CHAPTER EIGHT

CLASS, RACE, FLOATING SIGNIFIER:
AMERICAN MEDIA IMAGINE THE CHINESE, 1870–1900

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Strangers within our midst are indeed the strangest of all—not because they are so alien, but because they are so close to us.

David Napier

In 1870, the idea of excluding the Chinese from the United States seemed an absurd proposition and an impossible undertaking. The majority of Americans viewed the small group of agitators who clamored for exclusion as disreputable, and patently wrong. Protest against Chinese immigration arose in the west coast states, yet the population of Chinese people was barely statistically significant: in fact, most Americans outside of California had never actually seen a Chinese person. In California, the state with the greatest Chinese immigrant population, the Chinese comprised only a scant 11 percent of the population. And New York state had only 200 Chinese people in total. Yet, despite this, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was voted into Federal law. For an anti-Chinese mindset to gain ascendancy in the eastern states, the image of Chinese people circulating through the east coast had to radically change. At stake is the question: “For what purposes did Americans image the Chinese?” and its counterpart: “How does one image gain authority?”

The Chinese Exclusion Act signaled a landmark change in American thought: it was the first American policy excluding people on the basis of race or national origin. Through the outcome of the exclusion debate,

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1 Napier, 1996: 147.
2 These questions dovetail with James Clifford’s (1988: 8) question: “Who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity or authenticity?”
3 The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first American policy excluding people from immigration on the basis of race. Other types of racial discrimination pre-dated this: African Americans and Amerindians were excluded from citizenship, but in the case of Amerindians, they couldn’t be excluded from immigration because they were already in the United States (although the reservation system, of course, was its own form of exclusion). Finally, Africans were forcibly brought to the United States against their will. Most of these were not direct policies formalized in the same manner as Chinese Exclusion.
at the time thought to concern Chinese people only, Congress also delineated and effected all subsequent definitions of who and what is “American.” The battle for defining Chineseness was, in essence, also a battle over American self-definition. However, the relation between Chinese and American was not the dichotomy of “self” and “other” (as if a fixed and clearly delineated opposition). The boundaries between identity and difference, “us” and “them,” are always transforming. More than merely depicting the American ideas of Chinese people, the Chinese image became a marker in American culture, and a way for other Americans to visualize themselves. Jan Pieterse reminds us that:

Images of otherness relate not merely to control over others but also to self-control. Thus, representations of others relate to power, not merely in the sense of imperial power but also of the disciplinary power exercised by the bourgeoisie within metropolitan society, or power as it permeates the ‘society of normalization’…

In the absence of direct encounters with Chinese people, the idea of “Chinese,” strong enough to mandate exclusion, was created largely by the images disseminated by media flowing through America. As emerging market capitalism overturned a worldview based on fixed values and eternal hierarchies, both politics and technology demanded the creation of new media, with the capability to circulate and to be readily replicable. Images of the Chinese, both verbal and visual, became more familiar than actual encounters with Chinese people. Through invention of characteristics labeled “Chinese,” and use of the Chinese as a floating signifier, Americans explored new boundaries in the process re-inventing themselves as they changed the nation. At the heart of this chapter is cultural coding. Nineteenth-century American society was unified and coded through media, which set ideas, both in text and in images, zigzagging across the culture.

In this chapter, I examine two innovative nineteenth century media: newspapers, particularly articles from the *New York Times* between 1870 and 1890, and advertising trade cards, created in printing centers in New

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4 Pieterse, 1995: 233. This view is reinforced by Richard Meyer’s (2001: 169) statement that: “these discourses … map social and sexual anxieties onto cultural and geographical differences.”

5 This is something Marx talks about often. Marx frequently praises the revolutionary and progressive aspects of capitalism—a system of brutal exploitation. The capitalists wish to increase profits. However, in establishing global market relations they inevitably overturn a worldview based on fixed values and eternal hierarchies. This is not their intent but an unavoidable consequence.