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American Exceptionalism and Multiculturalism: Myths and Realities

Deborah L. Madsen

American exceptionalism is a system of cultural belief predicated upon the idea that America is a nation distinct from all others, possessing a singular national identity and destiny. However, American multiculturalism assumes the cooperative existence of many, equally valued, cultural identities within the single nation state. Multiculturalism accepts and respects the right of all citizens to express and share their individual cultural heritage within an overriding commitment to the basic structures and values of American democracy. But how are the claims to national singularity to be reconciled with a commitment to diversity within the American cultural context? In this paper I first sketch out the issues and then consider how the concepts of exceptionalism and multiculturalism have been engaged in literary terms.

Chinese American Gish Jen is particularly interesting in this connection. Her recent novels such as *Mona in the Promised Land* and *Typical American* invoke in their very titles a relation between American exceptionalism and multiculturalism. Jen writes from the perspective of the so-called Asian American "model minority," and also presents a sophisticated approach to the complex issues of ethnicity and American national identity. I would like to consider the significance of her work in the latter part of this essay.

A very much simplified view of the relation between exceptionalism and ethnic and cultural identity, and one which expresses the timeliness of this debate, is presented in a kind of "e-sermon" published on the website of the "Racing with Jesus Ministries" (http://www.rwjm.com) shortly after the September 11 attacks. In the "Weekly Message" of October 25, 2001 the Rev. Patrick Evans argues,

> When it comes to unity, the United States people and the Bible are agreed. Only Diversity Philosophy disagrees. Greetings, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus! In this time of attack on the United States, news commentators have repeatedly spoken of the unity of the American people. The Bible teaches us that we are all one in the Body of Christ as believers in Him as Lord and Savior. The country is based on this principal (sic) and Christianity emphasizes it. Our differences are set aside to make ourselves one in purpose and one in allegiance, both in God and in country. Yet we have a current philosophy which says diversity is our strength. It totally opposes the Bible and the founding fathers of this country. . . . In the Bible and in the beginnings of this country, believers and citizens are urged to set aside ethnic and other differences. We are urged to set them aside to become one body of believers and one united people of this country. Our country was called a "melting pot" where people from all nations came to live their dream. They set aside their former allegiances in favor of becoming United States citizens. There were no hyphen-Americans; only Americans. There was an effort to collect the varied people into one; *e pluribus unum*. Diversity is not our strength. Emphasizing differences is a weakness which, if left unfettered, inevitably weakens the very roots of a country. Unity as American citizens is our strength; leaving differences behind. Diversity and anyone who promotes it, is what causes wars in Ireland, Chechnya, Afghanistan and anywhere we see internal strife within the borders of a country. (Evans)

As multiculturalism underlies the "diversity philosophy" that Evans attacks, so exceptionalism underlies his promotion of an American national identity that joins all Americans together: "one in purpose, one in allegiance."

This is not an isolated instance of exceptionalist rhetoric used to unite Americans in the wake of the terrorist attacks. President Bush described the attacks as a test, sent to try America's national character, and he vowed, "We shall not fail." In the President's terms, what came under assault on September 11 were American freedom and democracy. Freedom with democracy is above all the exceptional gift with which America is to save the rest of the world from itself. In an address to a joint session of Congress President Bush declared: "They hate what they see right here in this chamber. . . . Their leaders are self appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other" (*Guardian Saturday Review*). As Victor Seidler has observed of the President's response to the crisis,

> It was crucial for Bush to present the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon not as an attack on the symbols of United States global economic and military power but as an attack on freedom and democracy itself. These were the values that a mythic "America" represented for the global community so that within the terms of an Enlightenment rationalism America had come to symbolise the

> aspirations of a universal freedom. "America" had learnt to identify itself with the aspirations of freedom everywhere. In this way it had refigured freedom as the gift which a mythic "America" could bring to the world. (Seidler)

Indeed, the concept of freedom is configured as a transnational and transhistorical value when it informs the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and is represented as the motive for America's exceptional destiny. In this context, America is without ethnicity because mythic America represents all nations and all races. The America described by Rev. Evans is "one in God" and as it transcends history so it transcends race and ethnicity. What the Rev. Evans attacks as "diversity philosophy" is an understanding of ethnicity grounded in history which is then hostile to the transcendent understanding of nationhood implicit in the myth of American exceptionalism. His sermon concludes by quoting the poem "Totus In Uno," written by Mrs. Margaret B. Peeke in 1882.

> God gave to every land a charm
> To hold her sons from straying;
> A subtle power, to keep their hearts
> The home land from betraying.
>
> The Swiss he gave their mountains bold;
> The South her perfumed flowers
> And music like the songs of birds,
> To gladden all her hours;
> To France he gave the luscious vine;
> Set German thoughts a swinging
> Like ponderous bell of minster chime,
> Through after ages ringing;
> But to the land we call our own,
> He gave his richest treasure;
> Her freedom, boundless as the sea,
> Her wealth that knows no treasure.
> And all the charms of other lands,
> Their hills, and songs, and flowers,
> Make lonely hearts at home again,
> Within this land of ours.
>
> And God bless America,
> When other lands are falling,
> Because to Him, in every tongue
> Her children will be calling.
> From East and West, from North and South,
> All nations here are joining

Their varied gifts, and out of this
A higher life is coining.

All hail, America, the blessed!
All lands in one combining,
Whose star so bright, through future years,
Shall evermore be shining. (Peeke)

This poem is a classic expression of exceptionalist values: the blessed status of the American nation; the unity of America ("All lands in one combining"); the special destiny of America which will be achieved by combining the best of all nations into "a higher life" underpinned by the foundational value of freedom. Freedom is the chief value that unifies and distinguishes America as a nation and freedom is the value informing the national myth.

But this freedom is implicated in the practice of cultural diversity as well as acting as a national characteristic uniting the specific core ethnic population. John Hutchinson, in his 1994 essay "Ethnicity and Multiculturalism in Immigrant Societies," observes that "even in New World societies [he includes Australia and Canada with the US] with a relatively weak historical sense and without mythic claims to 'primordial' homelands, foundation myths are associated with a specific ethnic core population and with patterns of power and exclusion, and cannot easily be manipulated" (374-75). The American foundation myth of exceptionalism carries profound ethnic proscriptions for national identity. Hutchinson goes on to argue, "There is a gap between the official self-image of such multi-ethnic societies as egalitarian, and the existence of ethnically based status hierarchies" (375). For example, the year in which Mrs. Peeke's poem was written, 1882, has a special significance in ethnic terms in that it was also the year when Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act. With this and subsequent acts of legislation, Congress sought to prevent the establishment of a significant Chinese ethnic community in the US. Strategies employed included restrictions on the admittance of Chinese women to the US; until 1943, when the restrictions were relaxed, the wives of Chinese Americans were banned and only so-called "treaty merchants" traveling on temporary visas could bring their wives to the US. An American man who married a Chinese woman lost his citizenship; a Chinese man who married an American woman caused her to lose her citizenship. Thus America's exceptional national identity was – and is – based on a set of specific racial exclusions that are organized hierarchically within American culture. The "America" that is so separate from and superior to other nations is racially engineered.

This exclusionary characteristic of exceptionalism forms the basis of a powerful and relatively widespread critique of this national myth. Exceptionalism is particularly criticized for failing to represent accurately the ethnic diversity of the US. Further, exceptionalism is seen as an agent of historical misrepresentation, as an historical "grand narrative" that supports an exclusionary national identity, and as the value that renders invisible the contribution to American history of those who fall under marginal ethnic, racial, gender, and regional categories. Joyce Appleby, in her 1992 Presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, claimed that exceptionalism "created a national identity for the revolutionary generation and . . . that identity foreclosed other ways of interpreting the meaning of the United States. It is to that foreclosure two centuries ago that we should now look in order to diagnose our present discomfort with calls for a multicultural understanding of America" (25-6). In Appleby's view, exceptionalism represents the values and experiences, and expresses the desires and aspirations, of white propertied males. Specifically, Appleby argues, exceptionalism excludes Native Americans, African slaves and white women. However, this assessment overlooks the fact that in text after text, writers who assign themselves to these marginal groups use exceptionalism as a common rhetorical form with which to engage contemporary cultural issues and debates. From the colonial captivity narratives to slave narratives, popular literary forms expressed in the language of exceptionalism the subjective experiences as Americans of Native Americans, African slaves and white women. Exceptionalism offers a common language, by means of which minority individuals can address, and often critique, the American mainstream.

Exceptionalism, then, is not anathema to marginal identities as is often claimed, but can it represent anything more than the desire of marginal individuals to join the cultural mainstream? But if we understand exceptionalism as a tool of cultural exclusion, can it ever work with multiculturalism, which is a tool of cultural inclusion? We would do well to begin by scrutinizing the assumption that multiculturalism is of necessity inclusive. Jody Pennington, writing from a judicial perspective about the relation between exceptionalism and multiculturalism, argues that multiculturalism never has been about diversity as such but is about certain kinds of diversity. "It is difficult to see why groups demarcated along the lines of ethnic or racial self-identification are more important or crucial to American history than groups demarcated by religious, political, or other attitudes, values, and beliefs. To borrow the argot of post-structuralists, why should one demarcation be privileged above another?" (269). Multiculturalism is about preserving ethnic diversity in the

face of assimilation, rather than protecting political or regional or religious cultures. A reason why the "culture" in multiculturalism is ethnic culture may be found in American exceptionalism and the definition of America it propounds. As I noted above, exceptionalism assumes that the diversity of American experiences is unified in a common commitment to the values of freedom and democracy. In these terms, political, regional and religious differences are subsumed within the transcendent "America" described by exceptionalism. Race or ethnicity, however, is not so easily transcended. The diversity of ethnic cultures is not so easily reconfigured as an expression of American freedom. Ethnic diversity resists rather than embraces exceptionalism's emphasis upon values that unify the American nation. Indeed, the ethnicity of American exceptionalism is white and European; though minority or "hyphenated" Americans may speak the language of exceptionalism, this is motivated by the desire to expose, in the language of the mainstream, the extent to which the nation has failed to realize its exceptional promise.

American exceptionalism is, then, a contradictory phenomenon. As a discourse it articulates the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the national destiny it describes; as a historical narrative it represents an attempt to transcend a history that is grounded in very specific historical acts. So one must ask the question: if exceptionalism and the teleology it presents are so fragile, if it is vulnerable to the challenge of racial difference, why then is exceptionalism so long-lived? Why since the Puritan mission into the wilderness have Americans been explaining themselves and their national destiny in exceptionalist terms, as "God's police" or the defenders of freedom or the guardians of democracy?

I propose that exceptionalism satisfies deep cultural desires that are as real as exceptionalism itself is mythic. The racial difference represented by multiculturalism expresses a powerful challenge to the comforting certainties of the exceptionalist myth, and so is a source of anxiety – paradoxically – that only exceptionalist rhetoric can assuage. Let me explain. The national absolute that is "America" exists as a transcendent subject that is both outside the discursive structure of exceptionalism (in the realm of philosophical absolutes) and also is represented within the limits of exceptionalist rhetoric (in actual cultural texts). The individual American subject defined in exceptionalist terms, then, is caught between conflicting identifications with the rhetorical and the transcendent. The individual is both an American living a day-to-day life in America and is also both agent and participant in the exceptionalist drama of American national destiny. To take up the case of Gish Jen's fiction: for Ralph Chang, the patriarch of Jen's fictional immigrant

family, the conflict between his aspiration to live the American Dream, on the one hand, and his inability to manage his own affairs, on the other, is experienced as a profound sense of alienation. His conflicting identifications are experienced simultaneously as personal and national alienations: alienations from the self that identifies with the national absolute (the American Dream) and the self that cannot.

The fractured and hybrid subjectivity that is the multicultural American self seeks a unified identity in the mythical timeless and transcendent America promised by exceptionalist teleology. All Americans share this condition of alienation that can be mediated only by exceptionalism. That is, exceptionalism offers a mythic or symbolic language with which to present America – the Nation – as a transcendent subject, though this takes the form of a process that is endlessly subjected to the contingencies of history, and not least of ethnic or multicultural history. The desire for assimilation is pursued and frustrated in just this way. The desire to transcend ethnicity and conform to an absolute definition of "American" is frustrated by the very experience of ethnicity that produces the desire.

As the title of Gish Jen's first novel, *Typical American*, indicates, her subject here is the assimilation Ralph and Helen Chang pursue as they seek to become American. It is significant that, unlike such writers as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, or Fae Myenne Ng, Jen does not use Chinatown as the setting of her fiction. Indeed the sequel to *Typical American – Mona in the Promised Land* – opens with the Changs' move to suburban Scarshill. From the outset, this suburban space is given a racial character as an affluent Jewish suburb. But the Changs believe that they belong there, as the narrator observes, "For they're the New Jews, after all, a model minority and Great American Success. They know they belong in the promised land" (3).

Much of the comedy of the ensuing narrative arises from the fact that they both belong and yet do not belong. As "Orientals" in a Jewish community, the Changs enjoy a novelty value, which the narrator likens to being "permanent exchange students" (6). And Mona makes much of her special access to such Oriental mysteries as how to get pregnant with tea or how to eat live monkey brains. When a Japanese boy temporarily joins Mona's class, she is selected to escort him around and ensure he learns what to do. But Sherman Matsumoto threatens to blow her cover and she hopes that he will not reveal that her facility with the Chinese language is restricted to the words for "soya sauce rice gruel [sic]" (10). In fact, Sherman awakens Mona's ethnic consciousness by asking questions she has never thought of before. Take the following exchange, for instance:

> [Sherman asks] Does she like it here? "Of course I like it here, I was born here," Mona says. Is Mona Jewish? "Jewish!" She laughs. "Oy!" Is she American? "Sure I'm American," Mona says. "Everybody who's born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before. You could become American." But he says no, he could never. "Sure you could," Mona says. "You only have to learn some rules and speeches."
>
> "But I Japanese."
>
> "You could become American anyway," Mona says. "Like I *could* become Jewish, if I wanted to. I'd just have to switch, that's all." (14)

This notion of "switching" becomes a major theme of the narrative, as Jen proposes an ethnic identity that is without essence, an American identity based on contingent multiculturalism. Within the Chang family, the parents seek to assimilate; Helen confesses to her daughters that China is such a distant memory to her now that she has trouble remembering the details of life there – though she uses her recollections to assert authority over her daughters. So when her eldest daughter Callie suddenly announces that they should no longer have a Christmas tree because Christmas trees are not Chinese, Helen responds by claiming not only to have had Christmas trees but, living in Shanghai, to have had access to everything she wanted – including bagels for breakfast. Unlike Mona who wants to become Jewish, Callie wants to recapture some of the authentic "Chineseness" which her parents never experienced. From her new college room-mate, Naomi, who is herself seeking an authentic African American identity, Callie learns to accuse her parents of colluding with the Western imperialists who introduced them to such things as Christmas trees. The irony of the situation is that Callie falsely essentializes her Chinese identity by adhering to the Orientalist values of the very imperialists she attacks. It is her mother, who wants above all to "fit in" as an American, who has an appreciation of historical contingency. Helen shocks her daughter by remarking that they didn't mind when missionaries tried to convert them to Christianity: "'Oh, well, we are still Buddhist after we are baptized,' explains Helen. 'We are Buddhist, and Taoist, and Catholic. We do however we want'" (42). However, when it comes to Mona's conversion to Judaism, Helen's sense of cultural relativism evaporates. She explains that she has raised her children to be Westernized, not even to speak Chinese, so they may become truly American – not Jewish. But here is the crux of their problem: as Mona points out, to be American is to be whatever one chooses to be. "'Jewish is American,' Mona says. 'American means being whatever you want, and I happen to pick being Jewish'" (49). It emerges that Mona is not alone in her ethnic "switching": her friend Eloise Ingle switches between

being Jewish and WASP; Mona knows some Jewish boys who want to be black and adopt what they can of African American culture; and her eventual husband Seth Mandel goes through a phase where he lives in a teepee in his mother's backyard. If there is a "bottom line" to the ethnic relativism represented in the narrative, it is experienced by African Americans who cannot "switch" in the way Mona and her Jewish friends do. Alfred, the cook in Ralph's pancake restaurant, reminds them emphatically of his situation: "'[N]obody is calling us Wasp [sic], man, and nobody is forgetting we're a minority, and if we don't mind our manners, we're like as not to end up doing time in a concrete hotel. We're black, see. We're *Negroes*'" (137).

The sense of disjunction between a transcendent American nationhood and a particular American ethnic identity is strongest for the generation of American-born children, the contemporaries of Mona and Callie, who define themselves as "American" but experience their lives in ethnic terms as Chinese or Chinese American, or Jewish or black. These ethnic designations, however, are experienced as cultural artifacts, in terms of what one wears, what one eats, how one speaks, or the manners one adopts in relation to other ethnic groups. In the debate between nature and nurture as the primary determinant of individual identity, nurture takes precedence. Jen represents ethnicity as being without "essence"; rather, ethnicity is a historicized consequence of patterns of commodification and consumption. The freedom to commodify and to consume ethnic identity is repeated throughout the narrative as the essence of what it means to be American. As Amy Tan has remarked of the novel, "Gish Jen bravely skewers what we think we mean by assimilation, cultural diversity and the uniquely American right to forge a new identity and then patent it" (Tan).

The exceptionalist commitment to freedom and democracy, as the commitment that sets America apart from all other nations and underlies America's special responsibility to save other nations from themselves, ironically has eroded the sense of America as a singular cultural identity. As a consequence, in Gish Jen's narrative, definitions of "America" are unresolved. What remains, however, is the desire to belong and to know where one belongs. Confronted with an exhibition of Chinese portraiture where the clothes worn by the figures are the most significant elements of the composition, Mona reflects that "she understood what mattered most to the people in the pictures as if it still mattered most to her: not that the world would know them for themselves – they would never dare to dream of any such thing – but only that they might know that they belonged, and where" (123). So Mona's parents resent and resist their categorization as "immigrants" or as

members of a "minority." When Mona explains her ethnic background to a teacher, she calls herself "Chinese American" and her parents "immigrants," but the narrator comments, "She knows as she says this, naturally, that her parents would never use that word on themselves. They think it means people who try to bring live chickens on buses and don't own real suitcases" (27). While her parents are certain of where they belong, Mona comes to define herself in negatives. She knows "what it's like to be not Wasp [sic], and not black, and not as Jewish as Jewish can be; and not from Chinatown, either" (231).

It is perhaps the need to belong that is satisfied by the mythology of American exceptionalism. One does have to ask why it is that if exceptionalism is racially exclusive, still the concept of "Americanness" that it articulates appeals to marginal individuals. The American identity described by exceptionalism is based not on linguistic or racial or even geographical borders but by a commitment to the values with which America is identified – and paramount among these are freedom and democracy. Exceptionalism allows marginal individuals to define themselves as American in so far as they claim a personal commitment to freedom and democracy commensurate with America's "exceptional" commitment to these values. In these terms, the supreme irony of Gish Jen's novel arises when Ralph and Helen Chang, who have tried so hard to assimilate and to raise their children as American – by *not* teaching them Chinese, by *not* living in Chinatown – betray their failure to assimilate by falling foul of racial discrimination legislation. Ralph will not promote Alfred the black cook, not because Alfred is black but because Alfred is not Chinese. Ralph retains a feudal understanding of relations with his employees, which his daughters find embarrassing but which Alfred finds constitute grounds for legal action when he learns of it from Mona. It is the failure to commit themselves to the basic structures and values of American democracy that reveals the extent to which Ralph and Helen remain Chinese. Exceptionalism permits individuals like the Changs to retain everything of their Chinese cultural inheritance that is not in conflict with the values of American democracy. So Mona can become Jewish and still be American; Callie can strive to become "authentically" Chinese and still be American. So long as they pursue these ethnic identities within the constraints imposed by American democratic values, multiculturalism is not in contradiction with American exceptionalism.

The most powerful myth surrounding exceptionalism and multiculturalism is the myth that the two are mutually incompatible. I began by referring to the current debate in this area, provoked by the events of September 11.

Let me conclude by quoting from Mayor Giuliani's address, "One Miracle of September 11th" delivered at Yankee Stadium on September 23, 2001:

> We unite under the banner of E Pluribus Unum. We find strength in our diversity. We're a city where people look different, talk different, think different. But we're a City at one with all of the people at the World Trade Center, and with all of America. We love our diversity, and we love our freedom.
>
> Like our founding fathers who fought and died for freedom . . . like our ancestors who fought and died to preserve our union and to end the sin of slavery . . . like our fathers and grandfathers who fought and died to liberate the world from Nazism, and Fascism, and Communism . . . the cluster of arrows to defend our freedom, and the olive branch of peace have now been handed to us.
>
> We will hold them firmly in our hands, honor their memory, and lift them up toward heaven to light the world. (Giuliani)

The challenge for us as Americanists is to ask why this mythical opposition between multiculturalism and American exceptionalism is so powerful. Who benefits from this particular myth amid the changing conditions of historical reality?

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