of women within Asian patriarchy or as portraying a distinct racial formation. An early essay by Elaine Kim, for example, in her seminal anthology, is simply titled "Hisaye Yamamoto: A Woman's View," while Nakao Sugiyama discusses the intersections between gender and race (Kim 157-63). King-Kok Cheung examines the convergence of gender and culture as oppressive forces that work differently on the Asian mother and her Asian American daughter, and the story's use of silence as a gauge for distinguishing between Asian and Asian American women. Stan Yogi suggests that the story's "buried plots" are evidence of a Japanese American literary sensibility akin to the feminist double plot, and Ming Cheng explores the way that limited gender roles also stifle the psychic lives of Asian men.

Few have considered the haiku as a symbol for how power is expressed in the story as a series of relationships among race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation—relationships, which flare up and are made briefly visible by Tome's efforts to resist them in her attempt at self-fashioning. An exception is Donald C. Goellnicht, who explores what it means for Tome to compose haiku rather than senryu, a popular form of haiku but without its elitist overtones. Although Tome's resistance is ultimately extinguished, the haiku, paradoxically, also offers her the possibility of a limited emancipation, where she

becomes for the space of seventeen syllables, something other than an immigrant Japanese farm wife. For Tome, the haiku describes the nature of power that articulates itself as both the force enabling her temporarily as a subject even as it confines her to larger and more diffuse relationships beyond her control or cognition.

"Seventeen Syllables" begins with the haiku: Tome is reading aloud to her daughter a haiku she has just composed. Although Rosie does not entirely comprehend the literary Japanese, she nevertheless answers, "Yes, yes, I understand, how utterly lovely" (Yamamoto 21). American-born Rosie struggles with Japanese, despite years of language school, and wishes she could tell her mother about the delightful haiku she discovered in a literary magazine from Japan, a humorous haiku composed in English. Nevertheless, as a pastime that only Rosie and her mother share (the father is indifferent if not outright hostile to the preoccupation he views as jeopardizing their livelihood and threatening to his authority as male patriarch), the haiku is, for this short story, a uniquely feminine space, and indicates the kinship and identity between mother and daughter. Still, the story makes a point of distinguishing them. Tome's haiku are properly "Japanese," adhering to the literary form by its syllabification, content, and tone; the haiku Rosie enjoys on the other hand are "Japanese American." Nonsensical and hybrid, written in English, they deviate both in content and form from traditional haiku. The haiku, that peculiarly Japanese literary form, now made to accommodate a Japanese American literary tradition, is the first of the story's attempts to indicate formally the likeness between Rosie and her mother. In this scene, the possibility of an alliance between mother and daughter, brokered through literature—not solely through gender—is first proposed. Rosie's answer, "yes, yes," initially appears to affirm this solidarity. As the story continues, other formal mechanisms, the pair of culturally taboo romances, the identical bildungsroman arcs, will be introduced to indicate the similarity between them. Those correspondences, hinting that Rosie will someday "become" her mother, doomed to repeat a similar pattern of maternal failure, are ways the story indicates by literary means how the same hegemonic forces circumscribe the lives of its female characters across the generations.

As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that mother and daughter share identical bildungsroman plots; one will enact the conventionally gendered arc of becoming a woman, the other will deviate from the lines of heterosexual reproduction to become a poet. Rosie's gradual sexual awakening, suggested by her increasing attention to men's attractions (she notices both the handsome Mr. Hayano and the elegant haiku editor from San Francisco) culminates in her first kiss by Jesus in the tomato shed. This plot of "natural" biological development is matched by her mother's narrative of artistic awakening: Tome's literary activity culminates in her efforts being awarded first prize in the haiku contest. Although we are aware of the plot that depicts Rosie's sexual awakening, it is not until Tome's secret past is disclosed (the failed affair representing an earlier effort to resist the impossibility of choices foreclosed by

class and gender) that we realize how perilously identical mother and daughter are and may become. The possible identity between mother and daughter, despite the gap of migration (nation) and class separating them, is where the story's social critique carries its most damning force. Within the canonical American literary tradition, immigration is often invoked as a trope of freedom, representing new world possibilities. In this story, however, migration fails to promise emancipation from oppression; the perilous identity between mother and daughter suggests that there is no space free from the very particular relationships among gender, class, sexuality, and nation that constrict the characters of Tome Hayashi and her daughter Rosie.

One way to glimpse the articulations of power that govern Tome's existence is to examine a scene that stages her transgression of these relationships. The story informs us very early on how Tome's literary preoccupation has had detrimental repercussions on the family dynamic, most significantly a disruption of the routine between husband and wife. No longer playing the role of the proper Japanese wife, Tome does not follow her husband's habit of taking a hot bath and retiring early. Instead, she stays up late, writing poetry. If he wishes to play cards, Mr. Hayashi must resort to solitaire. When the family has guests, again the traditional gender roles are reversed: Tome compares notes with the visiting poet while Mr. Hayashi entertains the non-literary members. The disorder introduced by the literary hobby into the domestic space of the home is repeated in the public domain, straining social norms as well. Invited to the home of the neighboring Hayanos one evening, Tome converses with fellow poet Mr. Hayano about haiku while Mr. Hayashi leafs through *Life Magazine*, relegated to the "feminine" role of making stilted conversation with the impaired hostess. The repercussions of Tome's social transgression are not felt until Mr. Hayashi abruptly ends the evening. On the drive home, he punishes Tome with his silence, which prompts her profuse abjection. Making excuses for his rudeness, she apologizes for being absorbed by her own interests: "I'm sorry [. . .] You must be tired [. . .] You know how I get when it's haiku [. . .] I forget what time it is" (Yamamoto 27). For Tome, haiku is so antithetical to the role she has been assigned that it becomes a kind of delinquency for which she must apologize. Her husband's displeasure makes it clear that haiku encroaches on the normative rhythms of the everyday life of a Japanese migrant farm wife and illuminates the forces that she must resist in order to be something other than what is prescribed for her. A few scenes later, Mr. Hayashi puts a definitive end to his wife's attempts at resistance when he discovers her discussing haiku rather than packing tomatoes.

The story makes it clear from the very beginning that being an issei farm wife and a poet simultaneously are so incompatible that doing so literally cleaves Tome in two: "Rosie and her father lived for awhile with two women" (Yamamoto 22); Tome keeps house and picks tomatoes along with her husband; the other, the poet Ume Hanazono, comes to life only after the dinner dishes are done, and is an "earnest, muttering stranger" who is unfettered by

social obligations, staying up late at night scribbling poetry. (Yamamoto 23) Tome's literary preoccupations cause an mounting chain of reprisals from Mr. Hayashi, portrayed as a simple young man who cannot comprehend the literary aspirations of his "picture-bride" wife, whose slightly higher class status is marked by her composing of haiku, a bourgeois attempt to imitate upper class literary traditions. His growing disapproval of the hobby that jeopardizes his place as family patriarch and threatens the authority of a conventional Japanese masculinity culminates in a violent act of sabotage—he destroys and sets fire to the prize Tome has won in a haiku contest, hence, disciplining Tome, and forcing her back into her proper role.

In the final scene, Tome reveals to Rosie the traumatic story of how she came to marry her father. It is a story, Rosie feels, whose revelation will combine with the earlier instance of (male) violence—the bonfire—to "level her life, her world to the very ground" (Yamamoto 37). Devastated by a failed love affair with a young man of higher class status and the premature birth of the child of that union, her mother departs as a "picture bride," migrating to America for an arranged marriage as an alternative to suicide. The bitter conclusion of her mother's youthful love affair with an unsuitable lover is meant to be a cautionary tale for Rosie, who, like her mother before her, is poised on the verge of womanhood, another unsuitable romance, this time, across both the class and color line, and potentially about to inherit the legacy of maternal despair. It is this suffocating legacy that Tome wishes her daughter to escape, and yet, the story has presented Rosie all along as a mirror image of Tome, poised to inherit those same shackles, merely reconfigured for an American landscape. Seventeen years previous, Tome was a young girl from a family with no prospects, her class status made her liaison with the son of the well-to-do family taboo. When their child is born prematurely, her family rejects her and her only option, next to suicide, is a metaphorical death—migration to the United States and the sentence of a loveless marriage for seventeen years.

It is at this moment, after her traumatic past has been revealed as a warning, that Tome demands of her daughter, "Promise you will never marry!" (Yamamoto 38) to which Rosie responds ambiguously. Rosie assents, giving her trademark equivocation–"yes, yes." In this instant, however, Rosie calls upon Jesus (her lover? the Christian god?) to rescue her from this promise. Tome's demand that Rosie eschew marriage is an attempt to liberate her daughter from the punishing force of being a heterosexual Japanese (American) woman. Rosie, however, hopes for a male savior (Yogi *passim*). Once more the story extends the possibility of a feminist alliance that can potentially achieve emancipation from the violence of men, a violence secured by heteronormative formations that were in operation seventeen years ago, and have exerted their power yet again in the present, in Mr. Hayashi's most recent punitive display. Here in this moment, the potential not to become her mother is the promise of non-identity, non-repetition, ultimately revealed to be

impossible. That imperative, issued by a maternal savior, proposes that Rosie escape the compulsion of heteronormative romance, and thus seize for herself an alternative life beyond the drive toward biological reproduction that is ensured by this specific gender formation. This time, when Rosie utters her trademark agreement, her mother understands her "yes, yes," to be rhetorical. Although the possibility of eluding the same choices limited by gender, class, sexuality, and race is held open by the story in the very rhetoricity of the answer Rosie does (not) give, the ambiguity of the "yes, yes" that is at the same time a no, no remains only a promise. Rosie's rhetorical answer, resembling the form of consent, bearing an actual dissent, makes it clear that it is in fact not possible to exist outside of these local articulations of power, much less extinguish her own desire for them. The feminist collective her mother proposes, align with me rather than the patriarchal dictates of heterosexual reproduction, is only that, a promise, a rhetorical clearing that is also the space of the haiku.

And it is to the space of this specifically Japanese literary form that we return to at the story's conclusion. Although neither race nor nation have been in the foreground of the story's anatomy of gender politics, they enter figuratively into the scene through the haiku. In the very first scene, Tome's traditional haiku, composed in Japanese, is a site of linguistic confusion and cultural alterity for Rosie. Deftly commenting on the social construction of race and ethnicity, the narrator informs us that the capacity for Japanese is not "natural"; for Rosie, Japanese must be learned. In fact, her lack of linguistic facility marks the distance measured by migration and assimilation from "racial" and "national" origin. As a specifically "Japanese" literary tradition, it is fitting that it is haiku that Tome composes; fitting that it is haiku, which represents this second attempt to recuperate an alternative life for a Japanese woman in America that will not be marked by the signal gender failures of her first life in Japan. Although the haiku gives her a second life as the poet, Ume Hanazono, it also imprisons her within its peculiar boundaries, the structural constraint, according to which she must "pack all her meaning into seventeen syllables only" (Yamamoto 21), that both defines and limits the form. Liberated and constrained by those formal restrictions, Ume comes to life, although her life span is only three months, the space of a single trimester.

At the story's end, the seventeen syllables of the haiku links together several different versions of the interwoven forms of coercion and resistance: it marks a Japanese farm wife's failed literary career as a poet of haiku; it remembers a child who would have been seventeen, born of a union that defied class expectations; and it indicates another child, soon to be seventeen, who, in resisting her mother's command, may very well be choosing subjection rather than the independence she imagines. For both Rosie and her mother, the haiku is a paradox that limits and defines, circumscribes and sets free. Indeed, in the first haiku scene, the poem both joins and separates mother and daughter; like the rhetorical "identity" Rosie offers her mother, the haiku represents the figurative location of a

collectivity that includes both "identity" and difference. But sustained and undermined by the ambiguous promise of figurative language, it is to remain a collectivity to come.

Exhorting Our Future

Ethnic studies has gained institutionalization. But the once radical declaration of colored politics, a strategic essentialism, as we see it, has impaired freedom's cause. More discretely but equally corrosive, binaries structure and occupy the U.S. racial formation, notably the ubiquitous architecture of white/non-white, and like identities that collapse differences for the sake of union, race thinking within ethnic studies has discouraged as divisive critical considerations of gender, sexuality, class, and nation. The social realities, we know, are messier and far more complicated than the binaries, which seek to exert authority by structuring the social relations, a complexity revealed in studies on relations among peoples of color mediated by White Power (Almaguer; Foley; Seidman; Okihiro; Prashad; Harden) .

Ethnic studies, we hold, must embrace the social and not racial formation, and therewith insist that race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation are related constructions—the systematic exercises of power to maintain hierarchies. Non-linear, social formations can be singly or multiply, serially or simultaneously expressed, and they constitute an "organic" whole such that race is gendered, classed, sexualized, and nationalized, gender raced, classed, sexualized, and nationalized, and so forth (Duan 68-82). That understanding, we know, is neither novel nor without advocates. Our contention is simply that race-based ethnic studies is still the rule in U.S. higher education, and that its qualifications merit transgressions.

In calling for routes beyond race, we are not denying its premises. Albeit creations of the imaginary, racializations persist because white racial politics mandates and benefits from them. We also witness the power of racializations, which structure lives and circumscribe life's chances. They have material, palpable effects (Winant). We see those in the correspondences of race with income, education, health and wellness, and social mobility. But our resistance against white racial politics need not be solely or even principally colored racial politics. We must find alternative, radical ways to free ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy and our choices of the past. If we can empower ourselves by constructing solidarities made in the U.S. as "African, Asian, and Native Americans," and "Latina/os," "Pacific Islanders," and "whites," we can surely re-imagine more expansive unities for the new millennium.

Paul Gilroy, in his impassioned plea for freedom from the past and a flight to the future, argues for the abandonment of the entire, antiquated apparatus of race thinking, an admittedly utopian project (*Against Race*). Escape, nonetheless, he writes, is a necessary pre-condition for a new humanism and democracy. Nationalism was intimately tied to the notions of identity, belonging, and race.

Union was a bond of blood. That was true of both white and black nationalisms. Instead of white nationalist trumpeting of sovereign states and national cultures and their appeal to blacks who might aspire for passports into modernity and citizenship, Gilroy proposes transnational solidarities and cosmopolitan cultures as constituted by diasporic dispersal and estrangement. "Becoming oriented toward the idea of a cosmopolitan future, even as it recedes, involves a variety of political work around racial discourse and racial division that is very different from what has been practiced in recent periods," (334) Gilroy writes. Raciology must be abandoned to the dustbin of the past for "a heterocultural, postanthropological, and cosmopolitan yet-to-come" (334). Although unclear about the actual strategy for achieving that future, Gilroy correctly exposes the intimacy of nationalism and racism (and sexism) and the complicity of whites and, in reaction, blacks in advancing those projects. Those connections and insights recall the beginnings of this essay and its critical accounting of ethnic studies' nationalist origins.

Perhaps exemplary in charting a new course for ethnic studies were the mappings of the past by women of color toward Third World solidarities and cosmopolitan subject matters. I am thinking in particular of a report from the Indochinese Women's Conference in Vancouver as reported in the 1971 *Asian Women* reader and the 1977 statement of black feminists of the Combahee River Collective. Rather than isolating each other into "permanent camps," the Third World women in Vancouver proposed, "we see a need for learning about each other's history as Third World people and of informing each other about our movements for self-determination" (*Asian Women* 80). The Combahee River Collective, named for the only military action in the U.S. planned and led by a woman, Harriet Tubman, in 1863, issued a statement after having met for three years in Boston. In it, they defined their politics as "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking." (Combahee River Collective 26). That conclusion, they testify, like the discovery of Asian American women in their 1971 text, derived from their political work and coalitions with other progressive groups. In retrospect, ethnic studies, led by men, erred when it chose race, patriarchy, and nation over the transnational "interlocking" systems of oppression as its theory and coalition politics as its practice (Glenn).

Ethnic studies must rethink its strategy for educational and social transformation in the light of growing diversity within racialized groups, the rise of multiracials, alienations among racialized groups, the lived intersections among race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation, and the global reorientations of capital, labor, culture, and our very identities as individuals, classes, and peoples. Adrienne Rich's criticism of U.S. feminism applies equally to insular ethnic studies. Rich scored feminism's retreat to "versions of female oppression which neglect both female agency and female diversity,

in which 'safety' for women becomes valued over risk taking, and woman-only space—often a strategic necessity—becomes a place of emigration, an end in itself." Instead, she proposed, feminists should carry on "a conversation with the world" (Rich 3).

And that global conversation should be enjoined with the twin recognition of the falsity and reality of race. Although a fiction, we know that race structures self and self's choices. We are not calling for an end to race thinking. What we are advocating, already called for by many others before us, is the reorientation of our field away from "ethnic" studies to a study of social formations—a shift not only in name but also in substance. If the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, it was because white and its opposition, colored racial politics made it so. By contrast, the problem of the twenty-first century for those of us in the newly constituted field of social formations will more accurately and powerfully be the problem of our re-conceptualized, mobile subject matter in all its confounded complexity, movement, and fetching fullness.

Notes

[1] The term "racial formation" is widely cited but often not credited to its originators, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who should be acknowledged and their idea, engaged.

[2] For an astute critique of internal colonialism, see Liu. On dependency theory and its application, see Carmichael and Hamilton, Blauner, Bonilla and Girling, Acuña, and White.

[3] On the cultural coherence and salience of British, French, and U.S. imperialism, see Said. For contemporary works advancing white supremacy and its opposition, colored union, see Strong, Pearson, Grant, and Stoddard.

[4] The marking of whiteness and its investments is an extremely important development. See e.g., Frankenberg, Lipsitz, *Possessive*; and Roediger, *Colored*.

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