Comparing Minorities' Ethnic Options: Do Asian Americans Possess ‘More’ Ethnic Options than African Americans?
Miri Song
*Ethnicities* 2001; 1: 57
DOI: 10.1177/146879680100100110

The online version of this article can be found at: http://etn.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/1/1/57
Comparing minorities’ ethnic options

Do Asian Americans possess ‘more’ ethnic options than African Americans?

MIRI SONG
University of Kent

ABSTRACT What does it mean for ethnic minority groups to possess ‘ethnic options’? Do ethnic minority groups differ in their abilities to choose and assert their ethnic identities, and can some groups be said to possess more ethnic options than others? It has been recently suggested by certain analysts that while Asian Americans can exercise some ethnic options, African Americans possess few, if any, ethnic options. This article critically assesses this view, and puts forward various reasons why such a view is problematic. In particular, it argues for the need to rethink and broaden the conceptualization of ethnicity and the need to re-examine our understandings of the images and labels applied to various ethnic minority groups. Although the article draws primarily upon studies of Asian Americans and African Americans, it also refers to the experiences of ethnic minority groups in Britain with whom Asian minority groups share both commonalities and differences.

KEYWORDS Asian American ● African American ● ethnic identity ● ethnic minority group ● ethnic option ● race

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, various analysts have argued that racialized minority groups experience ‘racial assignment’ (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998). That is, in most white majority societies, minority groups have tended to be arbitrarily placed into racial categories, vis-a-vis the dominant white group. The power to mark and classify certain groups is a significant exercise of symbolic power (Hall, 1997). For instance, racial assignment by the dominant group involves a form of ‘othering’, which objectifies and essentializes subordinate groups in relation to a limited set of characteristics (Bhabha, 1990).
The state plays a crucial role in the process of ethnic labelling and the construction of new ethnicities (Nagel, 1994; Omi and Winant, 1994; Spickard, 1989). For instance, the pan-ethnic term ‘Hispanic’ was adopted by the US Census in 1980 in the course of enumerating the Latin American population in the USA, bringing together Cubans, Puerto-Ricans, Mexicans, Colombians and Chileans from very different backgrounds (Portes and McLeod, 1996: 524; see also Dominguez, 1998 for a fascinating discussion of Hawaii’s changing racial classifications in the US Census, after Hawaii was annexed by the USA). Official labelling and categorization is important in not only the politicized recognition of particular groups as ethnic groups, but such categories are often internalized by groups themselves, even if there is some opposition to such labelling, which can take the form of a racially stigmatizing label or an imposed pan-ethnic label.

Given the fact that minority groups suffer forms of racial assignment, some analysts have argued that racialized minorities in multiethnic societies such as the USA are much more limited in their ability to assert their desired ethnic identities, in comparison with white Americans (Alba, 1990; Lieberson, 1988; Waters, 1990). According to these scholars, the adoption of ethnic identities by white Americans of European descent, such as Irish Americans or Italian Americans, is optional because they are able to invoke their ethnicity when, and in the ways, they wish. For instance, in many aspects of their everyday lives, Irish Americans may not actively invoke or be reminded of their Irish heritage; yet they may celebrate St Patrick’s Day or assert their Irishness in ways that they wish. Alba (1988), who has characterized Italian American ethnicity as being in the ‘twilight’ of ethnicity, and Zenner (1988), who has argued that Jewishness is largely a matter of individual ‘preference’, have made similar arguments about the directions of white American ethnicity. In other words, white Americans’ ethnicity is purely symbolic (Gans, 1979), and its celebration is without real social costs. That is, ethnicity is not something that influences these groups’ lives unless they want it to.

Mary Waters (1990) has argued that, in contrast with many white Americans, racialized minorities cannot exercise ethnic options in the same way as white ethnics, because for racialized minorities, ethnicity is not a freely exercised option, given their distinctive physical attributes. For racialized minorities such as African Americans, their identities, and their lives more generally, are fundamentally shaped by their ‘race’ and their national origins. While white Americans of European descent can be said to celebrate ‘individualistic symbolic ethnic identities’, racialized groups are faced with a ‘socially enforced and imposed racial identity’ (Waters, 1996: 449). Furthermore, while racialized groups must constantly contend with stereotypes of themselves, white people tend to be represented in white culture as being complex, changing and infinitely varied individuals (Dyer, 1997).
In this way, ‘all ethnicities are not equal, all are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary’ (Waters, 1990: 160).

Nevertheless, rather than simply being the products of racial assignment, minority groups’ images and identities form in interaction between assignment, which is imposed by others, and assertion, which is a claim to ethnicity made by groups themselves (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Espiritu, 1992; Nagel, 1994; Waters, 1990). Racialized minorities can and do play key roles in resisting unwanted meanings and images associated with them (Alexander, 1996; Fernandez-Kelly and Schauffler, 1994; Hall, 1997; Kibria, 2000; Solomos and Back, 1996). They actively participate in efforts to counter and re-shape the meanings and images associated with their ethnic identities. In fact, some recent scholarship on ethnic identity has highlighted the notion of ‘choice’ and of choosing ethnic identity (see Hollinger, 1995; Leonard, 1992), even though such choices are circumscribed and structured in significant ways (Nagel, 1994).

Thus the notion of being able to ‘choose’ one’s ethnic identity is a useful tool for examining the ways in which minority groups negotiate and participate in these processes. Most people can grasp the notion of individuals making choices about their ethnic identities, based upon an array of factors which structure their choices, such as their ethnicity, their class, their gender and their nationality. To discuss individual ethnic options without reference to group options, however, would make no sense whatsoever (given how important group membership is in structuring or limiting individual options). The notion of minority group options is theoretically very complicated because while groups are, at one level, comprised of individual members’ ethnic options, as an aggregate concept, group options cannot adequately be understood as simply the sum of individual members’ options.

What does it mean for an ethnic minority group to possess ethnic options, and from what are these options derived? In what ways are groups’ ethnic options similar to one another or different from one another? Many factors are likely to shape a group’s ethnic options. For instance, Nagel (1994), among others, has argued that various ethnic categories are characterized by differing degrees of stigma or advantage attached to them. If groups can be said to possess ethnic options, how can we then compare the nature of their ethnic options and their ability to exercise these options?

**DIFFERENTIAL ETHNIC OPTIONS?**

These questions arise because of a growing body of research, particularly in the USA, in which such comparisons among ethnic minority groups are being made. In particular, the ethnic options of Asian Americans and
African Americans have recently received attention by various scholars. In her study of second-generation Chinese Americans' and Korean Americans' ethnic identities, Nazli Kibria (2000) implies that Asian Americans may possess more ethnic options (though this is not the terminology used) than African Americans. Two types of arguments have been made by her and other analysts to suggest this. First, in comparison with African Americans, who are said to possess little or no ethnic options to speak of, Kibria argues that Asian Americans have recourse to ethnic and national backgrounds, for instance as Korean, Chinese, Japanese or Vietnamese people. Kibria notes that, 'As an immigrant group, Asian Americans have not experienced the forced obliteration of ethnic differences that has been part of the historical experience of African Americans' (2000: 93). Unlike African Americans (whose ethnic ties with Africa were wrested from them), Asian Americans are regarded as 'authentic ethnics' by the wider society (Kibria, 2000). For instance, they are expected by the wider society to maintain distinctive cultural practices (including speaking an Asian language) and to be knowledgeable about various aspects of East Asia. This expectation applies even to third- or fourth-generation Asian Americans, who are often believed to be newly arrived immigrants (Tuan, 1998).

Although both African Americans and Asian Americans suffer imposed forms of racialization by the wider society, in certain situations, Kibria argues that Asian Americans are able to counter racialization as Asians by claiming a particular ethnic heritage. For instance, Kibria (2000: 84–5) relates how one Chinese American woman, Meg, who was working as a youth counsellor in a predominantly African-American neighbourhood, made a point of saying that she was of Chinese, not Korean heritage. She made this distinction because she was concerned about being mistaken for being Korean, and thus incurring hostility from African Americans, in light of the various tensions and conflicts reported between Korean-Amercan shop owners and African American customers in cities such as New York and Los Angeles (see Belman and Lie, 1995; Min, 1996). Thus Kibria argues that Meg, in this instance, was able to transcend racialization as simply Asian and to assert her Chinese ethnicity in a way that bettered her relationship with African-American youths.

Kibria's work (1997, 1998) on Asian Americans' ethnic identities has been important and insightful in highlighting the often contradictory and multiple pressures they face in the framing and assertion of their ethnic identities. On the whole, I do not disagree with her valuable analysis of African Americans' ethnic options. However, Kibria's (2000) more recent work is premised upon a seemingly innocuous notion – that African Americans possess few or no ethnic options. Although her discussion primarily centres upon Asian Americans, I am interested here in probing the suggestion that Asian Americans possess more latitude and choice than do African Americans in the assertion of their desired ethnic identities.
By pointing to the ways in which recourse to ethnic ancestry can be a resource, Kibria is not suggesting that Asian Americans can then unproblematically and easily assert the ethnic identities of their choosing. There is important documentation of the ‘ethnic bind’ that Asian Americans encounter: while they wish to establish themselves as bona fide Americans, they are also expected by the wider society to be authentically ethnic. Nevertheless, there is a clear contrast with African Americans, who are characterized as being unable to claim a specific ethnic ancestry; in this way, African Americans, it is suggested, cannot capitalize on their ethnic backgrounds in the way that, in some situations, Asian Americans are able to do.

Other analysts have also implied that African Americans possess little or no ethnic options, albeit in different ways, by pointing to this group’s racialization as black people. Though she does not explicitly compare African Americans with Asian Americans, Joanne Nagel (1994) makes a similar point to that made by Kibria:

And while blacks may make intra-racial distinctions based on ancestry or skin tone, the power of race as a socially defining status in U.S. society make these internal differences rather unimportant in interracial settings in comparison to the fundamental black/white color boundary. (p. 156)

Mary Waters (1996) and Mia Tuan (1998) also highlight the case of African Americans as the paradigmatic example of racial assignment in which they possess little or no ethnic options. Although Tuan does not suggest that Asian Americans possess a wider range of ethnic options than African Americans, she notes: ‘Since ethnicity has long since faded as a salient marker for blacks, the issue of ethnic options is irrelevant’ (1998: 6–7). Tuan suggests that African Americans effectively have no ethnic options to speak of because their racial status is paramount in the eyes of mainstream American society, and the attribution of their ‘race’ effectively trumps black peoples’ ethnic status. Unlike African Americans, for whom their racial identity is allegedly key, and for whom ‘the issue of ethnic options is irrelevant’ (p. 7), Asian Americans are attributed both racial and ethnic qualities. Asian Americans are regarded as a distinct racial group, but they are also seen as possessing a distinctive ethnicity as well. This is evidenced by the fact that some Asian Americans, particularly immigrants, retain distinct ethnic practices, for instance in terms of language, food, or forms of socializing. Recent research also suggests that young Asian-American professionals can retain various forms of ethnic attachment despite a high level of social assimilation into a predominantly white world of employment and friendships (see Min and Kim, 2000).

But is it in fact the case that ethnic options are ‘irrelevant’ for African Americans? If one accepts that ethnic options are indeed ‘irrelevant’ for African Americans, one would reasonably conclude that they have few or no ethnic options to speak of. Unlike Kibria,
whose argument suggests that Asian Americans have recourse to ethnic identities and heritages not available to African Americans, Tuan’s argument is based on the contention that ‘race’ simply overcomes African-Americans’ ethnic options.

The second reason advanced for the greater ethnic options of Asian Americans is that certain assumptions about Asian ethnic options are derived from the fact that they occupy a relatively privileged socioeconomic status in the USA. In the USA, there is a fairly widespread consensus that, broadly speaking, white people are at the top of the racial hierarchy, African-Americans at the bottom, and Asian Americans, who are regarded as a ‘model minority’, somewhere in between the two groups (Bashi and McDaniel, 1997; Feagin, 2000; Kibria, 1998). Many comparisons have been put forward concerning the differential positionings of Asian Americans, such as those of Korean, Japanese and Chinese heritage, who are widely perceived to be successful, and of African Americans, many of whom are seen as mired in poverty and welfare dependency (see, for example, Sowell, 1981) – although as Duneier (1992) has observed, employed working-class African Americans tend to be overlooked, not to mention middle-class African Americans.

Asian Americans have been regarded, in some circles, as ‘honorary whites’ (a view refuted by Mia Tuan, 1998), whose trajectory is said to be similar to that of white European immigrants, as recently suggested by Hacker (1997). One reason for this is that Asian Americans, on average, possess a higher annual family income than whites and certainly higher incomes than African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.3 Generally speaking, Asian Americans experience lower rates of residential segregation than African Americans (Massey and Denton, 1993), and many second-generation Asian Americans have been successful in entering into higher education and into professional occupations. Furthermore, Asian Americans are said to benefit from their positive image as a ‘model minority’ who exhibit a strong work ethic and strong family values. This overall (but quite generalized) picture of success has fostered the notion that Asian Americans may be situated somewhere in between the privileged, dominant position of whites and the disadvantaged position of many, though not all, black people.4

Nazli Kibria (2000) has recently argued that Asian Americans’ social mobility (according to various socioeconomic indicators) affords them ‘some latitude in how to organize and express their ethnic identity’ (p. 80). This important point is not elaborated. While this appears to be a sensible argument, it is by no means obvious or widely understood. It is not clear just how Asian Americans’ social mobility enhances their overall ethnic options – when we consider the limitations surrounding the assertion of their ethnic options.

In many American studies, it is sometimes explicit (see Feagin, 2000;
Snipp, 1997: 677) but more often implicit that African Americans have suffered some of the most pernicious forms of racial discrimination (see Duneier, 1992; Gold and Phillips, 1996; Small, 1994; Waters, 1996), in relation to other groups – whether it be in the realm of racial violence, employment, university life, or getting served in a restaurant. Such a view stems from the fact that, unlike most other groups, African Americans have suffered slavery and its long aftermath, including Jim Crow laws (Woodward, 1966). The African-American experience is distinct from the kinds of racial oppression suffered by other groups. Various analysts have argued that forms of ‘racial apartheid’ apply in the organization of American society (see Hacker, 1992). For instance, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) have argued that:

... black segregation is not comparable to the limited and transient segregation experienced by other racial and ethnic groups, now or in the past. No group in the history of the United States has ever experienced the sustained high level of residential segregation that has been imposed on blacks in large American cities for the past fifty years. (p. 2)

It is not my intention here to dispute the distinctiveness or severity of racial discrimination experienced by African Americans in the past or present. However, the logic of claims about the relatively privileged position of Asian Americans in socioeconomic terms would seem to suggest that African Americans are able to exercise ethnic options of their choosing more easily than their African-American counterparts. But is this actually the case?

Though the nature of these various authors’ arguments differ, they tend to imply one common conclusion: that African Americans possess fewer ethnic options than do Asian Americans. In the remainder of this article, I put forward five reasons why such a conclusion is problematic and at the very least, inconclusive. In doing so, I draw occasionally on studies of ethnic minority groups in Britain to illustrate my points. To begin with, I address the issue of what ethnic options actually mean for ethnic minority groups, since there is no clear definition of this term. My second and third sections critically assess the two kinds of arguments discussed above. I then go on, in my fourth and fifth sections, to discuss two additional reasons why the comparison made about Asian Americans’ and African Americans’ ethnic options needs rethinking.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES TO HAVE ETHNIC OPTIONS?

One immediate difficulty in assertions that Asian Americans may possess ‘more’ ethnic options than African Americans is that there has been very little elaboration of what ethnic options actually are. No one has properly
addressed what it actually means for ethnic minorities to possess ethnic options. Remember that Mary Waters's analysis centres on white Americans' possession of ethnic options, by virtue of their privilege and economic power as white people. So such theorizing on minorities' ethnic options is mostly uncharted territory.

Ethnic options are presumably constituted by the nature and range of choices available to a group. In other words, in the abstract, since ethnic minority groups differ according to many variables, it would seem reasonable to think that some groups may have a wider range of choices about their ethnic identities than others. It may also be reasonable to think that ethnic options are shaped by the kinds of ethnic labels and stereotypes associated with particular groups. Furthermore, to possess ethnic options in any real sense must mean that groups are actually able to assert at least some images and identities they desire, in a variety of social contexts and especially in public spaces. In other words, the ethnic identities asserted by groups need to be recognized and validated by the wider society; otherwise, the term 'ethnic options' – which connotes choice(s) – holds no real weight or significance.

Thus a comparison of the ethnic options of various groups is certainly a legitimate and worthwhile subject of study. However, such comparisons, as in Kibria's work, are only hinted at, rather than explicitly addressed. Moreover, analysts have come to no consensus about how we may actually compare groups' ethnic options. On what basis should comparisons be made between groups? Discussion concerning minority groups' ethnic options is still marked by a high degree of generality as illustrated in the previous discussion.5

I would argue that the suggestion itself that some ethnic minorities may be said to possess 'more' ethnic options than others is a misguided one, and one which does not facilitate a full or subtle understanding of ethnic options. I question the received notion that Asian Americans necessarily possess a wider array of ethnic options than African Americans. The very terms in which the comparison is set is problematic. To try to measure or quantify the possession of ethnic options in a clearcut way (via the wrong-headed language or concept of 'more' or 'less') is not possible. I suspect that this is one reason (in addition to the political sensitivities surrounding the issue) why some analysts such as Kibria imply the comparison without actually using the language of 'more' or 'less'. Given both the existing (and limited) theoretical knowledge and consensus about what it means, in practice, to possess ethnic options in the first place, and the many, multiple dimensions which underlie the assertion of ethnic identity, I don't think it's possible, with any exactitude, to make claims about one minority group having 'more' or 'less' options than another group. Specific measures of particular ways of having options (though there is no recognition of or consensus on what these are) would yield different measures and results.
The language of ‘more’ and ‘less’ ethnic options, by comparison, can be applied, and does make sense, in the comparison between white Americans and ethnic minority Americans because the differences between whites and non-whites, generally speaking, are still so stark (see Waters, 1990). In the case of Asian Americans and African Americans, such a comparison would necessarily be tentative, as opposed to conclusive, about the ‘results’ of comparing the two groups – not because of theoretical fence-sitting or sophistry, but because of the difficulty and vastness of both the theoretical and empirical questions involved. Now I turn to the first of the two kinds of arguments made by Kibria discussed above.

THE EFFICACY OF ASSERTING ETHNONATIONAL DISTINCTIONS

Kibria (2000) has asserted that Asian Americans have recourse to specific ethnonational distinctions, which enhances the kinds of choices they have in asserting their desired ethnic identities. The efficacy of asserting a desired ethnic identity is an important element, it would seem, of a group’s so-called ethnic options. However, I would question the efficacy of Asian Americans’ claims to a specific ethnonational background (though, as with other groups, they can be active in asserting their desired identities in a variety of ways). There are many situations and contexts in American and British society in which recourse to specific ethnic backgrounds is either ignored or ineffective, as noted by Kibria herself. In Britain, for example, being Pakistani, as opposed to Indian (or being Sikh, as opposed to Muslim), simply does not register in many situations in the wider society, particularly in light of widespread ‘Islamaphobia’ (Modood, 1996). In relation to Asian Americans, possibly the most well-known example of this concerns the killing of Vincent Chin (a Chinese engineer killed by disgruntled white unemployed automobile workers who assumed he was Japanese – and thus to blame for the decline of the American auto industry). His murder reminded many Asian Americans of their vulnerability to being racialized as generically ‘Asian’. The homogenizing racialization of disparate ethnic identities and labels renders them largely synonymous and interchangeable. While there may be certain instances, as in the case of Meg, discussed earlier, in which Asian Americans may be able to assert a specific ethnic background with some success, on balance, there is still very little empirical evidence on just how effective such ‘disidentifying’ strategies actually are in countering the common racialization of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese people.

Tuan (1998: 155) has also noted that while many Asian Americans can exercise some flexibility and choice regarding the retention or discarding of
certain cultural practices, this flexibility is largely confined to their personal lives. In other words, Asian Americans' freedom to exercise their ethnic options (especially their claims to being American) is quite limited in most public arenas and in most interactions with non-Asians. If the exercising of ethnic options is largely limited to peoples' personal lives, this is a significant constraint on their so-called 'ethnic options'.

In this respect, the racialization experiences that Asian Americans are subject to are very similar to those experienced by African Americans and black immigrants to the USA. Studies of black immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America have found that, despite these immigrants' efforts at resisting the racial label 'black', their claims to specific ethnic and national backgrounds were not always recognized in many situations in the wider society (Fernandez-Kelly and Schaufler, 1994; Waters, 1994).

**ECONOMIC POWER AND ETHNIC OPTIONS**

As discussed earlier, Asian Americans, on the whole, have higher annual family incomes than both white Americans and African Americans. Nazli Kibria has argued that the relative social mobility enjoyed by Asian Americans has provided them with 'some latitude in how to organize and express their ethnic identity'. Many scholars have made the reasonable assumption that a group's ability to exercise its ethnic options is importantly shaped by the overall socioeconomic position of that group. Needless to say, ethnic minority groups have not fared equally well in terms of their material circumstances, as evidenced by a variety of socioeconomic indicators, such as their entrance into higher education, or their success in obtaining desirable jobs and housing. In Britain, a review of socioeconomic indicators suggests that a complicated picture is emerging among ethnic minority groups. For instance, Chinese and Indian men have earnings which are far closer to (if not surpassing) those of white men, in comparison with more economically disadvantaged groups such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and African-Caribbean men (Modood et al., 1997). But can we then conclude that Chinese and Indian men in Britain are more able (than Pakistani, Bangladeshi and African-Caribbean men) to 'organize and express their ethnic identity'?

The assumed automatic connection between economic privilege and the possession of ethnic options needs further investigation. It is easy to see how class privilege works, but how does this privilege translate itself into an increased ability to exercise one’s ethnic options? Based on my previous discussion of what it means to possess ethnic options, in practice, despite their relatively privileged socioeconomic position, and unlike African Americans (or Native Americans), many Asian Americans are not accepted as 'real'
Americans (Espiritu, 1992; Kibria, 2000; Kuo, 1995; Tuan, 1998); as such, Asian Americans are often denied a key ethnic option, that of being American. In fact, the ‘success’ image of Asian Americans does not reflect their genuine acceptance into mainstream society by the dominant white group (Hurh and Kim, 1989: 531). Contrary to classic assimilation theory, which posits that immigrants who fully integrated into the American mainstream would be fully accepted into American society (see Gordon, 1964; Warner and Srole, 1945), being successful in higher education and in the labour market has not automatically led to social acceptance for many Asian Americans. Just as being in elite professional jobs has not shielded many African Americans from various forms of racism and anxiety about racial marginalization and discrimination (Benjamin, 1991), being in high-level elite posts for Asian Americans has not meant their acceptance as ‘real’ Americans; nor has it precluded persistent anxiety about racial discrimination and stereotyping (Min and Kim, 2000; Tuan, 1998). It is possible, of course, that there may be regional variations (based upon the length and size of Asian-American settlement and the racial and ethnic ‘mix’ of specific regions) in the degree to which Asian Americans are accepted as bona fide Americans, but this question needs empirical investigation.

One example of how Asian Americans are not seen as ‘real’ Americans arose in the course of the long O.J. Simpson murder trial, during which third-generation Japanese-American judge, Lance Ito, received a great deal of unflattering media attention. On a radio show, New York Senator, Alfonse D’Amato, ridiculed Ito’s handling of the trial by speaking in singsong pidgin – caricaturing the way in which a newly arrived Asian immigrant learning English would speak. As Tuan (1998) points out, Ito, who was ‘born and raised in the land of the Beach Boys, who speaks little Japanese and is married to a white ethnic woman’ (p. 3), is mocked as a foreigner. Since Ito speaks English in much the same way that a white Californian would speak it, such treatment, we can only assume, derives from Ito’s appearance as an Asian man, and his name, Ito. Unlike the forms of racial discrimination suffered by African Americans (which do not include allegations of foreignness or of not ‘belonging’ in the USA), Asian Americans constantly battle with the commonplace belief that they are newly arrived (‘fresh off the boat’) immigrants who are therefore foreign (Tuan, 1998).

In a study of Chinese families running takeaway businesses in Britain, Song (1999) found that Chinese young people’s accounts of racial stereotyping and denigration were common – both in and outside the takeaway business. Although many of these Chinese families were technically economically middle-class and ‘successful’, and although many Chinese young people were going to university and entering professional fields, their stories of life in Britain revealed how narrowly their ethnicity as Chinese people in Britain was depicted and understood. These young people constantly struggled with the view that Chinese people were both strange and
servile, and ‘belonged’ in the takeaway business (see also Parker, 1995). And although Britons of Indian heritage, in comparison with the South Asian population as a whole, are now a ‘successful’ group in socioeconomic terms (Modood et al., 1997), they too must struggle to assert their desired meanings of Indian identity in Britain, including their status as bona fide Britons. In these examples, class privilege is mediated by these families’ experiences of immigration and the particularities of Chinese and Indian settlement in Britain, in addition to Britain’s colonial pasts in Hong Kong and the Indian subcontinent. In these cases, as in others that remain to be documented, the relationship between economic power and the possession of ethnic options, though tangible, needs refinement and qualification.

Groups may encounter different kinds of barriers and difficulties in asserting the meanings and images they want associated with themselves, and economic power surely enhances the variety of ways in which they are able to do this; however, we know little about the actual opportunities and limits involved in the exercising of ethnic options, even for minorities who are relatively privileged. Middle-class status does not automatically open all doors, nor does it ensure all forms of social acceptance, which are important in the assertion of desired ethnic identities. Economic power must make some difference - the question is, what difference? More empirical investigation of this question is needed. I now turn to two additional arguments - the need to broaden our understanding and conceptualization of ‘ethnicity’ and the importance of going beyond superficial readings (and presumed effects) of ethnic labels and images.

BROADENING THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ETHNICITY

As discussed above, Kibria and Tuan suggest (though in different ways) that African Americans, in effect, possess no ethnic options - they are simply reduced to their racial status as black people. I question the suggestion that Asian Americans necessarily possess ‘more’ ethnic options than African Americans by pointing to the very narrow conceptualization of ethnicity underlying this suggestion. In the USA, ethnicity tends to be understood, at least among many sociologists, in terms of one’s ethnic origins and heritage, and the distinctive cultural practices associated with such origins.

The suggestion that African Americans effectively have no ethnic options because of their racialization as black people, based upon ‘the forced obliteration of ethnic differences’ accompanying diverse African peoples’ enslavement, is problematic. Kibria (2000) rightly notes that the attribution of ‘authentic ethnicity’ to Asian Americans, though oppressive in many instances, can also provide them with valuable forms of ethnic capital, including ethnic networks, ties and resources (see Portes and Zhou,
This is an important point, but there is no consideration of how African Americans may possess forms of ethnic and cultural capital, as discussed below.

As in the case of African Americans, who are said to be primarily assigned in terms of their ‘race’ rather than their ethnicity, some analysts in Britain have implied that African Caribbeans lack the potentially positive resources associated with ethnicity. For instance, Pryce (1979) argued that some troubled West-Indian youth in Britain have failed to succeed partly because of the inability of ‘West Indians in general to develop a distinctive culture of their own that is strong enough to counteract the disorienting effects of poverty and the frustrations of social rejection…’ (p. 112a). By comparison, Pryce argues that Indian and Pakistani youth in Britain have not suffered the same kind of ‘psychic and cultural confusion’ because of their reliance on a distinctive language, religion and strong family system. While one cannot dispute that a strong sense of ethnic ties and family support help to provide a buffer against the worst effects of racism, the assertion, in effect, that Indian and Pakistani youth have a distinctive ‘culture’ and ethnicity while African Caribbeans do not, is unfounded and erroneous (Alexander, 1996).

Although North American analysts such as Tuan or Kibria do not mean to suggest that African Americans possess no ‘culture’, the notion that while all minority groups are raced, some are seen to possess ethnicity while others do not – results in a crude and overly simplistic conceptualization of ‘ethnicity’ – one which is understood primarily in terms of ethnic lineage and other people’s attribution of foreignness. Such a simplistic conceptualization of ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’, which is suggested by the point that African Americans have been deprived of knowledge of their African heritage, would suggest that ethnicity is something which is ‘traditional’, and which is somehow ‘preserved’ from ‘the old country’, rather than something that is constantly created and recreated (Alexander, 1996; Ang, 1994). Surely, despite the violence with which African Americans were deprived of their African ‘roots’, they have built on and created meanings, ethnic identities and cultural practices which are both related to and independent of their African origins. Indeed, contemporary black culture and ethnicity have drawn importantly upon the slave experience itself (Gates, 1988; Gilroy, 1993).

Furthermore, as Cornell and Hartmann (1998) point out, evidence of distinctive cultural practices (such as a distinctive language or the eating of traditional ethnic foods – practices which African Americans are not usually associated with) is not actually required to make an ethnic group ‘real’ or to make an ethnic identity a lived experience. For instance, a study of Americans of Armenian heritage found that many of these people continued to ‘feel’ Armenian even though many of them did not speak Armenian, or eat Armenian food with any regularity, or partner
with other Armenians (Bakalian, 1993). Ethnic identity arises from and is recreated by historical and lived experiences (as in the case of African Americans) as well as from adherence to what are seen as traditional cultural practices from ‘the old country’.

Reading the most recent American literature on ethnic minority groups, one might think that African Americans have always and solely been understood by analysts as a racial, and not ethnic, group. This is not the case. Although it has been inexplicably neglected by more recent analysts, back in 1979, Taylor made an important argument about the historical emergence of black ethnicity in the USA. He argued against the tendency to regard African American identity and experience solely in terms of racial oppression and exploitation (or predominantly in terms of ‘internal colonialism’, as famously argued by Blauner, 1972), to the neglect of their experiences of migration, urbanization and intergroup conflict, all of which contributed importantly to the emergence of a distinctive black ethnicity (see also Glazer and Moynihan, 1963, who conceived of a black ethnicity).

While I am unable to go into any detail in this article, African Americans (and African Caribbeans in Britain, though in rather different ways) assert particular meanings, practices and images which are meant to convey black identity and ethnicity – and these can vary according to both class and regional differences. Although there are many shared meanings and practices associated with a black identity in the African diaspora (Gilroy, 1993), there are also multiple and diverse manifestations of black ethnic identity in both the USA and Britain. For instance, some black people may play up being ‘bad’ (through forms of speech, dress, music) as an independent assertion of their identities, as black people, by highlighting their divergence from the norms of whiteness and conventional ideals of ‘success’ (Lott, 1994; Ogbu, 1990). This is evident, for instance, in the image put forward by some black rap bands such as ‘Public Enemy’ and ‘Niggaz With A ttitude’ who have fostered controversial reputations. Another example of this is the embracing of the counter-ideology and culture provided by reggae music and Rastafarianism in the black diaspora. In Britain, Pryce (1979) found that some young black men embraced the shock value of long dreadlocks and even the wearing of rags, in the effort to be as ‘black’ as possible. The assertion of such a black identity, as an expressive means of coping with undesirable identities, is linked with instrumental responses to a disadvantaged minority status (Ogbu, 1990). Another means of playing up one’s ‘blackness’ is, for instance, the practice of re-naming, in which black people’s slave surnames are discarded for African names or the use of distinctly black first names, such as ‘Sheronda, Lichelle, and A retha’ (Russell et al., 1992: 69). Some African Americans also choose to speak with a distinctly black accent (Davis, 1991). These are all, in my view, examples of African Americans exercising their ethnic options (although their options are clearly limited). And whether it be in scholarly or popularized writings
of an Afrocentric bent, or in the practice of celebrating Kwaanza, there are ongoing debates among black people about black ‘culture’ and what it means to be black, all of which constitute elements of their ethnic options. Therefore, while it would be true to say that African Americans are often racialized in many ways in which they cannot control, the notion that they possess fewer (if any) ethnic options, in comparison with Asian Americans, is both overly simplistic and erroneous.

Furthermore, in the USA, the tendency to make very clear analytical distinctions between the terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ has contributed to the overly narrow conceptualization of ethnicity discussed above. For instance, in a recent study of Asian-American professionals’ ethnic and racial identities, Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim (2000) make the following distinction between ethnic and racial identities:

Whereas their ethnic identity is related closely to the ethnic subculture practiced in their parents’ home and in their parents’ home country, their racial identity stems from the consciousness of their non-white status in a white dominant society. To state it alternatively, their racial identity is related closely to the perception that as non-whites they are not fully accepted in American society. (p. 751)

This definition of ethnic identity, which is based upon notions of ‘ethnic subculture’ and ‘their parents’ home country’, is consonant with the narrow conceptualization of ethnicity criticized above. Although such analytical distinctions between racial and ethnic identities can be helpful in understanding the source and formation of such identities, these distinctions can also be rather wooden, and can discount the slippery and blurred boundaries between racial and ethnic identities, and the ways in which the meanings and experiences associated with these identities can shade into one another.

THE COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF ETHNIC LABELS AND IMAGES

In order to critically assess suggested comparisons made about the ethnic options of Asian Americans and African Americans, we need to look at the nature of the images and labels applied to these groups. As noted earlier, Nagel (1994), among others, has argued that various ethnic categories are characterized by differing degrees of stigma or advantage attached to them. Not only have different minority groups encountered variable treatment by the state, as well as differential forms of discrimination, but they also suffer disparate kinds of expressive or symbolic forms of discrimination (Ogbu, 1990). Stereotypes, which are by definition reductive and crude, are an integral part of how racialized regimes of representation operate (Gilman,
A nother reason why some analysts may assume that African Americans do not possess ethnic options is that many of the images and labels applied to this group appear to be negative. Given the persistence of stereotypes about black people and criminality (Hall et al., 1978), African Americans in the USA and African Caribbeans in Britain have often noted the way in which white people clutch their belongings as they walk by, or the fact that they are often monitored for theft in stores. One particularly tenacious stereotype of black people is that they comprise a dangerous ‘underclass’, who are not only lazy and on welfare, but also criminally minded (Morris, 1994; Song and Edwards, 1997). In many white majority societies such as the USA and Britain, representation of the major segment of the black population, which is both ‘decent’ and law abiding, tends to be elided in favour of the sensationalistic image of most black people (particularly men) as dangerous and shifty hustlers. African Americans and Asian Americans have been racially stereotyped by the wider society, generally speaking, as ‘bad’ and ‘good’ minorities, respectively. Asian Americans and African Americans have tended to be depicted in a wholly antipodal manner, particularly in terms of their cultures and their overall ‘success’ in American society (Abelmann and Lie, 1995). However, both groups are often subject to double-edged meanings and images, and this complicates the everyday experiences of African Americans and African American.

As noted by both Tuan and Kibria, the wider society’s allegedly positive perception of Asian Americans has always been ambivalent and rather uneasy; at one moment Asian Americans may be paragons of the American Dream, and at another, they may be ruthless and cunning, as ‘Orientals’ are wont to be, not least because they are seen to be both an economic threat in the Far East, but also because they are often high achievers who threaten to gobble up places in elite universities (Lowe, 1996; Takagi, 1992). Because Asian Americans may have to endure unappealing stereotypes such as being stolid and humourless, overly ambitious, or inscrutable, in addition to more positive characterizations of them, such as being intelligent and competent, Kibria (1997, 2000) found that her Asian-American respondents were highly aware of the unflattering aspects of the model minority image, and that they tried hard to distance themselves from such characteristics, particularly by displaying behaviours which were contrary to the stereotype (see also Lee, 1996; Tuan, 1998). Some might say that the widespread image of scientifically or mathematically oriented Asian-American students with bad haircuts is hardly damaging, but such a ‘nerdy’ image has real and painful ramifications for Asian American young people, in particular, who are anxious to gain social acceptance from their peers (Lee, 1996).

It is also possible for ethnic labels and images to be rather ambiguous or inflected in changeable ways. Nagel (1994) notes that ethnic minorities are
subject to both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ forms of labelling. Informally ascribed ethnic labels, in everyday life, can differ from formally ascribed ethnic labels, which are usually institutionalized by the state. Many analysts in the USA tend to overlook not only ‘informal’ kinds of ethnic labelling, but also ‘informal’ everyday kinds of ethnic identity assertion and cultural practice. Related to this point about the need to examine both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ forms of identity ascription and assertion, the received wisdom about what constitutes a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ group image/stereotype is questionable because it relies upon very superficial readings of what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It fails to consider the double-edged nature of many group images: that ‘bad’ can, in certain contexts, appear to be ‘good’ in some ways (e.g. being radically oppositional or even a bit dangerous can be cool), or that ‘good’ can, in certain contexts, appear ‘bad’ (e.g. being a reliable, hard-working person can also appear conformist, unimaginative, self-serving, etc.). Apparently ‘good’ and ‘bad’ images can, upon closer examination, reveal unexpected benefits or liabilities for various groups. An exploration of these double-edged meanings and images is integral to the broader conceptualization of ethnicity I employ (and which I argue is integral to understanding the notion of groups’ ethnic options). Part of the difficulty in comparing the ethnic options of Asian Americans and African Americans is that there is usually little distinction made between informal and formal forms of ascription, for in ‘real life’, these often shade into each other.

Ironically, the assertion of ‘bad’ oppositional identities has, in some ways, enhanced some black people’s ethnic identities and images. Mindful of the negative discourses surrounding black men in Britain, for instance, some British analysts such as Roger Hewitt (1986) and Claire Alexander (1996) have emphasized the emancipatory and imaginative implications of oppositional cultural practices and identities asserted by black people (see also Gilroy, 1987). By comparison, the Chinese in Britain, who are generally regarded as a non-troublesome and high achieving group, consistently tend to be stereotyped as ‘square’, conformist and uncreative (see Parker, 1995; and for Vietnamese youth in Britain, see Back, 1995).

Related to my previous point that African Americans can and do assert their ethnic identities in various ways, African Americans and African Caribbeans in Britain have gained a cultural kudos that coexists uneasily with the very real forms of racial oppression they still suffer. In many spheres of social life, black people have gained a great deal of popularity and attention, as evidenced by forms of cultural synthesis and white youths’ appropriation of black music, dress, and speech (see Cohen, 1988; Hewitt, 1986; Jones, 1988). Citing the ‘significant growth in black–white sociability and cultural synthesis, especially among young people’, Modood points to ‘the high esteem in which black cultural styles are held, in the hero-worship of successful black “stars” in football and sport, music and entertainment’ (1996: 9). Although the term ‘cultural capital’ is typically associated with the
possession of elite, mainstream tastes and cultural practices, certain black cultural styles and practices can constitute an important form of cultural capital for black people in a variety of situations (Bourdieu, 1984). But as in the case of Asian Americans, both African Americans and African Caribbeans have been subject to double-edged meanings associated with being black. As Cohen (1996: 20) has noted: “Blacks are simultaneously admired for their “gangsta” reputation whilst being denigrated for their violence and street criminality.” To recognize the “street cred” possessed by young black people in particular is not to neglect the very real consequences of racially based discrimination and marginalization, which contribute to (though not exclusively) the creation of vibrant black youth cultures.

While we must not be overly sanguine in our formulations of black people’s status and experiences by virtue of their cultural kudos, equally, we should not discount the positive ramifications of possessing such forms of cultural capital, particularly in the case of economically disadvantaged black people. For example, in a study of low-income African American youth, Prudence Carter (2000) argues that, in addition to the attainment of conventional cultural capital which is important for mobility within the opportunity structure, “non-dominant” forms of black cultural capital are critical to black youth’s “social prestige”, and sense of belonging within African-American communities. I would argue that the possession of such cultural capital is, in fact, an important ethnic option for African Americans and African Caribbeans, particularly for young black men. Easy distinctions and assumptions made about the nature and effects of “good” and “bad” racial images and labels, and their implications for a group’s ethnic options, need to be problematized and further studied.

It is important to remember that ethnic minorities’ interactions with others are not wholly determined by the dominant images held of them. This is because minority individuals negotiate their ethnic identities in a variety of ways; they are not simply the passive recipients of unwanted racialized stereotypes and images. We must not overlook the ways in which minority people contest and assert their desired ethnic identities. Various analysts such as Mary Waters (1994) have shown that, despite being subject to racialization as black people, second-generation black Caribbeans may engage in forms of code-switching, so that they may act African American with one group of friends, while acting Haitian, for example, with their Haitian network (as do African Americans, see Carter, 2000). Such code-switching is one way of exercising one’s ethnic options. It is increasingly shown, in Britain, that black and South Asian second-generation Britons are skilled cultural navigators (Ballard, 1994; Hall, 1991; Modood et al., 1994). In other words, ethnic minorities, including black people, are not powerless in asserting their ethnic identities - even in the face of multiple forms and shades of racist practice and ideology.
CONCLUSION

By critically assessing the suggestion that Asian Americans possess ‘more’ ethnic options than African Americans, I have tried to raise some key questions about what we mean by the notion of ethnic minority groups possessing so-called ethnic options in the first place. I have argued that it is problematic to suggest that Asian Americans may possess ‘more’ ethnic options than African Americans. First, I argued that there is no clear understanding or consensus among analysts about what ethnic options actually are, at least in relation to non-white minority groups. Because the dynamics around the assertion of ethnic identity are complex and often changeable in most multiethnic western societies today, it is difficult to conceive of one minority group as possessing, in any straightforward fashion, ‘more’ (or, for that matter, ‘better’ or ‘worse’) ethnic options than another. True, groups may possess different kinds of ethnic options, but ‘different’ does not easily translate into measures of more or less, or better or worse, options.

Second, I argued that while ethnonational distinctions, such as Japanese, Korean, or Chinese, may be recognized and employed in some contexts, the alleged efficacy of Asian Americans being able to assert specific ethnonational distinctions (and the assumption that such ethnonational distinctions translate readily into a wider set of ethnic options) is questionable and needs more examination. There are many studies that have shown that the processes of racialization can counter the ethnic assertions of both Asian Americans and African Americans.

Third, although ethnic options are clearly shaped by economic privilege or disadvantage, I argued that one cannot automatically read off a group’s ethnic options on the basis of its socioeconomic status (though this is obviously important). A group’s ethnic options should not be conceptualized as simply an extension of its material resources or political power. A group’s ethnic options are negotiated by members of the group, both in relation to each other and in relation to the wider society (Song, forthcoming). Put another way, the ability to exercise ethnic options is highly complex and is not merely epiphenomenal to various material indicators of oppression or privilege. Even groups who are relatively disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic indicators, such as African Americans, can arguably exercise a diverse, albeit limited, range of ethnic options, despite the view held by some that African Americans’ racial status as black people predominates and dwarfs any ‘ethnic’ attributes or identities they may possess.

Fourth, the very narrow conceptualization of ethnicity underlying the suggestion that African Americans effectively have no ethnic options while Asian Americans do possess such options, needs serious revision. Our understanding of ethnicity should not be restricted to a sole emphasis on ethnic heritage or origin that is connected to some distant ‘homeland’ (Ang,
Rather, ethnic identities are constantly undergoing reinvention – sometimes by minority people who have had little exposure to or knowledge of their ancestors or their so-called ethnic origins. African Americans can and do assert cultural practices and identities which are integral elements of what should be understood as ‘ethnicity’. Rather than adhere to overly neat analytical distinctions between racial and ethnic identities, future studies concerning minority groups’ ethnic options need to examine the variable and complex intertwinnings of racial and ethnic identities as experienced by disparate ethnic minority groups.

Fifth, to the extent that ethnic options are importantly shaped by the dominant images and labels applied to disparate groups, it is difficult to portray the representation of either African Americans or Asian Americans in wholly positive or negative terms. In reviewing the representations and characterizations of African Americans and Asian Americans, I demonstrated that both of these groups are subject to doubled-edged meanings and images associated with them, and that what is initially perceived to be ‘bad’ may be ‘good’ (and vice versa) in certain situations. In their efforts to assert their desired ethnic identities, both groups must contend with the double-edged meanings and stereotypes that are associated with each of them. Even if we were to accept that the ethnic options African Americans possess are more negative than positive in their consequences (though this would depend on the particular situation and the desired goal), then (rather than suggesting that African Americans do not possess an array of ethnic options) it would be more accurate to make the more specific claim that Asian Americans, generally speaking, possess more advantageous ethnic options than African Americans. This latter, more specific claim, however, raises different (though related) theoretical and empirical questions that would require further study.

We must not overlook the growing evidence that ethnic minority groups and individuals contest unwanted images and meanings associated with them and work at asserting their desired ethnic identities through a variety of ways. More attention needs to be given to the ways in which the possession (or lack) of cultural capital, including the possession and practising of popular cultural forms by particular groups, has mediated groups’ range of ethnic options, as well as their selective inclusion and exclusion across many social contexts (Back, 1995). A consideration of the often mutable and double-edged meanings and images attached to particular minority groups will also further a more complex understanding of groups’ abilities to assert their desired ethnic identities. This suggests that we need a more holistic and complex understanding of ‘ethnic options’, one that is not only shaped by ‘race’ and ethnic ancestry, but also by the ways in which particular groups possess (or lack) various forms of cultural capital, and through the varied ways in which they counter and negotiate imposed and unwanted images and identities.
Notes

1 Earlier generations of immigrants, such as the Irish and those from southern and eastern parts of Europe, such as Italians, were denigrated and regarded as distinct unassimilable races. However, in the contemporary USA, groups such as Italian and Irish Americans are seen (along with those of English, Scandinavian, or German backgrounds) as belonging to a ‘white’ race (Steinberg, 1981; Waters, 1990). However, the privileged status associated with white ethnics, such as Irish and Jewish people, is more contested in Britain (see Cohen, 1996; Hickman, 1998).

2 Tuan argues that the issue of ‘racial options’ – the ability to choose whether to be identified in racial terms – is what is relevant for African Americans. Tuan concludes that African Americans cannot escape the racial marker of being black.

3 However, some analysts such as Hurh and Kim (1989) have argued that such generalized statistics can give a false impression about how well Asian Americans fare in the labour market. These analysts claim that when one considers other factors, such as working hours, the number of workers in the household, and education, the individual earnings ratio for Asian Americans (especially for the foreign-born) are lower than those of white people with equivalent conditions of investment in education and the labour market.

4 However, the ‘model minority’ image fails to acknowledge real differences in the alleged success of various East-Asian groups in the USA (Cheng and Yang, 1996; Espiritu, 1992; Wong et al., 1998; Yamanaka and McClelland, 1994). Not all Asian Americans are by any means ‘successful’. For Asian Americans of both sexes and various ethnic backgrounds, differences in class backgrounds and native, versus, foreign-born status, result in different structures of opportunity and outcomes.

5 One difficulty with the entire enterprise of comparing ethnic minority groups’ ethnic options is that it presupposes a degree of homogeneity for each group, when, in fact, various subgroups can comprise such groups. Differences within a recognized group, according to length of settlement, sex, religion and class, among other issues, contribute to divisions within them. Another major demographic issue which complicates the question at hand – that of comparing minority groups’ ethnic options – is the growth of ‘mixed race’ people in both the USA and Britain (pers. comm. with Paul Spickard) – an issue I consider more fully in the forthcoming book.

6 Tuan’s study of third- and fourth-generation Asian Americans of Chinese and Japanese origin suggests that ethnic distinctions among ‘multigeneration’ Asian Americans may be diminishing, in favour of a more generalized Asian-American culture and growing forms of panethnic association (p. 166). If this is the case, this would also suggest that Asian Americans (and particularly ‘multigeneration’ Asian Americans) may be less likely to claim a specific Asian ancestry.

7 Interestingly, in Britain, black people’s status as ‘real’ Britons is sometimes called into question, as is pointed out in Paul Gilroy’s (1987) evocative title, There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack [the British flag]. This may stem, in part, from the fact that African Americans have been a part of US society since the inception of slavery, while many black Britons immigrated to Britain in the mid-20th century. In Britain, both African-Caribbean and South-Asian people have also been subject to discourses of repatriation.
8 The ‘model minority’ stereotype (which is a relatively recent one), and its assumptions of social acceptance, also endangers the memory of historical discrimination against Asian Americans. Fears about the ‘Yellow Peril’ were reflected in the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese immigration to the USA until 1943 (Daniels, 1988; Espiritu, 1992), and Japanese Americans were interned in camps during World War II, as a result of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor (Daniels, 1988; Takaki, 1989).

9 It should be noted that middle-class African Americans possess their own forms of cultural capital which have arisen from their interactions with both the white middle class and the black working class (see Neckerman et al., 1999).

Acknowledgements

This article is drawn from a forthcoming book, Choosing Ethnic Identity, about ethnic minority groups’ ethnic options. I would like to thank Stephen May and Tariq Modood and the referees of this journal for their helpful comments. Paul Spickard and Mitch Duneier also got me thinking about some of the key themes in this article.

References

G lazer, N an thon and D aniel M oy nihan (1963) B eyond t he M elting P ot. C ambridge, M A : M IT P ress.


MIRI SONG has been a lecturer in sociology at the University of Kent at Canterbury since 1995. She is the author of Helping Out: Children's Labor in Ethnic Businesses (1999) and the co-editor of Rethinking 'Mixed Race' (2001). She is now completing a forthcoming book, Choosing Ethnic Identity. Her research interests include ethnic identity, racism(s), immigrant adaptation and young people. Address: Department of Sociology, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NY, UK. [email: a.m.song@ukc.ac.uk]