Remaking Ethnic Studies in the Age of Identities

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I love detective novels. One of my favorite sub-genres might be termed “ethnic cops.” Books about such police officers often follow a pattern that dominated Ethnic Studies when it became a formalized academic field in the 1960s and 1970s. In that arena “ethnicity” was often portrayed as an insider identity generated in largely closed minority communities whose members struggle in their interactions with society at large. Not surprisingly, the ethnic cop genre is usually one where the author and the main character share the same ethnicity. Chicano author Martin Limon’s major character is George Sueno, a Chicano military police officer working in Korea. Jewish-American Stuart Kaminsky’s hero is Jewish-American Chicago cop Abe Lieberman. Japanese-American Naomi Hirahara’s amateur sleuth is a seventy-year old Japanese-American gardener named Mas Arai.1 One of my favorites is Chinese-American author Henry Chang’s fictional hero Jack Yu, a Chinese-American cop assigned to New York’s Chinatown. Yu features in a recent novel called Death Money and one scene takes place in an illegal gambling den. As Yu enters the room, the narrator notes what the officer sees: “There were a few other Asians, he could not tell what kind . . . Cuban maybe?”2

Chang’s (or Yu’s) definition of “Cuban” as a kind of “Asian” reminds us that the essentialist discourses often found among subjects and scholars when discussing identities are neither uniform nor consistent. Situational ethnic flexibility, however, is not only found in the realm of fiction: The anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro tells of a mid-twentieth century cocktail party conversation between the painter Tomás Santa Rosa Junior (1909–56) and a young Afro-Brazilian, who complained about racial barriers in his ascent in the Brazilian diplomatic service: “I understand your case perfectly, my dear boy,” Santa Rosa is reported to have replied. “I was black once, too.”3 A second example involves

Chen Zhi Zhao, a 24-year-old labor migrant to Brazil, contracted by the Sport Club Corinthians Paulista for the 2013 futebol season. At a press conference in March 2012, where Chen was introduced by the Brazilian name “Zizão,” a pregnant Chinese woman named Luw Su Chen was sitting in the front row with her husband Lao Su Chen. They raised a large hand-written sign in Mandarin, proclaiming: “If you give me your team jersey and sign it, I will name my child after you.” At the end of the question and answer session, Luw Su Chen and her husband were invited on stage and given the jersey with a flourish.4

The story made news across Brazil and was portrayed as a microcosm of the country’s developing relationship with China. Some commentators viewed Chen Zhi Zhao and Luw Su Chen in a negative light, accusing the Chinese of imperialism and complaining that Chinese immigrants were changing Brazil’s population and bringing mainly crime and exploitation. Other observers presented the footballer and the pregnant woman as examples of hard-working immigrants who were influencing Brazil’s population for the better.

What interested me, however, happened two weeks after the event, when the hosts of the Bandeirantes television network talk show Agora é Tarde revealed that the entire episode was a set-up. The Chinese woman was not pregnant. She and her “husband” were in fact Nikkei (Japanese-Brazilian) actors Priscila Akemi and Ricardo Oshiro. When Akemi was invited to Agora é Tarde, the host greeted her by pulling back his eyes and making up words in a faux Chinese voice. Her laughing reply showed that even subjects who at times describe their ethnicities in essentialized ways, do not always do so: “A gente fala português porque somos japoneses” (We speak Portuguese because we are Japanese) explained the actress.

When scholars, especially those trained in North America, observe types of identity expressions like those of Santa Rosa and Akemi, they often judge them as non-normative compared to the apparently absolutist ethnic discourses that emerge from, for example, the leadership of ethnic institutions. But since World War II, large numbers of “ethnics” have constructed their identities outside of traditional “community” norms. A case in point is the recent Pew Research Center survey showing that almost 60 percent of recently married (between 2005 and 2013) Jews in the United States have partners who do not define themselves as Jewish, and that 69 percent of those who define them-

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