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ANOTHER ETHNIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

CHILDHOOD AND THE CULTURAL ECONOMY OF LOOKING

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Dramatis personae

This piece was originally written for the International Conference on Knowledge and Discourse, and presented at the Run Run Shaw Theatre, Hong Kong, in 1996. A companion article on Asian masculinities was published in conference papers (Luke, 2002). My original talk included videoclips of my Uncle, Keye Luke, in *Star Trek*, “Whom Gods Destroy” (Series 3, episode 13, 1969) and with clips of my Father, Edwin Luke, in *Blood Alley* (Dir. William Wellman, Batjak Productions, 1956).

The work sat unpublished until my mother, Ahlin Wong Luke, passed in 2007. My Father and Uncle’s representations continue to circulate in the transnational semiotic ether – as downloads, as DVDs, and in Wikipedia. I am rereading my Father’s film scripts, reconnoitring his experiences and, indeed, mine.

As you read, you will notice that my discussion of ethnic narratives has been overtaken by subsequent work in film, cultural and Asian-American studies. I have retained the original 1990s citations in this work, updating them only where relevant. The premise of the article stands: that in contemporary capitalist societies like those of North America and Europe, essentialist bids to reclaim originary ethnic voice and identity are invariably forged in the contexts of multimediated childhood. Identity and practice are shaped by media representations of ‘cultures’, even where they are reproduced across generations by face-to-face and everyday exchanges between parents, community elders and youth. We learn about and constitute our cultural selves and affiliations as much through Hollywood and Bollywood, through branded toys and clothes and their affiliated corporate lifeworlds as we might through the face-to-face intergenerational passing of wisdom, habituation and logics of practice. Given the pervasive influence of new digital arts, social networking, gaming, and other emergent cultural texts – the postwar TV-saturated childhood I describe in this paper is, if anything, an early, approximation of the hyper-mediation of childhood.

In postmodern childhood, the shifting relationships in what counts as figure/ground, authentic/inauthentic, history/nature, and, indeed, narrative and science inevitably generate new amalgams of identity and position. Just as we could see strategic bids by minority and diasporic communities as bids for new forms of solidarity and identity in the face of racism, cultural and economic marginalisation (Luke, 2008) – fundamentalist and neoconservative bids for a return to a print, Anglo-European

‘basics’ and canonical knowledges are a nostalgic essentialism built around a mythic print, Anglo-American childhood lost (Luke & Luke, 2001).

In current conditions, Aristotelian concepts of mimesis, romantic concepts of authenticity, pramatis notions of experience, and, indeed, revolutionary construals of voice are partial and unstable. His views about the possibilities of political solidarity and action aside, Baudrillard’s (1995) concept of the *simulacrum* marks a key turning point in Western theories of representation, art, culture and semiotics. My aim in this paper was to turn the concept of simulation to questions of childhood and cultural identity, albeit through the lens of my own family’s idiosyncratic history. My efforts also are an attempt to reclaim that history – insofar as Keye Luke’s work as an actor has been the object of considerable critical analysis and speculation.¹ Because of his notoriety as Charlie Chan’s “Number One Son”, he has been viewed widely as an embodiment of the stereotypical subservient Chinese.

My father, Edwin Luke (1911-1986) and his elder brother, Keye Luke (1904-1991) were children of Cantonese migrants to Seattle. My grandfather died when they were young of a violent “incident”, the object of speculation in Chinatown talk. The family worked its way through the next decades in Seattle, with everybody working to make ends meet. Part of our family’s story is archived in Seattle’s *Wing Luke Museum*. The family’s folk narrative about their involvement in the movies goes something like this: Keye Luke was an excellent student and developed into a fine pen and ink artist/illustrator, modelling his drawing on that of Aubrey Beardsley. His published work includes a limited edition of the *Rubiyat of Omar Kyam*. His first involvement with cinema was as a publicity/poster artist for one of the local theatres. In Seattle or perhaps Los Angeles, the story goes, he met industry contacts looking for Chinese actors with excellent spoken English diction – which his was. His work in films, typical of non-white actors in the period, was an historical accident. He moved to Los Angeles in the 1930s to begin – followed shortly thereafter by my father, Edwin Luke.

Keye signed as the first Asian contract player at MGM in the 1930s. Following his 1934 debut in *The Painted Veil*, he was cast as the original number one son in the Charlie Chan series with Werner Oland – who became a friend and mentor. He subsequently moved on to a half-century career that included over two hundred of wartime and postwar movies as Asian soldier, scholar, politician, houseboy and servant. His corpus also included Broadway and off-Broadway leading roles in several Rogers and Hammerstein musicals like *Flower Drum Song*. He was a regular on 1950s and 60s television series, with featured roles in *Anna and the King* and, most notably, as Master Po in *Kung Fu* and guest slots in everything from *Gunsmoke* to *Star Trek* to *Trapper John MD*. In his later years, he had small but notable roles in Spielberg’s *Gremlins*. His final appearance was in Woody Allen’s *Alice*.

My Father, Edwin S. Luke took a different route. He left Seattle in the 1930s with a journalism degree from the University of Washington. He landed a role in *the Jade Mask* (1945) as the number 4 son of Charlie Chan (Sydney Toler) and a feature role in

¹ For an overview, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keye_Luke. There are numerous Charlie Chan websites describing both his work and noting Edwin Luke’s role as number 4 son. Some are laudatory, others critical, and yet others replicate without irony the orientalism and stereotypes of the original films.

the Paramount production of *Tokyo Rose* (1945) His principal work was as a featured player in movies *Bloody Alley* (1955), and over 30 minor parts in TV and cinema. From the contracts left behind in his papers, he's probably still owed residuals. The acting didn't pay the bills and by the early 1950s, parts for Asian actors had dried up considerably – with a visible shift from the portrayal of evil Japanese to evil Communist Chinese. He worked delivering newspapers, as an insurance salesman, and proofreader to make ends meet. He was the first Chinese member of the California printers union, and went to work in the 1940s in the press room of the *Hollywood Reporter*. A typographer and linotyper by trade, he was a fine writer and editor. Around the time of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he began a twenty five career as a social worker in Los Angeles, working closely with the Latino community in Tijuana. His life and work informed my writing, politics and world view. He and my Uncle told my sisters and me that we should never be actors.

Ethnic affiliations and visibility

One of the powerful knowledge and political effects of postcolonial and feminist intellectual work has been to open a space for other voices in the public spheres of popular and academic writing. But in attributing this 'opening' to minority voices to feminisms and postcolonialism, it would be a mistake to overlook the long histories of underground literature that extend back to historical slave narratives, revolutionary literature, and the work of women poets and novelists, much of which was censored or suppressed from mainstream selective traditions of literature and curriculum until the last two decades. At the same time, it would be naive to that the emergence of new narratives of ethnic identity are somehow the results of new found political power, literary quality or suppressed genius. There are of course powerful political economies at work in the production and popularisation of women's, ethnic migrant, diaporic and postcolonial films and literature -- in Sydney, Shanghai, Hollywood, New York, Hong Kong and elsewhere. Ethnic narratives - whether those of Hollywood's or Hong Kong's China - have become increasingly marketable, moving from the "foreign films" category into the mainstream.

This chapter is nominally about the construction of ethnic selves and narratives, offering an analysis of ways of portraying and narrating culturally different life histories of visible minority groups in mainstream, white-dominated cultures. It proceeds in two moves. First, I provide an overview of two genres that I provisionally term 'ethnic narratives' -- narratives of liberation and narratives of displacement -- discussing their assumptions about essence, origins, authenticity, and, the place and significance of pedagogy in the formation of the self. Here I look briefly and selectively at the work of Latino, Asian-American and Asian-Australian writers.

I then present an alternative story, a narrative of growing up ethnic in postmodern culture. This is a more complex and complicated process than either the common 'return to the origins' or 'between two worlds' metaphors explain. My story begins to speak of ethnic childhood as *simulacrum* (Baudrillard, 1995), of identity formation as a form of channel and web surfing, of childhood as a task of holding mirrors up to the mirrors of popular cultural texts. Along the way, I offer one such narrative, dealing at length with my family's experiences of the construction and portrayal of Asian-Americans in movies and television. So the watching and participating in the Hollywoodisation of images of the Asian is what this paper is really about

(Hamamoto, 1994). This is, hopefully, Orientalism and Occidentalism in technicolour, Panavision and black and white. Or, to give you a sense of the its final resting place, the subtitle should be: You thought you were constructing us as the Other, when we were busy watching and laughing at how you construct yourselves and us.²

I will use the shorthand terminology here of ‘visible minorities’ to refer to those of us who are people of colour in White-dominant, so-called Western cultures like the US, Australia, Canada and the UK. I am aware of the difficult issues of definition surrounding cultural difference, visibility and race (Luke & Luke, 1999). Whether we use the terms ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ or ‘cultural minority’ is bound to raise epistemological and political problems of inclusivity, exclusivity and homogeneity. For the purposes of this narrative, I characterise postcolonial subjects as offspring of colonialisation, as those people of cultural and racial groups who have historically been marginalised or made diasporic by large scale political and population shifts accompanying decolonisation. This marginalisation might have entailed centuries-long political and economic colonisation and domestic subjugation, systematic genocide or forced relocation, as in the case of indigenous peoples, or migration as the result of the growth or collapse of European or Asian empire. The processes of marginalisation typically involve racialising practices -- the discursive and institutional practices whereby people of visible difference are ascribed as an inferior, exterior, and negative Other, with curtailed or limited access to economic, political and human rights (Luke, 2008).

There is of course considerable debate over the extent to which the descriptors used for diasporic and ‘minority’ communities refer to homogenous communities. We can take categorisations of ethnic and cultural groups as descriptions of residual and emergent cultural affiliations defined in relation to White-dominant societies and institutions, and specific political economies. In the case of Asian-Americans, who have some striking historical parallels with their counterpart Asian-Australians and Asian-Canadians, a range of definitional issues arise. First, the historical solidarity among Asian-Americans is itself a discourse move, developed as a political strategy in the 1960s to bring together many disparate and historically autonomous groups, including Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Filipino-Americans and others who had been distinguished both by their own histories, and by successful divide and rule strategies like the relocation policies of World War II, discriminatory housing and educational practices and citizenship legislation (cf. Kim, 1993). Second, the very term “Asian” and such partner terms as “Asia-Pacific” are increasingly used to establish imaginary spaces that serve particular political and economic ends (Wilson & Dirlak, 1995; Luke & Ismail, 2007). Third, the degree to which such categories as Asian-American risk totalising the class, generational and place-bound demographic diversity of any ethnic minority group raises serious issues -- as does reference to the

² There may be a salutary lesson in this for scholars focusing on the colonising views of ‘Asia’ in Western literature, history and media. This work risks replicating, however intentionally, the imperial assumption that the Eurocentric gaze continues to matter. Given the geopolitical and cultural shift of flows towards and from China and India, it may be strategically and critically more important to focus on how these peoples and places represent and position the ‘West’ (Louie, 2002).

imaginary category of a 'dominant Anglo/Australian culture'. But we've got to start somewhere.

On the other hand, to refer to Asians or, more specifically diasporic Chinese, Caribbean migrants, African refugees and others as 'ethnic groups' comparable to other European ethnic groups, as has been the trend in Australian and Canadian legislation, immigration and multicultural literature, risks skirting the crucial issue of visibility of colour: a visibility which is a biological fact, an element of the habitus that cannot be made over, however it is reconfigured or positioned through discourse (Luke, 2008). And there is a significant critique among many of colour -- African-Americans, Latinos and others -- that the notion of 'ethnic' or 'cultural' group does not capture the physical visibility and vulnerability that enables the practices and discourses of racism, from physical violence and exclusionary legislation to racist jokes. For their part, indigenous Australian Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and New Zealand Maoris have historically made the case for an essential, originary relationship to the land -- one that supersedes the definitions and claims of approaches to multiculturalism.

The matter of where, when and how the 'uptake' of colour is made to count clearly is one of cultural locality and sociopolitical context. That is, how, when and to whom you become visible is sociologically contingent -- dependent on a network of racialising practices and interpellating discourses that range from those of the mass media, to racist jokes and slurs, to actual physical violence. Yet the issue of being a 'visible' minority -- becomes particularly focal when we turn to issues of representation, and begin to ask who is looking at and naming whom. And who is looking back.

Ethnic Narratives

I will use the term *ethnic narratives* to describe those works of postcolonial writers and by marginalised minorities that attempt to provide accounts of their life-trajectories and of the intergenerational dynamics of identity, political agency and desire. Many of these have the distinctive features of minority discourses (JanMohamed & Lloyd, 1991): they are oppositional, historically situated and opportunist, contradictory and hybrid texts, often drawing upon binary forms of representation. Such narratives can be provisionally classified into three broad categories: liberationist, displacement and simulacrum.

- **Narratives of Liberation:** allegorical narratives of cultural solidarity where individual experience and struggle represent that of an oppressed collective; these works aim at the recovery of voice, authenticity and power and the documentation of oppression;
- **Narratives of Displacement:** narratives of absence, these works pivot on the theme of recovery, of cultural continuity and change; they typically aim at the recovery of self through a return to homeland and origins;
- **Narratives of Simulation:** narratives of blending, hybridity, pastiche and textual self-reconstruction; these works represent and describe the emergence of new cultural transformations, texts and identities.

These narrative structures are of course, produced by differentially located writers and subjects - in terms of their 'outsider' status in relation to any particular cultural histories, state formations and political economies. In her analysis of *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchu y Asi Mi Nacio la Conciencia* (Menchu & Menchu, 1990), Saldana-Portillo (2004, pp. 152-4) describes the emergence of the "guerrilla testimonio" as a genre of liberationist literature, tracing the genre back to Che Guevara's testimonials of the early 1960s. Menchu's Mayan Quiche Indian narrative begins with the statement, "I'd like to stress that it's not my life, it's also the testimony of the people". Menchu's is a woman's narrative, vividly describing her work as a peasant labourer, her relationship to her mother, and the awakening of her political consciousness. The text is characterised by her move from a narrative of "I" to the solidarity of the "we". This move, Saldana-Portillo (2004) argues, is different from the rhetorical constructions of male revolutionaries, who refer to the indigenous and peasant classes almost in abstract, mystical terms.

This moving from the self to the *self as embodiment of the oppressed* is a tradition from and through Fanon, Malcolm X and others. The assumptions of the liberationist narrative return us to Freire's (1990) radical pedagogy: That through writing one's narrative, and taking oneself as an allegorical subject, one gives "voice" to the "voiceless", a political act in itself. By this account, liberationist narratives are in part a recovery of voice and human authenticity, a realisation of consciousness of material conditions and social relations, a recording of the experience of oppression and marginality, and a building of solidarity. The liberationist narrative of colonised peoples thus has a straightforward and valid aim: the self-production of the revolutionary self, a matter taken up in the African-American literature of the 1960s and 70s, most specifically, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1987). As a genre, it has historical precedents, then, in the slave narratives of Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass and others.

Yet for each testimony of the emergence of voice, of power and identity affiliated with political analysis -- other ethnic narratives reflect a sense of envy, of the experience of the colonised other as characterised by intrinsic 'lack' or absence. In an influential 1980s autobiography that was cited as a rationale against bilingual education, Richard Rodriguez (1982), took up the issue of cultural displacement and shift.

What I am about to say to you has taken me more than twenty years to admit: A primary reason for my success in the classroom was that I couldn't forget that schooling was changing me and separating me from the life I enjoyed before become a student. That simple realization. For years I never spoke to anyone about it. Never mentioned a thing to my family or my teachers or classmates... At the end of my schooling, I needed to determine how far I had moved from my past. (1982, p. 14)

For Rodriguez, the educational issue centred on language:

I would also hear then the high nasal tones or middle-class American speech. The air stirred with sound. Sometimes, even now, when I have been travelling abroad for several weeks, I will hear what I heard as a boy. ... the high sound of American voices. For a few seconds I will hear it with pleasure, for it is

now the sound of my society -- a reminder of home. But inevitably -- already on the flight headed for home -- the sound fades with repetition. I am unable to hear it anymore. (p. 14)

Though he framed his experience by reference to Richard Hoggart's (1959) "scholarship boy", Rodriguez was broadly attacked for having sold out his culture, language and identity. The legacy of Rodriguez's work and the mainstream multiculturalism debate of the last three decades is the metaphor of 'between-ness' and of 'lack'.

- that we are caught between two worlds, cultures, and languages;
- that cultural displacement is a psychological, political and pedagogical dilemma resolvable through the restoration of 'wholeness', equilibrium, stability.³

Despite the development of postcolonial and feminist models of the subaltern and marginalised subject - the dominant approach in educational and clinical settings where old style deficit, assimilationist models no longer prevail is to treat children from visible minority groups according to the 'between two worlds' metaphors. Unlike the postcolonial narratives of liberation, the teleology of Rodriguez's work is not revolutionary but psychotherapeutic. The two worlds model operates on the basis of a binary of immigrant and dominant cultures, while presupposing the need for a 'whole', centred individual of dominant Western culture. Narratives of psychological, intellectual and psychic displacement hinge around themes of longing and lack and, indeed, they search for a cure or fix for the displacement.

The theme of displacement recurs in some of the more powerful recent Asian-American literature. The Chinese and Chinese-American women in the Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989) reconcile the 'two cultures' dilemma by re-narrating, reliving and mythologising a return to China. This is done principally through mother/daughter storytelling and exchange (Yu, 2002)

My daughter wanted to go to China for her second honeymoon, but now she is afraid.

"What if I blend in so well they think I'm one of them?" Waverly asked me. What if they don't let me come back to the United States?"

"When you go to China," I told her, "you don't even need to open your mouth. They already know you are an outsider" (Tan, 1989, p. 253)

Chinese-Australian photographer William Yang (1994) writes

³ In work on interethnic families in the 1990s, Carmen Luke and I found that the mainstream explanations of "interrace" in the social sciences were also based on assumptions of lack and deficit. In social psychology, for example, the assumption was that interracial children were prime candidates for remedial intervention (Luke & Luke, 1998).

Homesickness. What a strong emotion. What an attachment to the country. All my family's roots were in Australia. I was more Australian than the kids who told me to go back to China. I didn't even know where China was. (1994, p. 70)

In *Woman Warrior* (1994), Maxine Kingston Hong's Chinese-American woman must retrace and retell her Father's trip from China in search of the Gold Mountain. Kingston Hong's character quite literally loses the ability to speak until she has engaged in a historical connection with her origins.

There are, then contrasts between liberationist and displacement narratives, most obviously the move from indigenous and postcolonial narratives of political emancipation to migrant narratives of familial and biographical reconciliation. Yet both genres are based around economies of production – symbolic and at times allegorical productions of the self, whether as revolutionary agent, as matriarch, as literate subject, or, in Rodriguez's case, as assimilated subject.

Not surprisingly, minority representation entails the construction of a strategic essentialism as a counter-hegemonic tactic. Keesing (1992) described the discourses of identity that emerged in the Solomon Islands after decolonisation, noting the construction of a discourse of authenticity, of a unitary cultural repertoire and history where none before existed. As Rey Chow (1993) argued, diasporic literature is preoccupied with a metaphoric “return to the origins”:

... we see that in our fascination with the “authentic native,” we are actually engaged in a search for the equivalent of the aura even while our search processes themselves take us farther and farther away from that ‘original’ point of identification. Although we act like good Communists who dream of finding and serving the “real people”, we actually live and work like dirty capitalists accustomed to switching channels constantly. As we keep switching channels and browsing through different, “local” cultures, we produce an infinite number of “natives”, all with predictably automaton-like features that do not so much de-universalise western hegemony as they confirm its protean capacity for infinite displacement. The “authentic” native ... keeps receding from our grasp. Meanwhile our machinery churns out inauthentic and imperfect natives who are already copies. (1993, p. 46)

She goes on to redescribe Walter Benjamin's work on “the native in the age of discursive reproduction”. Chow's point is that the search for origins, the search for authentic voice, the search for an unmediated essence and hence political or genealogical affiliation is, finally, an *in situ* act of textual self-production and self-reconstruction (cf. Ang, 2000).

Chow's work suggests the possibility of a new kind of ethnic narrative -- one that is more a study in self-consciousness of how we are being represented and produced, one that moves from an economy of self-production that aims towards liberation, spiritual or psychotherapeutic redemption, and moves towards what Vicente Raphael (1994) has described as a critical “economy of looking”: looking at ourselves and Others through the critical lenses of multiple, overlapping and lived representation. In

contrast to the narratives of liberation and displacement, consider this passage cited by Raphael, from Filipina-American writer Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* (1990):

1956. The air conditioned darkness of the Avenue Theatre smells of flowery pomade, sugary chocolates, cigarette smoke and sweat. "All That Heaven Allows" is playing in Cinemascope and Technicolor. Staring Jane Wyman as the rich widow, Rock Hudson as the handsome young gardener, and Agnes Moorehead as Jane's faithful friend, the movie also features the unsung starlet Gloria Talbott as Jane's spoiled teenage daughter, a feisty brunette with catlike features and an innocent ponytail.

. . . Huddled with our chaperone Lorenza, my cousin Pucha Gonzaga and I sit enthralled in the upper section of the balcony in Manila's "Finest! First Run! English Movies Only!" theatre, ignoring furtive lovers stealing noisy kisses in the pitch-black darkness all around us.

Jane Wyman's soft putty face. Rock Hudson's singular, pitying expression. Flared skirts, wide cinch belts, prim white blouses, a single strand of delicate blue-white pearls. Thick pencilled eyebrows and blood red vampire lips; the virgin pastel-pink cashmere cardigan draped over Gloria Talbott's shoulders. Her casual arrogance seems inherently American, modern and enviable. (1990, p. 3)

Hagedorn describes an economy of looking, a moment of the textual construction of desire, where issues of identity, gender, sexuality are powerfully at work. There is a celebratory and playful tone here altogether different from than the discourses of 'lack' and displacement that dominate many of the male-authored narratives – Rodriguez's (1982) troubled search for stable male ego-identity is missing.

This is a different kind of self-production at work—where childhood, youth, and growing up becomes less a search for liberation or authenticity and more akin to cultural *bricolage*. In his early description of the "ecstasy of communication", Baudrillard (1995) argues that we live in a multimediated environment such that any longstanding analytic distinctions between figure/ground, sign/signified, truth/reality have become problematic. He argues that navigation through postmodern culture involves participation in an a hall of mirrors, where image/identity are simulations. With the decay of these binary analytic categories, the dialectics of colonised/coloniser, self/Other that are at the heart of ethnic narratives of liberation and displacement also become less stable.

Following Raphael (1994), my view is that there is a politics of identity in the strategies and tactics of the practice of viewing. Hagedorn again:

We compare notes after the movie, sipping TruColas under the watchful gaze of the taciturn Lorenza. "I don't like her face", Pucha complains about Jane Wyman, "I hate when Rock starts kissing her". What's wrong with it? I want to know, irritated at my blond cousin's constant criticism. She wrinkles her mestiza nose, the nose she is so proud of because it's point ant straight. "Ay! Que corny"... ... being corny is the worst sin you can commit in her eyes. (Hagedorn, 1990, p. 4).

Here linguistic creolisation is doubled in the body: died blond hair and mestiza nose. We begin to see in Hagedon's text a different kind of ethnic narrative -- where identity, sexuality, and politics are stitched together from popular cultural images, which are debated, mocked, critiqued, played with -- without the will towards the fixity, the certainty of assumption of singular, centred identity.

This ethnic narrative of simulation provides evidence of a *stabilised for now* characteristic of ethnic identity in popular culture that is much like the channel-surfing described by Chow (1994): a multi-channelled and multi-mediated identity formation where one learns to live within the interstices and gaps of images, without a perpetual feeling of absence, loss, or lack -- the absence loss or lack presupposed in assimilationist, psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic analyses of difference. Raphael (1995) puts it this way:

Envy thus becomes the site from which a new kind of agency is formulated. It entails the capacity to take on diverse identities for oneself, to claim that the "I" could be other "I's" elsewhere beyond the compass of the nation state and neocolonial society. For this reason, the mestizo/a viewer can be thought of as an ideal audience whose hybridity signifies the privilege associated with collaborating with and containing the workings of power. (1995, p. 105)

With that in mind, I'll narrate, as one such inauthentic and imperfect copy churned by the machinery of postwar popular culture.

Another Ethnic Autobiography

I was born in Los Angeles California in 1950. Looking back, the single most important bit of my childhood was TV. When we got our first colour TV in the 1960s, we became a two TV household (we kept the black and white). We spoke English in the home, and we swapped lunches and homework and comic books with Hispanic, Jewish and African-American kids. I learned to read from the Dick and Jane readers: recognising, sounding out and subvocalising the words of Dick, Dad and Spot the dog (Luke, 1988). And at the end of each week, we would go to Chinese Schools, where our Aunt Beulah dutifully tried to teach us Cantonese and Christianity, sometimes in that order. She, like many of the Aunties and Uncles in our extended families, worked part time as an actor.⁴

First black and white TV and, by the mid-1960s colour, and the local theatre: when we finished playing on the streets these were our prime time activities. Mid to late 1950s LA was a media mecca: there were about 10 channels, showing reruns continually. Me, and neighbours Timmy and Monica, more recent arrivals from Hong Kong across the street, would play *Rawhide*, *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*. When we and

⁴ Beulah Quo (1902-2004) was one of the most successful Chinese-American actors of the postwar generation, appearing in over two hundred feature films and television programs. She was one of the Aunties in our extended Chinatown family. See: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beulah_Quo. Lisa See's *On Gold Mountain* (1997) is an accurate and vivid description of the postwar LA Chinatown social networks of our community.

the Latino kids down the street would play war -- we would redivide who was going to play the Japanese and the Americans -- or sometimes we just split the difference and play Germans and Americans.

My Father and Uncle were actors. Both had raised themselves in Seattle. My two sets of grandparents who had come from Canton in the 1890s. Both my father and uncle were the first educated Chinamen in our family. My Uncle became MGM's first non-white contract player and first Asian featured actor, starring the Charlie Chan series and making over two hundred movies. His career culminated in Woody Allen's *Alice* and Spielberg's *Gremlins*, where he played, surprise: a Chinese herbalist with a long Fu-Manchu beard.

They worked in an environment where the only work they could get was playing Hollywood's Asians. As Darrell Hamamoto writes in *Monitored Peril* (1994) -- they were caught up playing Japanese and Chinese soldiers and generals, Pearl River peasants, Confucian scholars and, at better moments, the loyal Asian sidekick, always in supporting roles to Whites. Hamamoto's cogent analysis makes the case that Hollywood reified Asians as the Other -- as objects of derision, as object of violence, as servant and slave -- or, in the case of Chinese women, as the objects of desire for Marlon Brando, Cary Grant, Gregory Peck and just about anybody else. If this weren't enough, when the roles were featured roles, they would give them to White people playing in yellowface, from Paul Muni to Jennifer Jones to Lauren Bacall to Peter Sellers playing Asians or Eurasians. This drove my Father and Uncle crazy.

My father's career was different. He completed a Bachelor's Degree in the 1930s. But his talents as a writer were unused by the Hearst-dominated LA dailies, which had invented *yellow journalism* in the 1920s. So logically he went to Hollywood where he became a linotyper in the press room of the *Hollywood Reporter*. But he also worked as an actor -- playing Filipino chefs, soldiers, houseboys, playing anything that would pay the bills. I can remember sitting with him while he practiced his lines, dressed as a Filipino housekeeper for a White Boss or as a Filipino Chef for submarine movies. There were days when he would wake early and leave for work early in the morning ready to play a Japanese soldier.

My Uncle would wait until everybody else upstairs was playing mah jong, would have a few drinks and we'd go downstairs. Always playing for an audience, he'd rehearse his lines for Rogers and Hammerstein, or read me Shakespeare out of a worn set of *Harvard Classics* that my father had gotten from the Salvation Army store. Every time there was a casting call -- whether for Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* or *Flower Drum Song*, or for TV or movies, many of my extended family's kids would go work as extras.

In 1954, the movie *Blood Alley* was cast and shot in San Rafael, California, on the north side of San Francisco Bay. This was at the height of McCarthyism, and its script by A.S. Fleischman,⁵ wove together two new schemata -- anti-communism and the Exotic East -- into a classic, but tacky action movie. Lauren Bacall was featured as Cathy, who appears in shot 37:

⁵ A.S. 'Sid' Fleischman, author of numerous novels, screenplays and children's books went on to win the Newberry Award for children's literature.

As she approaches the landing, we see that she is barelegged, her feet in sandals. Her hair is cut short and the South China sun has tanned her skin. She has put on her best skirt, a Tartan affair (Fleischman, 1954, p. 8).

Blood Alley was, in many senses, an archetypal Cold War encoding of the Other, where hapless Nationalist Chinese were saved by the Duke. John Wayne plays Wilder, a reluctant American hero who takes a ferry boat of sympathetic Nationalists and peasants to safe harbour in Hong Kong. With Bacall and a cast of hundreds, namely my Dad, cousins and the entire neighbourhood, and others they defeat the Communists. The Duke was the hero. The enemy was us.

(Insert Figure 1: Blood Alley Cover)

The Duke was my father's favourite actor. We went to see every John Wayne movie made together: I remember sitting through *The Alamo* 3 times in succession at a theatre on Santa Monica Blvd. The trouble was: my Father was cast as an evil communist sympathiser, the dangerous Feng Number One. His job was to take out John Wayne.

My father and many others from the LA Chinese acting fraternity went off for 2 months on location to shoot the movie. Here is my father's script. He has written his name in English and Chinese below the title. The cover is signed by John Wayne (in the upper right), Lauren Bacall (down the centre), and the director, Bill Wellman, in the upper left. It was passed on to me as a family heirloom, as one would receive an artefact or a painting. I received a 19th century gold nugget from my Grandfather, and film script from my Father. I read this not as a film scholar would. I ask you to read it as you would a scrapbook or photo album.

(Insert Figure 2: Bloody Alley Script Cover)

Its story grammar is as follows: the western hero saves diasporic people from even more diasporic bad guys. My Father played First Feng, the first son of a wealthy "Commy" as the Duke comments. Feng Senior was portrayed, in a caricature that only a McCarthy-era screenwriter could have come up with, as part gluttonous Mandarin and part petit bourgeois, carried around by servants like an emperor. They all – noble Pearl River peasants and covert "Commy sympathisers [sic]" alike - depart for "freedom" on a refurbished ferry captained by the Duke to battle hostile gunboats, disease, and a typhoon. Along the way, my father leads a cowardly attack on John Wayne on the bridge during the tempest.

Here are my Father's lines:

(Insert Figure 2: Bloody Alley Script, p. 98)

The scribbling below the margins are his lines in Cantonese, which he hand wrote in a Romanised notation. Hence: (1) “We take command now, foolish captain” is transcribed as: “ghor de yee gah fun foo ney deh, ney dey gum bungah, shoon yeung”. Now my Father could indeed speak and, though rusty, read and write Chinese characters: but his Romanised version on the script was ideosyncratic. Actors make mnemonic notes on scripts, and his has underlines, exclamation and accent marks for intonation and stress.

What’s more interesting here is that the scriptwriter (A.S. Fleischman) and director (William Wellman) left the translation to the Chinese-American actors. Hence, First Feng’s lines – (2) “Change directions! We go back to Swatow!” – are prefaced in the script with “[In Chinese]”. My Father could have said anything.

Whatever he did utter was virtually inaudible in the storm and violent scuffle: “First Feng beating to a pulp with a rifle butt”, the script explains. But not before the Duke can shout at Feng and others “You idiots (in Chinese)”. There are no diacritical marks or translations for the Duke.

My Dad was knifed in the back by two Anti-Communist Peasants – the people who sided with the American captain. John Wayne is rescued and soothed on the deck by Lauren Bacall’s character.

Blood Alley was the last feature film my father appeared in: he returned to a career that included linotyper, proofreader, insurance salesman, and finally, social worker, some 30 years after he received his undergraduate degree. A coffee mug autographed “To Ed from the Duke” sat on our mantelpiece for 30 years, an object of family debate once John Wayne’s right wing politics became unbearable.

We wore his acting like a badge. I remember going to school and trying to tell the other kids that my Dad had hit John Wayne (I never claimed he had beaten him to a pulp with a rifle butt). Nobody believed me. In LA at the time, KHJ was a local television station that played the same movie 4 times a day (morning, mid-afternoon, evening, and overnight). This meant that my sisters, cousins, neighbors and I could stay up late and watch Dad smash John Wayne, again and again. When *Blood Alley* played we would watch it 10-20 times a week. Like a later generation of Trekkies, we repeated each line, and watched it over and over... I even learned my Dad’s crowning line as First Feng, his last on big screen celluloid: “You refuse, American Pig” (“ney ng tso, Me Gurok Gee!”).

We would watch other Chinese and Japanese actors that we knew -- occasionally Aunt Beulah or Uncle Keye, Richard Loo, or Victor Sen Yung on programs that featured Asians playing generals, houseboys, drug barons, and constant sidekicks. We knew all the stories about the Asian actors. My parents would tell us which actors were relatives, who was divorced, who was educated, which were drunks, which roles someone we knew *should* have had. It was like having a Chinese actor’s tabloid TV Guide on site. We will film critics and insider traders.

We had our own folklore for viewing. My father told me that when they spoke the Chinese dialogue to the White actors they would sometimes swear at them or insult them, sometimes when smiling. So while the scripted speech act meant X, in Cantonese they would deliver Y. We'd watch *Bonanza*, where we heard or imagined that Hop Sing the Cook would tell the Cartwright Brothers where to get off, it was just that they didn't know it. So Little Jo would ask for tea and might get called a running dog. And there was a story there as well: My father used to say "Uncle Victor has a UC Berkeley degree, but wound up playing a houseboy, how undignified". (He should speak!). My grandparents had been peasants, my mother had grown up on a farm in Punalu'u on the north shore of Oahu. Hence, there was no romanticisation about rice and pig farming in our family, no nostalgia for a China lost. My childhood goal was to watch enough TV to get into UCLA. I don't know how many times my Father told me he didn't want us to be actors -- he said it wasn't steady work and that it gave you a big head. I think he was talking about himself, and my Uncle too, whose success everybody spoke of. But I was upset when we couldn't be extras on movie sets like my cousins.

So we'd sit and watch *Bonanza*, which we actually could see in colour at friends' houses. While everybody else was watching the Cartwrights, we were watching Victor Sen Yung, waiting for the day when Hop Sing would tell Little Jo where to get off in his nattering, clattering Cantonese soliloquies, or whether he might, just might, wink at the camera, since he knew we were watching. So we learned to look for these signs of playing with the script -- and we would play with the scripts too, rethinking them, re-running them, and rehearsing them -- always in our heads, sometimes physically, always among ourselves ("You refuse, American Pig!"), not with our White or Latino or African-American school mates. This was our secret knowledge, our try at re-production, our indigenous Hollywood Chinese wisdom, or at least a good in-joke.

Often the distinctions between what was ours and what was cinematic were blurred in this intertextual and intergenerational hall of mirrors. In the 1960s, Keye Luke was featured as Master Po in the TV series *Kung Fu*, where he uttered quasi-Confucian wisdom. During that period, I remember going out to dinner with him and he'd stop and break into his TV voice and say: "Confucius would say: Go slowly and with considered thought, Grasshopper"... or something like that. Was this the transmission of intergenerational wisdom or the passing of another kind of wisdom, anagrams twice removed from China via blacklisted screenwriters? If indeed every text and utterance is already a revoicing -- whose historical and cultural voices were speaking to whom?

My Uncle Keye died in 1991. After a good deal of community effort, he had a Star put on Hollywood Blvd. But this was not without muted controversy -- for he remained a throwback, an anachronism, presenting an historical anomaly to a newly empowered and fully voiced Asian-American acting fraternity. In his epilogue to *Monitored Peril*, Darryl Hamamoto (1995, p. 251) describes him as follows:

In a film and television career that spanned a period of fifty years, beginning with the "Charlie Chan" film series during the 1930s and running through the TV-movie reprise of *Kung Fu* (1986), Keye Luke (1904-1991) was probably the Asian American actor best known to the general public. ... With few

exceptions, Keye Luke's outstanding career was predicated upon his ability to portray the stock array of Asian domestic servants, laundrymen, mystics, gangsters, and enemy soldiers. In this, Keye Luke was the prototypical "Oriental" as constructed by the implicit racism of network television standards and practices.

I share Hanamoto's analysis. But my Uncle was no dupe, no sellout, no Uncle Tom, no Banana, no Republican. He was many things. He was a mirror. He was a prism. Like my Father, and perhaps like so many migrants - he was an actor. And like my Father, he worked to survive in good faith, within and through a fundamentally racist medium.

Gazing Back/Looking Back

The folk wisdom that many of us were raised with in the postwar Chinese community was not to fight back: to work harder and better than whites. As my Father said, when "the White Boss tells you what to do, say yes, then just go and do what you think needs to be done". Similarly, my mother taught us always to be polite. In the 1950s before the Civil Rights Act, we would sometimes dress up and go out to expensive White restaurants - to learn how to do it properly. We couldn't afford it - but we were told that we had to learn how to use the right forks. And she would go out of her way to show White People that she could speak their codes, that she could do their politeness protocols, sometimes making malapropisms on the phone. At the time, I resented it. I thought it was a loss of face. And as an undergraduate circa 1968, it made me angry to think she was selling out to dominant, White bourgeois culture - and I despaired at the migrant preoccupation with wealth and status that seemed to pervade many segments of the LA Chinese community. But later she and I have talked of what it meant to be an Asian woman in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. What it meant to be invisible. About what it meant to have to avert your eyes. And I understand better what it meant to be in that economy of looking, where unemployment, living at the fringes, the ugliness of face-to-face symbolic and physical violence always lurked just below the surface. How you looked, what you saw, how you were looked at, and what they saw were daily face-to-face and media cues and reminders. And I better understand and respect her historical strategies - and those of my Father and Uncle.

Face, according to ethnographers of communication, is a premium in all intra and intercultural communication (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). But we were taught not to confront verbally or physically. Sometimes this conferred advantage, or sidestepped disadvantage, at other times it was a cultural liability. Sometimes we fought and yelled back. But many of us who were Other growing up in White modernist cultures developed a performativity of looking, a way of reconstructing the gaze by 'staring back' - sometimes masked and covert, and at other times overt, sometimes when you were watching, sometimes when you weren't. They can't control or suppress your eyes. Even now, as sometime academic, public intellectual and state bureaucrat - I might use it in boardrooms and staffrooms, as a way of jamming the radar of the Other. This *looking back* is akin to bell hooks' (1989) "talking back" against dominant cultures or other cultures' traditions of fighting back physically.

These moments of *looking back* are crucial to the formation of the minority subject in postmodern conditions. We regain our agency by asserting, *inter alia*, our capacity to look, stare, gaze in different ways and to rewrite, to reconstruct texts and codes-- as Hagedon's (1990) *Mestizas* did. But it is not simply an economy of envy, we are also able to see absences, to see what isn't there, and to construct on the fly counterplots, counterpoints, and bizarre alternatives. We always wondered just what would have happened if my Dad had taken out the Duke. What would Lauren Bacall have done?

I would hope that there is a simple lesson here for Hollywood, the dominant culture, talent scouts and agents within the political economy of scholarship and filmmaking, counsellors, therapists and educators who deal with children of visible minorities - whoever is actually out there reading this text. This is a different kind of ethnic narrative, one where identity is constituted not in the binary oppositions of 'between two cultures' or in the 'finding authentic voice' argument of the liberationist and displacement narratives. These remain salient historical strategies for writing and talking back, of great efficacy and power in particular places at particular historical moments (Luke, 2004). But there are radically different stories out there as well, stories where cultural boundaries and exchanges are harder to pin down, where simulation suffices for something more solid, where separating out the good guys and the bad guys is a bit more ambiguous.

Growing up different in the proto-postmodern hotbed of Hollywood left us with a different species of literacy. My parents bequeathed to me critical ways of looking. And that critical engagement with the politics of representation may be as powerful a political tool as any available today. That we really own and control the media - even when we can barely afford the light bills - is the best folk wisdom around for survival in fast capitalism that my parents could have given me -- perhaps better than if I had learned Cantonese properly.

Rey Chow (1993, p. 23) asks "Where have all the 'natives' gone?" She answers that we are caught somewhere between what she terms the "defiled image and the indifferent gaze". But we are not dupes. We are no longer stuck between two cultures, two languages -- we produce ourselves in many third worlds: worlds of simulation, refraction and popular culture.

Postscript

I am not a novelist or a literary critic or a cultural studies theorist. I am a teacher with a story to tell and, no doubt, innumerable axes to grind. I have her tried to offer yet another ethnic autobiography, but one with a slight difference. It is an attempt to mark out:

- a shift from an binary economy of production and destruction, of liberation and displacement -- to an economy of looking, a notion of identity formation as channel surfing - one where you can go back, but it's back to another channel or rerun.
- a shift from a sense of the minority person as filled by lack, deficit, displacement, only to be filled up by a return to the origins myth -- to a self-

understanding based on the need to deal strategically with the ongoing instability and difference of a multimediated culture.

When you held a hegemonic mirror up to us, we held it up back at you. We saw Warner Oland, Sydney Toler, Peter Sellers, Peter Ustinov, Jennifer Jones, Marlon Brando and David Carradine in yellowface -- painted to look like us. On behalf of all of us who played your version of us, we laughed when we saw you playing us.

First Feng, shaking off the blow, finds the rifle on the deck and grabs it by the barrel. Wilder and Second Feng are wrestling on the deck at the far end of the pilothouse. Wilder gets the Chinese to his shoulders and sends him crashing into a window. First Feng bludgeons Wilder with a rifle butt, knocking him to the deck. (*Blood Alley*, p. 99)

As a kid, I knew the layers of truths of cinema and representation. I relished my Father's wonderous simulation. We were critically literate long before we invented the term. You were duped into thinking we were dupes.

Acknowledgements

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