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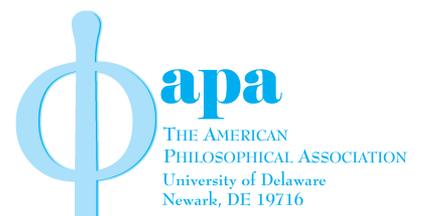
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NEWSLETTER ON ASIAN AND ASIAN-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHIES

ARTICLE

JANET FARRELL SMITH

“Multiplicity within Identity: Asian American
Cultural Experiences in the Plural”





Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies

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ARTICLES

Multiplicity within Identity: Asian American Cultural Experiences in the Plural

Janet Farrell Smith¹

University of Massachusetts Boston

Introduction

Cultures have been viewed as “one” or “single” units, as wholes including sets of practices, beliefs, attitudes, and products such as texts, artworks, and so on. For example, Eric Liu, exploring tensions and multiplicities in his cultural identity in *The Accidental Asian*, notes that some scholars assert the existence of a “core” Sino culture (Huntington). Some may believe there is a core Asian American cultural identity. A cohesive cultural identity has been assumed to rely on this “oneness,” and internal multiplicity or diversity has been assumed by some to be at least problematic and sometimes a threat or deficiency.

In contrast, I suggest the following theses: A cohesive group cultural identity may proceed with a high internal degree of internal multiplicity, and need not be viewed as deficient or fragmentary. An individual person’s cultural identity may incorporate multiple internal affiliations, and need not be confused or deficient. Rather a person’s healthy cultural identity may proceed with a high degree of multiplicity. Multiplicity is not only compatible with group unity, but it may also enhance it. Multiplicity is not only compatible with a flourishing human identity of a person, but it may also enhance it. I explore these multiplicity theses here in the context of what Asian Americans say about the issues.

There are strong challenges to the singularity view, both theoretical and pragmatic. For example, philosopher Anthony Appiah, citing Toni Morrison, challenges the singularity or wholeness notion:

I have insisted that African Americans do not have a single culture, in the sense of shared language, values, practices and meanings. But many people who think of races as groups, defined by shared cultures, conceive that sharing in different ways. They understand black people as sharing Black culture by definition: jazz or hip-hop belongs to an African American...because it is culturally marked as black.²

Critiques of a single culture view can also be tied to cultural identity. Appiah also criticizes what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls “cultural geneticism,” i.e., simply by “having a racial identity,” you “earn rights to culture that is marked with the mark of a hard identity position.”³

While rejecting a singularity view of “a culture” tied to a racial group, Appiah also rejects the narrowness of cultural identification associated with that view. He invokes the view of the great thinker and leader, W.E.B. DuBois, who was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, was the first African American to major in philosophy at Harvard, was denied entrance into a philosophy Ph.D. program, and was a proponent of Pan-Africanism and a leader who helped found the NAACP. Appiah says:

Cultural geneticism deprives white people of jazz and black people of Shakespeare. This is a bad deal—as DuBois would have insisted, “I sit with Shakespeare,” the Bard of Great Barrington wrote, “and he winces not.”⁴

We should also note that cultural geneticism deprives black people of classical music and opera as well as assimilates them too narrowly with jazz. It deprives Asian Americans of (for example) R&B, hip-hop, and basketball, and African Americans of traditionally Asian cultural experiences.

To whom is Appiah’s challenge addressed? Those who stand on the outside looking in on “Black culture,” or “The Black Experience,” especially from the viewpoint of white majority culture, may tend to think there is “one” culture. Analogous observations hold for “Asian culture” in America. A singularity hypothesis may help organize the complex array of cultural and ethnic categories that sometimes overwhelm persons in a highly diverse pluralistic society. Nevertheless, such views may simply “lump” groups and individual persons in distorting ways.

I will take up an Appiah-type challenge within what Asian Americans say about Asian American cultural identities in the plural. We may take from Appiah an analogous challenge for many groups’ cultural identities. One caveat: The point is not that Asian American culture is “like” or “parallel” to African American culture. Nor is the point that we ought to look for parallels between African American and Asian American cultures. Rather, my point is that Appiah’s challenge to single or “one” culture can be applied to many cultural identities in addition to African American. If we “look” carefully, we may see more perspicuously how multiplicity is contained within a cohesive cultural identity on both group and individual levels.

Appiah condemns the identification of black culture as “a single culture.” My views on multiplicity within identity clearly stand in line with challenges to cultural “geneticism” or to essentialism, the notion that each culture has an essence, or a unified core of essential features, or “cultural inherentism,” in Lawrence Blum’s term (“these people are just that way, e.g., Jews are stingy, whites are racist, Asians are studious...”).⁵ My multiplicity theses also support Seyla Benhabib’s critique of “faulty epistemological premises” in the assumption that a culture is a “whole” thing.⁶

Cultural identity is related to racial identity, yet the relation itself is highly complex and fraught with racialist, and racist associations, e.g., cultural geneticism. Can we strip away prejudice and arrive at a bias-free theory? In response, I question the notion that we can develop a coherent general theory on “the relation between culture and race.” The way race and culture interact is specific to each group, and must be contextualized. Cultural identity needs to be explored in its group specificity.

On the connection between racism and group cultural identity, we have much to learn from the specificity of Asian American experiences. Racism and prejudice arise in specific ways for each group. For example, given the ties of racial and cultural identity to a nation, the way a nation relates to U.S. military power (Vietnam War) and economic dominance (Japan) will filter down and affect groups and individual persons. Predictions of China’s increasing economic power⁷ may pose a warning of the potential for economic racism with a specialized character for Asian Americans. If history repeats itself, generalizations from “Chinese” to “Asian” may implicate many Asian groups. The economic dominance of a nation has racialized implications for Chinese Americans because of the “lumping” phenomenon. The overall point is that the structure of our linguistic terms “cultural” versus “economic,” or “cultural” versus “race,” artificially separates phenomena, implying separate spheres. In actuality, they are points of view that take on complex practices.

My method selects certain examples from Asian American experiences to expose the falseness in certain frameworks and point the way to accuracy. Recalling Wittgenstein’s saying, “Don’t think. Look!”, I try to expose misleading assumptions, some of which come from too much thinking and not enough looking. We need to examine actual cultural processes, observing how dynamic and fluid they are. Only then can we develop coherent philosophical methods and theoretical frames.

This method is also found in certain social scientific investigations. Lai mistakenly terms the model minority portrayal “monolithic” sounding a theme parallel to the major theses. Paul Watanabe, condemning false portrayals of Asian Americans, claims they are “simplistic, stereotypical, and devoid of critical nuances.” Watanabe’s methodological aim is to start with accurate description, rather than analysis or speculation, to reverse the effects of false portraits, and to more fully comprehend the “diversity that exists within (the Asian American) population.” He objects to the way the model minority portrayals have been used to drive a wedge between minority groups.⁸

Part I: Multiplicity within Asian American Group Cultural Identity

One way of obscuring multiplicity is to draw together many specific predications into one general attribution. These attributions are “falsely coalesced” into a unified subject group: e.g. “Asian Americans” and one unified predicate: ...are economically better off than...(groups) (B) (NA)(H)(W). Ronald Takaki’s critique of the “myth of the model minority,” in my interpretation, criticizes what I term a “false coalescence” of attributes misrepresenting its internal multiplicity.⁹ If we aggregate certain statistical generalizations, we may get something that appears to be a technically accurate generalization of a definable sector. However, an attribution to a statistically defined sector on a statistical scientific level is not the same as an attribution to a socially recognized group. In social and political reality, attributions have different roles and effects in social-political discourse. A technical statistical

“slice” may mischaracterize a social-cultural-racial group’s internally complex economic and cultural situation.

Multiple cultural and economic practices are misleadingly coalesced into the model minority set of generalizations (Note that the myth entails more than one generalized attribution). In Takaki’s view these are “exaggerated,” because they are based on misinterpretations of (a) regional variations; (b) how economic income and wealth are produced within a household; (c) variation in certain sectors which are not doing well economically but are “mired in poverty...including Southeast Asian refugees such as the Hong and Mien as well as immigrant workers trapped in Chinatowns”; (d) literacy, language skills, and educational background (“Fifty five percent of the residents of New York Chinatown do not speak English well or at all.”); (e) the status of women and gender inequalities in debt-bonded labor for the disproportionate representation of women in garment industries.¹⁰

The moral or ideological force of the “Asian Superminority” in media and governmental rhetoric is based on the values of individual effort and self-reliance. This interpretation mistakes the way in which many Asian families live and cooperate together. Assets are measured solely by household, obscuring the number of family members contributing and type of contribution from each individual member (recalling a similar problem in the gender division of labor, which obscures the contribution of the caretaking parent). Takaki’s interpretation implies a multiplicity thesis in social ontology: what is achieved by collective family units in Asian cultural patterns is misattributed—within the myth—to economic and cultural individuals. Many Asian American families manage economic productivity as social units, not simply as individuals.¹¹

Significantly, in my view, Takaki, in refuting the model minority myth, does not use the term “stereotype.” He calls it “society’s most recent jeremiad—a call for renewed commitment to the traditional virtues of hard work, thrift and industry...Look at the Asian Americans! They did it by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.” He highlights the way this call divides Asian and African Americans. I also note that Watanabe does not specifically apply the term “stereotype” to the “model minority” although in general he criticizes stereotypes applied to Asian Americans.

In my view, the omission is significant because the ordinary notion of stereotype under-describes both the internal logical complexity and the negative moral force of the model minority portrayal. Drawing on Blum’s thesis that we need a new and more nuanced analysis of a “Variety of Racial Ills,” we may display more accurately how the false portrayal in the model minority negates the Asian American cultural group’s internal multiplicity and misattributes another false singularity to African Americans, a contrast then used to drive a wedge between the two groups.¹² In brief, the other-attributed “model” myth directly denies internal multiplicity in ways that undermine both group and individual cultural identity. This political use of the myth should not, on Takaki’s view as I interpret him, be termed a “positive” stereotype. His view is that the false attribution to the group as a whole has negative effects on significant portions of the group as well as on other groups. There is little positive about it, since it undermines both intragroup unity among Asian Americans and intergroup unity among Asian and African Americans. In summary, although it is not the only element, a philosophical notion of one, single, or “whole” culture lies at the root of this cluster of mistaken attributions and messages in the so-called model minority.

Part II. Multiplicity within Individual Asian American Cultural Identity

While many Asian Americans have explored tensions in their individual cultural identity, the example of Asian descent children adopted by non-Asians presents a particularly challenging question. Do these children have a problematic cultural identity because they are not raised by Asians, and thereby do not have an “authentic” connection to Asian cultures? Many consider the child adopted outside the group, particularly by white parents, to be at risk for an authentic cultural and racial identity, or at least to be at risk for a problematic or confused racial and cultural identity. This view has been expressed within many racial, cultural, and national groups.

My question is: What are the assumptions concerning race and culture standing behind these worries? How do these relate to the assumption of “one” version of A, B, or C culture? Consider an analysis designed to reconstruct the background assumptions of the claim, but not to take a side on one ideological position on whether children should be adopted outside their group of origin, an issue I have explored in depth elsewhere.¹³

As I argue here, the assumption of a problematic cultural (and racial) identity often turns out to be based on a false assumption that “Asian cultural identity” is a monolithic, singular, whole, and that non-Asian parents lack a singular connection to Asian culture, (or do not have an Asian cultural identity). Significantly, these singularity assumptions would also condemn interracial families, where a non-Asian parent raises children of Asian descent. Analogous arguments might be made for African Americans, but I do not address this question here in order to remain consistent with my thesis that each culture-race identity issue should be contextualized in a group-specific context.

On a social level, Asian adoptees are often connected to their specific culture in their land of origin. Korean adoptee advocacy organizations are often considered as exemplary. Since Korean children were first adopted into the U.S. primarily by whites starting in 1956, these organizations have had an established tradition of sponsoring summer culture camps and organizing homeland tours. Even children adopted in rural areas with few Koreans or Asians may be able to have some connection with the homeland culture. Also, Families with Children from China (FCC) supports Chinese adoptive families with similar kinds of active cultural engagement. The Holt studies of psychosocial adjustment of Korean adoptees, considered solid social-scientific investigations, showed a high degree of healthy adjustment and are taken by many to demonstrate that cross-racial adoption need not be *prima facie* problematic because of its multiple cultural and racial influences. Various studies, for example, by Simon and Altstein, show that a majority of Korean descent adopted young adults identified themselves both racially and culturally as Korean American or Asian American. This does not mean individual conflict is absent, that a person’s identity can never be confused, or that psycho-social problems are nil. In view of these social scientists, the studies do show that a multiple set of cultural experiences can form the basis of a cohesive cultural identity, i.e., that multiplicity within identity is possible and has succeeded in terms of healthy adjustment as well as self-identified cultural and racial identity.

There are many ways a cultural identity can be imbibed. For example, a substantial number of Korean and Chinese adoptees travel to Korea or China to experience the culture firsthand. Yet they do not enjoy the privilege of growing up with a Korean or Chinese mother, “funneling China into our

ears,” in Maxine Hong Kingston’s words. Ironically, these adoptive children travel to the motherland, but Kingston, whose mother gives her culturally rich detail (“...Kwantung Province, ...the river Kwoo, ...Just give your father’s name and any villager can point out our house.”), says, “I am to return to China where I have never been.”¹⁴

However, the multiplicity-within-identity theses seem to be strongly rejected by various groups’ opposition to out-group adoption. Let us next ask a meta-question: What is the relation assumed between race and culture, and what are the assumptions about a singular culture, presupposed in the worries of these critics of cross racial adoption? If racial identity were counted solely by biological lineage, one could be counted of African descent or of Asian descent, even if adopted by outgroup parents. (Granted, for the sake of argument, this way of counting race inclusion.) So where does the problem lie?

The source of the problem, on my reconstruction here, must lie in the cultural transmission of racial identity, since outgroup parents are assumed not to have the capability to transmit this on the view opposing outgroup adoption. If racial identity were purely biological, and biologically transmitted, then, even if the biological parents were not doing the childrearing, the racial identity would already have been conferred. However, according to these critics, racial identity transmission is ongoing, surfacing critically in adolescence and young adulthood. Hence the critics’ assumption, or tacit presupposition, must be something like the following: transmission of racial identity must have a strong cultural component. And, therefore, only same-race parents can transmit healthy racial identity in the sense of self-ascribed identification and survival skills. I interpret the baseline presupposition on race and culture, presupposed within these critics’ view, to be that the child’s cultural experience of race must be, in some sense, a “whole” or “singular.” Only then can the requisite unity be established between racial identity and cultural identity. Granted, this “singularity” or “wholeness” presupposition differs in its complexity from Appiah’s challenge raised at the beginning of this paper on a “single” culture. Yet it does constitute a related challenge in the same territory. It also shows that part of the “meaning” of “racial” identity is so closely bound up with “cultural” identity, that it seems hard to disentangle the two (if indeed they are “two” in the first place).

Next, consider some hypothetical cases to investigate whether a healthy cultural identity needs to be tied to a single or “whole” culture.

Consider an adopted girl of Chinese ancestry, Lilly (LiLi in Chinese), whose U.S. white adoptive mother strongly emphasizes classic forms of Chinese culture and civilization in the home. The mother, highly aware she is not authentically Chinese, exposes her daughter to many Chinese people born in China and living in the U.S. (CBC’s versus ABCs). For example, in the Tang family, the children are taught the ancient Chinese virtues and core civilization of China. The father is a dedicated Confucian scholar advocating Confucian values in the diaspora, while the mother collects Chinese art, and draws Lilly into their traditional Chinese family holidays. The Chao family, immersed in the values of the Maoist-Marxist tradition, dismisses the “olds” of China, condemns the crass materialist values of capitalist Western society, and advocates a social-scientific worldview in theory and practice. They want their daughter Rose to tutor Lilly in Mandarin, but are very worried that Rose will become exposed to corrupt American materialism. The Li family, products of the cultural revolution, immigrated to the U.S. right after the 1989 Tiananmen massacres, to become enterprising medical professionals who

run a health clinic for Chinese immigrants. They repair their own cars and drains and laugh at the “spiritual pollution” of Confucian ideas, yet draw on Chinese cultural practices (e.g., traditional Chinese medicine) when it is pragmatically useful to their well-being.

Which version of these incompatible versions of “Chinese culture” will Lilly take in? Which will most influence her? Surely, we can see that she has not been presented with one “whole” or “single” version of Chinese culture. Surely, we can also see that in the global, diasporic, and the current Asian American context, there is no one version of “Chinese culture” exemplified in the Chinese cultural identity of the three families. Indeed, there are multiple versions, each of which claims to be authentic, sometimes in direct opposition to the others.

By middle adolescence, the adoptive daughter Lilly dismisses her mother’s identification with classic Chinese culture, and remains indifferent to each of the Chinese cultural influences to which she is exposed. She advocates contemporary “Asian Pride” and looks on Asians around the world as having special (superior?) characteristics. She identifies across Asian ethnic boundaries, admires and wants to learn technologies developed in Japan, and thinks that Asian technologies will far outstrip Western ones. Perhaps she has developed a sort of “cosmopolitan identity,” in Jeremy Waldron’s term, not in a global culture-neutral or race-neutral sense, but firmly ensconced under an umbrella of a pan-ethnic youth-oriented version of Asian cultural identity. She directly says that her adoptive mother just fails to get (and never will get) what is important about Asian pride and Asian identity.

Next, consider an immigrated Chinese family with three children. The parents have effectively integrated to U.S. culture and have assimilated in terms of culture, religion, lifestyle, etc. Perhaps they exemplify a classic second-generation pattern. Now suppose each of the three children goes back to “authentic Chinese culture” being dissatisfied with their parents’ assimilation. Child number one rejects the parents’ Christian affiliation, practices Buddhism, becomes a scholar of ancient Confucian and Taoist texts, learns the ancient languages, and travels to shrines to record the original artwork in China. Child number two becomes a political activist, focusing on development issues in contemporary China, especially equal economic participation for women, human rights, and general economic well-being in twenty-first century China. (One and Two disagree over whether Confucianism is anti-equality for women.) Child number three becomes an advocate of what she calls “Asian pride,” identifies across national boundaries with the Chinese Diaspora and cultural features uniting persons of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other Asian descent, majors in Asian American studies, admires and tries to work in technologies developed in Asia. Still exhibiting the Chinese virtue of respect for elders, trying to save face for them, Number three implies gently that, regrettably, her parents just might have missed what is important about Chinese cultural identity, in particular, and Asian American identity, in general.

What points can we draw from these cases? The first point here lies in the strong multiplicity, even incompatibility, in what is defined as “Chinese culture” as derived from the original nation state(s) or geographical-temporal-historical location. Since the “original” or “mother culture” strands are so strikingly multiple, it is not surprising that contemporary “Asian American culture” generally will also reflect internal multiplicity. There are certainly more than three versions of Chinese culture, and far more within Asian American culture if we consider Korean, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Indian

versions of Asian culture in America. I make the point within one tradition to emphasize the patent multiplicity within a supposed “one” classic, original “motherland” cultural identity. The general point to be gleaned is: there are multiple, contested, opposing, versions of what is authentically Chinese culture, and of what is authentically Chinese cultural identity. Each of offspring, child one, two, and three, would affirm their version as valid, and none would deny that the others have a Chinese cultural identity, although they might certainly put the particulars up for discussion. The third generation children have a familial identity and a Chinese cultural identity, in which loyalty and political unity are central. The same point applies to Asian Americans, for the most part, given the strong coalitions and community actions developed in unified political base. For example, the highly active and successful CAPAY (the Conference for Asian Pacific Youth) was founded by high school students, originating with a Laotian young woman student organizing a walkout to protest harassment against Asian women.¹⁵

The second point is that a strong group cultural identity can accommodate contested and even contradictory versions of Chinese culture, and by implication, Asian American culture (or B-culture or NA culture). Granted there are conditions of unity for cultural identities. What unifies the group cultural identity is not the “identity of a culture” in the ordinary way that “entities” satisfy identity conditions. This may sound a paradoxical point. However, the term “culture” does not designate an entity in the ordinary sense. So if Quine’s, “No Entity without Identity,” is not clearly satisfied for a culture, that implies that “a culture” is not an “entity.” It is highly doubtful that the internal multiplicity of the Chinese cultural map would satisfy Quine’s identity criterion. (The appearance of a name-type designator with a noun structure (a culture, this culture, the culture of x) misleads us into assuming that we are speaking of a “thing” with clear boundaries and identity conditions.) My ontological-linguistic analysis parallels Benhabib’s detection of “faulty epistemological premises” that “cultures are clearly delineable wholes,” “that cultures are congruent with population groups, and that a noncontroversial view of a culture is possible.”¹⁶

Unity, in cultural identity, has to do with continuity over time and space as well as the social-political unification of a group. Cultures are more accurately characterized as dynamic fluid processes contextualized in historical time and specific places.

The third point is that the energetic youth in our cases illustrate the cultural force of new generations defining each stage of cultural content and process. The philosophical point is that cultural identities are dynamic, fluid, and constantly changing, in process. Yet it is not only oppositional or adolescent identity that turns things around, carving out a new cultural constellation. Each new generation, one after another, in a “series of accretions,” or, in some cases, revolutions, defines the content and process of a given cultural identity.¹⁷ In Chinese history and in Chinese art, each dynasty takes from the old and recreates a new constellation. In the Chinese communist liberation, a radically new constellation emerged against the backdrop of many continuous cultural customs. Multiplicity has to be recognized to understand the true nature of culture. Little in cultural custom and practice can be static. Even the “old traditions” depend on contemporary in-group (often-contested) interpretations of what is authentically “old.”

The fourth point connects an internally multiple group identity with an internally multiple personal identity. Cultural identities of persons may contain a high degree of multiplicity within a strong, healthy, self-affirming self-concept. Conflict

among the various pulls of the multiplicities is not necessarily a problematic but a normal part of identity formation, and stabilizes the person's ability to achieve equilibrium amidst variation. (Many models of individual identity cohesion contain an implicit assumption that a monolithic trait, e.g., "one" culture or race, is the most stable foundation, and that multiple sources are inherently problematic.)

However, the ability to process multiplicity, not an attachment to a monolithic cultural type, is the sign of stable flexible identity. Conflicting loyalties may exist to self-valued strands within a group cultural identity. Analogously, one person may value strands of cultural identity that stand in conflict to personal projects or goals, or even to other parts of his or her cultural identity. These are normal tensions in the growth of a person's individual identities. The norm need not be defined as monolithic cultural affiliation or as monolithic racial identity. Most of such content is multiple, variable, and not monolithic. This point is also made strongly by Appiah when he explores the interaction of attributions by others and of self-identification in racial identity.

Chinese culture, on some views, includes multiple strands, many of which are contested and revisionist, incompatible, or frankly, may even negate and cancel each other out. (Traditional virtues of Confucian harmony based on hierarchy, e.g., wifely obedience, stand in opposition to twentieth century liberation anti-hierarchical ideas of equality, e.g., for women.) Perhaps what characterizes "typical" Chinese culture is a strong multiplicity of strands, standing in a dialectical relation to each other, sometimes esthetically or value-conflicting, and sometimes accompanied by internal political conflict.

This kind of internal multiplicity would not—could not—be true of most ordinary entities, e.g., a table, which for example, cannot have predicates such as blue and not-blue which negate and cancel each other out. The *T* is not both *B* and not-*B*, by the law of non-contradiction. At least not, at the same time, in the same place, and in the same respect. However, what we call "a culture" or "C-culture," may have contradictory predicates attached to it, which are strongly disputed, i.e., contested contradictory predicates. Moreover, even the way these features are contradictory, contrary, and contested can be distinctively culturally "C." My general point, in support of multiplicity within identity is that cultures do not have identity conditions in the way that ordinary "entities" do.

Part III: American Pacific Asian Identity

In a previous issue of this *Newsletter*, Tommy Lott raises intriguing questions on Asian American culture viewed in a pan-ethnic context. While affirming Lott's attempt to shift criteria for pan-ethnic American Pacific Asian identity off a biologicistic focus on race, or the simplistic assumption of a three-race categorical scheme, I think it is worth probing the relative weights, role, and complexities of so-called physical characteristics. First, take an example of physical characteristics in what Michael Hardimon calls the "ordinary concept of race."

¹⁸ Even if I participate in and support Asian culture and strongly identify with Asian American identity; nevertheless, (as a round-eyed, blue-eyed, blonde, with pinkish-pale skin), I will continue being racially categorized as white Caucasian when I am stopped by the police for my u-turn, when I fill out my census, voting registration and informed consent forms, or when I apply for a medical experimental trial (all of which have occurred in an ordinary week). The police, census takers, medical professionals, etc. will counteract any thought I have to call myself Asian American, which I recognize, of course, would be a political falsity (in one sense) anyway. Thus, these observations hold both for what Appiah calls attributions of racial identity by others and identification by self.

Second, these examples of racial categories in everyday life are (a) based on physical criteria, and (b) physical criteria as set up and interpreted by legally and governmentally sanctioned authorities, i.e., the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) which gives the census its categories and reaches into voting registration, medical and health care, etc. The Asian American Institute at my university will accept my membership and contributions, but major milestones of social practices in our racially regulated social lives will not accept me as Asian American. We need to recognize how pervasively physical or biological criteria are used in the everyday ordinary concept of race. Yet many theorists do not sufficiently emphasize how deeply these "physical" traits are tied to official government constructions.

Third, the reason an impulse to classify myself as Asian American is politically false, is that I am still socially treated as white, not Asian. Statistics based on OMB racial categories compile a track record of groups' social and economic progress or regress, hate crimes, discrimination, economic status, and so forth. Carrying white privileges, I do not face the prejudice, overt or subtle stigma, and racist taunts or threats my Beijing-born daughter faces on playing fields in white-dominated communities. Nor do I face the risks of racist violence that she and other Asians and Asian women have to fend off. I can take her to self-defense class and try to inform her of ways to handle racist threats, but my bodily experiences and relation to racism are far different. Given the racist element in bodily experiences of Asian-descent persons and African-descent persons in America, I am sure Lott would agree with these points. Maybe these observations simply concretize Lott's view, but the everyday versus the theoretical role of physical criteria in racial identity still needs to be refined.

Given how pervasive racial categories are in negotiating everyday life, the risks to Asian descent, African descent, or Latino/a persons are surely different and greater than the experiences of a person with white skin. It is worth stressing the point again: physical biological criteria are always culturally interpreted within a political-governmental scheme.

Next, I elaborate points in general agreement with Lott, then probe his assumptions to raise a new perspective on unifying factors in Asian-Pacific-American identity (hereafter "APA identity"). Lott as I understand him tries to push the central basis for pan-ethnic unity off a focus of monolithic physical or biological racial characteristics. He stresses the socially constructed meaning of physical or biological criteria of racial identity. ("I want to draw into question this reconstitution of the biological ground of racial identity." "...all racial categories, including the Asian-Pacific-American, are more sociological than biological, as is the case of black and white Americans.")¹⁹ In terms of my analysis, Lott rightly identifies a false singularity in the assumption that monolithic culture and physique is required for APA identity. For example, he analyzes intragroup antagonism in the comment to the editor by a Vietnamese descent person:

"I don't think "Asian" Indian Americans should be considered "Asian or Oriental."

Lott observes "the Vietnamese speaker is making the point that all APAs share a similar culture and physique that Asian Indians do not have." He tries to show why this is an oversimplified and false assumption. His method exemplifies what I call a "multiplicity within identity" thesis by recognizing "biologically diverse APA ethnic groups. Figians, Samoans and Filipinos, for example, often share common physical characteristics with African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans." Lott also cites an other-ascribed "monolith" assumption, the phenomenon of "Lumping" Asians by

outsiders. This also illustrates a false singularity of racial allied to cultural traits, (perhaps a form of “cultural geneticism”) a phenomenon which led to the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese man killed by a white autoworker hostile to Japanese for taking U.S. jobs.

Lott stresses the false singularity of biological criteria for racial or pan-ethnic identity, in a way that coheres with the multiplicity theses I advocate. He also makes the following comment:

In the case of Asian Americans, the relative absence of a monolithic cultural heritage, combined with substantial intra-group resistance to a social realignment that requires each ethnic group within the APA category to shun its mother culture in favor of a new Asian -Pacific-American identity, is an important destabilizing factor. (And this is also true for other emerging pan-ethnic identities as well.)²⁰

One aspect of this comment, however, gives me pause: it needs to be probed more critically from a perspective of multiplicity within identity. Why does Lott assume that a “monolithic cultural heritage” is required for pan-ethnic Pan-Asian unity? That each group needs to “shun” its mother culture? Does he (do we?) overestimate the extent to which a “single” or “whole” or “monolithic” heritage is necessary for pan-ethnic unity?

Consider another form of multiplicity in the extent to which pan-ethnic Pan-Asian cultural unity exhibits syncretism (criss-crossing combination of elements of different cultures, a phenomenon long studied by anthropologists). The unifying factors may be but newly formed accretions of cultural practices and attitudes with a unifying solidaristic dimension. (They are not necessarily political even if they have political implications.)

Continuing our twenty-first century youth-focused examples, young people of Asian background around the globe connect with each other via expressive and artistic media. They emulate one another in ways that innovate new combinations of cultural elements but still retain distinctively Asian style and tradition. Some U.S. youth identify with the highly innovative fashions and hair dyes of Japanese teens, as shown in the book *Fruits*.²¹ They promenade on the streets with, e.g., brightly colored or spiked hair, and e.g., Japanese adaptations of classic Chinese Cheongsam dress, cut-short, worn above twelve-inch platform shoes, or satirizing U.S. pink dotted gingham Barbie outfits worn with dyed platinum-blond hair. Another example carves Scottish tartans into piecemeal chunks and redistributes them in uniquely new ways, e.g., a Kimono sash in red Stuart plaid, (not unlike the outlandish styles of haute couture Parisian designer Christian LaCroix). A sizable number of American youth of Asian background know about these teens. Some dye their hair bright colors like pink or orange in explicit solidarity.

These practices can be interpreted as second-level commentaries on “classic” cultural traditions syncretizing specific Asian (Chinese, Japanese) elements and combining Western and Asian elements in novel ways. The young people have not “shunned” their “mother culture” but have reinterpreted it, and built a new Pan-Asian cultural baseline.

Many youth of Asian background also eagerly follow the latest developments in Japanese *Anime*, (a sophisticated form of film animation *Princess Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*). While culturally recognized as originating in Japan, Anime often carries a cultural identification generalized to an Asian culture on a global scale. Young people attend *Anime* conventions in the U.S., and buy the latest *Anime* CDs and *Manga* (a genre of Japanese graphic novel) in local Asian or Japanese bookstores,

groceries, and technology stores. In London, the Tate Modern Gallery shows *Anime* encyclopedias. *Manga* bookstores can be found near London’s British Museum, while Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts sells the *Fruits* book. The traditional line between “popular” and “high” culture dims in this global version of pan-ethnic Asian self-identification. Imitation of youth styles in other countries is a kind of self-affirming version of cross-national Asian pride. In summary, syncretism of cultures, a melding and blending in this Asian context, forms another example of multiplicity within identity, both on a group and individual level.

Conclusion

An assumption of much literature seems to be that cultures are monolithic, that persons are culturally and racially monolithic. Historically and empirically this assumption needs to be challenged more thoroughly in a way that penetrates into philosophical and theoretical analysis, since it carries a deeply misleading framework. There are many versions of multiplicity compatible with internally unified personal and group cultural identity as I have tried to stress. These are group-specific and are socially contextual. Empirical historical variation is philosophically significant. Misleading ontological assumptions of what a culture might be, or what “unity” might be, lead to much of our trouble. Linguistic and grammatical forms are sometimes the sources of falsely posed and counterposed issues. My youth-based examples feature the philosophical point that cultural identities are dynamic, fluid, constantly changing processes. Instead of looking at cultures backward in time, we need to look forward, for the “meaning” of cultural identity is created now into the future. Youthful explorations are a harbinger of what is to come, indicating that cultural identity is not a static present, but is constantly in process of being created. There are many ways to develop integrative strength. That integrative strength within a host of multiplicities can lead to strong, flourishing, politically empowered cultural and racial identities.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank the Spencer Foundation for supporting the research on which this paper is based. Thanks to my daughter, Julia Farrell Smith, for technical and research assistance, and especially for vivid dialogue on culture and identities. Thanks also to Zhang Xi for technical assistance. Author Affiliations: University of Massachusetts Boston, Department of Philosophy, and Public Policy Ph.D. Program; and Harvard University, Fellow, W.E.B. Dubois Institute.
2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. Edited by Anthony Appiah, Amy Gutmann, and David Wilkins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 90.
3. *Ibid.*, 90. Appiah also notes that Gates uses the notion to cover thinking in terms of cultural patrimony generally, not just race. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).
4. Appiah, *Color Conscious*, 90.
5. “Cultural inherentism” is related but distinct from biological inherentism in its racial form: “that certain traits of mind, character and temperament are inescapably part of a racial group’s “nature,” and hence define its racial fate.” See Lawrence Blum, *I Am Not a Racist...But: The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2002) 133-4.
6. A culture is not a thing” in the sense of a “reified” entity in her view. See Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4ff.

7. See William Shapley, "China Trades Its Way to Power," *New York Times* (19 July 04: 23)
8. See Paul Watanabe, "Mindful of the potential of statistics to perpetuate myths and misunderstandings about Asian Americans we are determined to paint as accurately as possible a portrait of the often ignored and misrepresented Asian Community in Metro Boston...Our primary focus...is on description rather than detailed analysis or even informed speculation." In Paul Watanabe, Michael Liu, Shauna Lo, "Asian Americans in Metro Boston: Growth, Diversity and Complexity," prepared for the Metro Boston Equity Initiative of the Harvard Civil Rights Project. Watanabe is Director of the Institute for Asian American Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston, which does research and community action on behalf of Asian Americans. The Institute was founded in the 1960s, the historical period when "Asian American" focus was formed.
9. Ronald Takaki, *In a Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston, MA: Little Brown), 414-417.
10. Takaki pays special attention to multiplicity in detailing position of women within, e.g., Chinese immigrant groups. Historically, certain U.S. government immigration policies have undermined and divided families of Asian immigrants. See Ronald Takaki, *In a Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, "Twice a Minority: Chinese Women in America" (Boston, MA: Little Brown: 209-215).
11. Takaki says, "The use of 'family incomes' has been very misleading, for Asian-American families have more persons working per family than white families. Thus the family incomes of Asian Americans indicate the presence of more workers in each family rather than higher individual incomes actually, in terms of personal incomes, Asian Americans have not reached equality." Takaki, *In a Different Mirror*, 415.
12. Among his "Varieties of Racial Ills" Blum includes "Recognizing Internal Diversity in Racial Groups" and "Appreciating Individuality." See Blum, *I Am Not a Racist...But: The Moral Quandary of Race*, 53-57. Blum defines the moral harms of stereotyping: "whether the content of the stereotyping is in some way flattering or (as is usually the case) primarily negative: stereotypes always involve false conceptions of groups, thus generating unwarranted and constricting expectations of individual members; stereotyping involves not seeing the internal diversity of a group." On stereotyping see Blum, 214, n4, and 132. I would observe: All stereotypes involve false conceptions of groups, but not all false conceptions of groups involve stereotypes.
13. For summaries of critiques of cross racial adoption, see my "Analyzing Ethical Conflict in the Transracial Adoption Debate: Three Conflicts Involving Community," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Volume 11, Number 2, May, 1996. Also, Janet Farrell Smith "Identity, Race, and Culture in Adoption: Ethical Values in the Power of Language," in *Adoptive Families in a Diverse Society*, edited by Katarina Wegar (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005). We may observe that open, published critiques of whites adopting Asian descent children are less prominent than such critiques of African descent children adopted by whites. What this means can be questioned. Some Asian nations have periodically shut down foreign adoptions. Also, perhaps some Asians disapprove just as strongly but are reluctant to express it openly, a situation not unfamiliar in my experience. Might those who constrain open or public disapproval of Asian outgroup adoption be motivated by a desire to save face for the unfortunate adoptee? After all, she or he is still a member of the cultural group, even if viewed at risk for cultural identity. My belief is that such views deserve social recognition, even if they cause some discomfort in some quarters.
14. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts* (New York, NY: Vintage International Edition, 1989), 76.
15. See the political and historical mission at [www.capay.org/21 July 2004]. Professor Peter Kiang, University of Massachusetts Boston, was a faculty sponsor for this new organization. In his speech to graduates of the Asian American Studies Program, 4 June 2004, Kiang noted the strong participation of Asian adoptees in the program and the Asian American political community.
16. These premises represent "a reductive sociology of culture" for Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), aff.
17. The term "series of accretions" to describe cultural process was used by a culture-bearer and cultural historian for the Lenape people in a recent documentary in PBS [July 14 2004]. For example, what was considered "old tradition" in the 1960's has changed in the past decades. The warrior dances revived in the 1960s are not necessarily the focus in present Lenape gatherings, since the social basis of culture has shifted from competitive tribal to more cooperative forms.
18. See Michael Hardimon, "The Ordinary Concept of Race," *Journal of Philosophy* v.C no.9 (September, 2003).
19. Tommy Lott, "The Role of the Body in Asian-Pacific American Panethnic Identity" *Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophy and Philosophies*, American Philosophical Association, v. 2, no.2 (Spring 2003): 38.
20. Ibid.
21. Shoichi Aoki, *Fruits* (London, UK and New York, NY: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002).