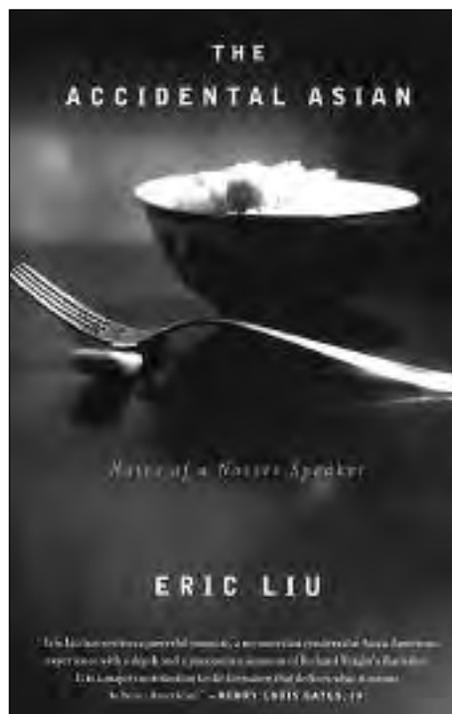


BOOK REVIEWS



The Accidental Asian *Notes of a Native Speaker*

BY ERIC LIU

NEW YORK: VINTAGE BOOKS, 1999

224 PAGES. PAPERBACK: ISBN 0-375-70486-8

Thought-provoking, nuanced, and easy to read, the book's central point is that we should begin "to conceive of assimilation as more than a series of losses—and to recognize that what is lost is not necessarily sacred."

As the title hints, this book is about Asian-Americans and the issue of assimilation. More broadly, it is about the nature and role of race and ethnic identity in American society. A slim volume of seven essays of social commentary mingled with (and in large part told through) personal and family narratives, *The Accidental Asian* was named Notable Book of 1998 by the *New York Times*. Its author, Eric Liu, is an American-born son of immigrant parents from Taiwan. Raised in a comfortable, largely white suburb in Poughkeepsie, New York, and married to a Caucasian American, Liu's Chinese ethnicity was no barrier to professional success in America. Twenty-nine years old at the time of the book's writing, Liu had already chalked up impressive credentials: graduate of Yale, former speechwriter for President Clinton, television commentator on MSNBC, and student at Harvard Law School.

Thought-provoking, nuanced, and easy to read, the book's central point is that we should begin "to conceive of assimilation as more than a series of losses—and to recognize that what is lost is not necessarily sacred" (p. 55). Migration to a new country may cause children born in that country to be unfamiliar with the culture and language of their parents. That is the loss. The gain is that the native-born child speaks the language of the new country of birth, adopts its ways, and becomes a true citizen, rather than merely an expatriate or resident alien. Also, the process of assimilation begins not only after the act of migration, but well before. As Liu observes, "My own assimilation began long before I was born. It began with my parents, who came here with an appetite for Western ways already whetted by films and books and music" (p. 36).

As old cultural categorizations and ways of being are not necessarily sacred, Liu contends, some new ones—specifically, the category of "Asian-American,"—are not necessarily valid. "Asian-American," he says, is an artificial category because the term embraces groups too diverse, culturally as well as in other ways, to represent a real community. Liu sees the category as having come into being largely because of feelings of being threatened by the wider society: "The Asian-American narrative is rooted deeply in threat. That is one of the main things polyglot Americans of Asian descent have in common: the fear of being discriminated against simply by being, metaphorically if not genetically, Chinamen" (p. 69). However, threat and the perceptions of the wider society, Liu contends, are insufficient to make the category of Asian valid.

None of the above arguments by Liu are by any means new, although Liu's book presents them in an engaging, accessible way—facilitating their discussion. More controversial is Liu's argument that "The choice to invent and sustain a pan-Asian identity is just that: a choice, not an imperative" (p. 78). This argument is based on his belief that American society has changed to the extent that Asian-Americans no longer "face the levels of discrimination and hatred that demand an enclave mentality" (p. 78). In fact, in Liu's view, race today is perhaps, above all, a tool in the play for power—at least among those who cultivate the Asian-American identity. "Race, in the guise of whiteness, has always been about power. Now, in the masks of color, it is also about countervailing power. To call yourself a minority today is not only to acknowledge that you are seen by whites as nonwhite; it can also be to choose, as a matter of vocation, to sustain the dichotomy." (p. 72).

Liu dreams of an America that is “post-ethnic,” where people of all colors can “treat race as an option, the way white people today are able to enjoy ethnicity as an option.”

This being his premise, Liu denounces the formation of “conglomerate identities” such as the Asian-American one, as damaging to the goal of a society that is beyond color. Liu complains: “This is the multicultural method at its core: liquefy the differences within racial groups, solidify those among them” (p. 71). Yet surely an equally valid way of interpreting the process is to see it as an entirely logical development in the evolution of American society, as the American-born children of immigrants become more assimilated into American society (and therefore less conscious of the differences between the different Asian cultures) and simultaneously acquire the linguistic and social tools to actively combat racial discrimination.

Liu dreams of an America that is “post-ethnic,” where people of all colors can “treat race as an option, the way white people today are able to enjoy ethnicity as an option” (p. 65). Few would quarrel with the worthiness of this vision. What is contradictory in Liu’s book is his insistence that ethnic identity (as least in regard to Asian-Americans) is entirely a choice, even as he acknowledges that “whiteness . . . is still our metonym for power” (p. 35). Liu’s personal success in that white world of power has, one senses, blinded him to the difficulties that others face. In that world, one’s race all too often results in the imposition of an ethnic identity by society, not its voluntary assumption. And here lies the weakness in what is otherwise a thoughtful book: the author places the blame for the persistence of racial barriers primarily on these ethnic groupings themselves, rather than on mainstream American society’s continued discrimination against non-whites, even as he acknowledges that such discrimination exists: “I don’t like it that the people I should learn from tend so often to be white, for it says something damning about how opportunity is still distributed” (p. 55).

The Accidental Asian would be most profitably employed in undergraduate courses on Asian-American studies and ethnic studies courses. In particular, it should be used in conjunction with materials that examine second-generation immigrants and the formation of ethnic identity. ■

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