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Good Ethnics, Bad Aliens: Imagining the Global Village

Samira Kawash

I. Fictive Ethnicities

In choosing a topic for the 1996 International Roundtable, I imagine the organizers might have had in mind, among other things, an increasing sense of the intractability of ethnic identity as a source of conflict and violence around the globe. Such concern is widespread and well founded. Many commentators have remarked with surprise on the resurgence of ethnic particularism in the late 1980s. In light of such disturbing phenomena as "ethnic cleansing" in Eastern Europe, the question is often posed: Is ethnic difference consistent with universal values and rights? Sometimes this question appears as a debate about the desirability or danger of "cultural relativism," whether in relation to the American school curriculum or the African practice of clitoridectomy. Another question often raised is whether ethnic identity strengthens or undermines the nation, that is, whether nations should correspond to ethnicities, or whether nations are better conceived of as a secular and neutral alternative to ethnicity. The ongoing tragedies in both Rwanda and Bosnia make these questions especially urgent.

In response to such conflicts, political leaders and others have emphasized the drawing of boundaries and the separation of peoples as the best remedy to ethnic conflict, appealing to ethnic identity as both the source of tension and the basis of a resolution. Such a viewpoint assumes, among other things, that ethnicity is separable from its historical conditions or conflicts, and that ethnicity preexists history in some way, such that already

established and differentiated ethnic groups meet on the historical stage. In the framing of all of the issues and questions I have mentioned, ethnic identity is assumed to be something originary and natural, such that it is ethnic identity that produces the particularities of ethnic culture. In this framework, ethnic identity is assumed to be something distinct and specific that each of us has, an important and determining component of our individual identities. Thus, insofar as ethnic identity is understood as natural or unchanging, it appears to be a perpetual source of conflict as well as the necessary basis for any political or social action.

Ethnicity has usually been taken to refer to a group's holding something in common, whether language, religion, geographical origin, common history, some physical characteristic, genetic similarity, or some other attribute. But in fact none of these characteristics, either alone or in combination, can systematically account for the differences and groupings everyone will nonetheless agree actually exist. For this reason, ethnicity is not the kind of empirical fact that we can isolate and understand abstractly. There is no essential, universal determinant underlying the idea of ethnic identity as a fundamental and unvarying aspect of human history, which is what identity in its traditional philosophical or scientific sense is usually taken to mean. Just as there is no essential or constant determinant of ethnicity, there is no form of ethnicity that is absolutely pure or uncontaminated. Any attempt to discover some aspect of ethnic purity that would serve as origin or ideal can be easily shown to be false; every imagined purity turns out to be already contaminated and hybrid. Although communities may understand themselves as sharing a particular ethnicity, these ethnic identities are not natural or eternal; rather, they are "invented" to give a sense of coherence and tradition to groups that are constantly reforming and shifting (this is what Etienne Balibar has called "fictive ethnicities"). Ethnicity in the sense I am describing is constantly being contested and reinvented. It is not the sign of the timeless origin of a people; rather, it is the always newly created expression of an experience in the present.¹

But to say that ethnicity is fictive or invented is not to say that it is not powerful. Indeed, the appeal to ethnic identity both as a basis for political struggle and as an explanation for various con-

flicts seems stronger than ever. For this reason, I am interested less in determining what ethnic identity is or ought to be than I am concerned with understanding the way the idea of ethnicity operates culturally and politically to provide a framework for interpretation and action. In the current context, we should not be surprised that the accelerating globalization of commodity capitalism and its accompanying cultures are exacerbating already existing conflicts and creating new ones. Thus, I want to ask: What is the significance of the fact that these conflicts are interpreted and explained from the perspective of ethnicity? And also, in what ways might the lens of ethnicity contain, control, or limit the ways in which conflict can be understood or resolved? These questions are addressed not to the empirical events that make up conflict, but to the way these events are represented and therefore given meaning and form.

Currently in mainstream discourse — by which I mean the language and representations shared as a baseline of common assumption by politicians, television, film, print media, and reflected in everyday “common sense” — one finds two competing versions of ethnic diversity. On the one hand, there is a positive image of pluralistic coexistence in which differences are a source of pleasurable variety rather than conflict or dissent. On the other hand, there is the negative image of a world being torn apart by ethnic differences that can only deepen. Of course, these two visions mark a contradiction: ethnicity is represented as being at once a *deep and irreducible* basis of conflict or separation and, at the same time, a *superficial* difference that will be overcome by the forces of modernization or globalization. This contradiction is resolved in contemporary discourse through an effective splitting of what is represented as ethnicity: between an *assimilable* form of difference at the level of style, and an *inassimilable* otherness that is perceived as threatening. Although both these forms of ethnicity appear in contemporary discourse and analysis, they do not share the same relationship to modernity. Rather, the ideas of good ethnicity and bad ethnicity are implicitly related as stages in development. Bad ethnicity, an ethnic difference that appears as conflictual and irresolvable, is ethnicity that has failed to evolve. In this sense, ethnicity itself is anachronistic, reaching back to a premodern past rather than forging ahead into a future that transcends such quaint particu-

larities. Thus, while the cosmopolitan image of the global community is represented as ethnically pluralistic, ethnic particularity is represented as the antithesis of cosmopolitan values and metropolitan styles.

But despite its contradictory nature, ethnicity operates as a powerful explanatory figure. In a media context of short attention spans and soundbite politics, ethnicity provides a convenient and simplifying shorthand to signal, describe, and understand conflict. Such a simplification is dangerously convenient, swiftly and imperceptibly shifting our attention away from a careful consideration of the historical and political forces particular to a specific situation that might reveal a complexity of positions and interests. Conflicts ranging from mild discrimination to full-scale war may have material, economic, or political dimensions, and may be rooted in fundamental dissymmetries of power or interest. The explanatory and analytic framework provided by ethnicity cannot account for such complexity, and instead refers conflict to forces that lie outside the realm of politics or understanding, such as taste, belief, lifestyle, values, and so on. Once conflict has been determined to be rooted in ethnic differences and ethnic particularities, then the splitting of ethnicity into good and bad forms correlates with a splitting of conflict into resolvable and irresolvable conflict. Good ethnicity is taken to be the source of superficial and therefore resolvable conflicts of style, while bad ethnicity stands as the source of deeply rooted and irresolvable conflicts. And insofar as both good and bad forms of ethnic identity are understood as ahistorical and immutable, such conflicts allow for only two solutions: tolerance or exclusion. When conflict can be understood as rooted in "good ethnicity," then a corresponding policy of tolerance will assure that each party can continue in their different styles or ways of life without impinging on the other. However, if conflict is represented as being caused by "bad ethnicity," then the only solution that can be imagined is absolute separation, either through a strengthening of borders to exclude the dangerous alien or more ominously through total destruction of the threatening alien other.

Within this discursive framework, images of globalization, whether presented as imagined or real, are obliged to steer a course between these poles of good ethnicity and bad ethnicity

in their attempts to imagine a global community that contains difference without conflict. To better understand the effects of this discursive maneuvering, I want to look in detail at particular representations of the global community that came to dominate the popular imagination in the United States during the summer of 1996: the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta and the release of the blockbuster action film *Independence Day*. The narrative strategy common to the texts I will consider is to contrast the superficial differences of style with the universal commonality of the "human family" and to project all threats to the imagined unity and harmony of this fantasmatic family onto an alien and excluded other. The image of a harmonious and inclusive global community therefore has a necessary counterpart in the image of the excluded dangerous alien. The inclusive global community is the site of "good ethnicity," that is, ethnic and cultural differences that generate variety without creating conflict. In contrast, the excluded alien is the site of "bad ethnicity," the source of a difference that is dangerous and must be suppressed or controlled to protect the "good" community. Thus, the opposition between good, assimilable ethnicity and bad, conflictual ethnicity is refigured as the opposition between the familial community and the alien who both threatens and opposes that community.

The results of this imaginary transformation and simplification are twofold: first, the community is imagined as having no internal conflict; and second, the community is imagined as having no obligation to understand, communicate with, or compromise with the alien other. The difficult task of addressing the complexities of conflict becomes simplified: all that seems necessary is to shore up and police the boundary between family and alien, between "us" and "them." I want to suggest that the image of peaceful harmony that accompanies this splitting into "us" and "them" is absolutely opposite its real effect. Rather than producing a harmonious and inclusive global community, the imaginary splitting between good ethnic community and bad ethnic alien is the occasion and justification for violence and repression, both against any deviation or conflict that appears inside the community, and against the threat of the alien other who appears outside the community.

The images I will be considering in this essay establish a community that is global in scale. This is not to imply, however, that they reflect a global desire or a global imagination. *Independence Day* and the Atlanta Olympics television coverage originate in the United States, and despite their explicit concern with global issues, they persist in imagining the global community as the extension and expansion of the national community. In general, the global community as it is imagined in the United States neither recognizes nor accounts for the existence of other communities around the world that might imagine alternative global villages. Nevertheless, due to the international power of the U.S. media, such productions as Hollywood films and U.S.-based television broadcasts play an important role in projecting particular images into the international arena, thereby subtly shaping the possibilities for debate or imagination internationally.²

Before continuing, I should briefly clarify my use of the inclusive pronoun “we.” I will be discussing media representations of community as they appear in mass television advertising and in Hollywood film. These kinds of popular media play an extremely important role in constructing a “we” as the object of address, a “we” that aims to name those who are included and represented in the cultural, political, and social life of the community. This is the “we” of the mainstream, a “we” who imagines itself in a positive, noncritical relation to its position and opportunities. Of course, if you or I as individuals imagine ourselves as a part of this “we,” it is in large part due to being constantly addressed as a member. However, this “we” does not in fact include, speak for, or represent everyone; what must be excluded from the “we” is one of the things I will be focusing on. My use of “we” to describe certain desires, perspectives, or interests is not to suggest that everyone would agree or would hold such things in common. Rather, I am seeking to focus on the way each of us is asked to participate in the “we,” and what this “we” implies as well as what it excludes.

II. Where Is the Olympic Village?

For two weeks during the summer of 1996, I, along with millions of other Americans, was a somewhat involuntary participant in the carefully staged spectacle of global unity and competition

known as the Olympic Games. Although I do not consider myself a sports fan and am studiously indifferent to the Olympics in principle, I could hardly avoid the hype leading up to the games, not to mention the saturation coverage on NBC, expanded to every station after the bomb exploded in Atlanta's Centennial Park. I want to consider the Summer Olympics as a mass public ritual enactment, not simply of hero worship or sports fanaticism, but of a certain global vision of community best captured in the metaphor of the global village. While the images of a sports competition might seem trivial and superficial in relation to images of more urgent and violent global conflict, I want to suggest that the ritual structure of an event such as the Olympics allows us to perceive the fundamental lineaments of a basic set of assumptions that structures virtually all representations of global community and conflict, from the high seriousness of the evening news to the preposterous scenarios of Hollywood action movies. Even more explicitly than such forms as the news or popular film, the broadcast of the Olympics is designed to interpellate the viewer as a member of the global community being constituted in the event. Thus, the Olympics not only provides an example of the representation of global community, it is explicitly engaged in the imaginary constitution of just such a community.

The Olympic Games provide a particularly condensed and highly visible example of the phenomenon of globalization as simultaneously political, cultural, and corporate. The commercialization of the Games is not only a matter of financing, but also marks the peculiar contemporary conjunction between corporate sponsorship and communal ritual. It is not surprising that one of the pavilions in the Olympic compound was called the "AT&T Global Village," suggesting that the very idea of the global village is inseparable from AT&T. Such juxtapositions are in no way accidental. Throughout, advertising prepared especially for broadcast during the Games sought to make explicit or emotional connections between the global spirit of the Games and the products promoted during the commercial breaks. In this way, games and advertising merge into a seductive spectacle that draws us in by appealing simultaneously to us as consumers and as global citizens. The emphasis on individual athlete heroes suggests that the viewers are invited to identify

with the athletes and participate in the competition vicariously through them. But a more powerful and pervasive form of viewer participation is through consumption, both of the broadcast and of the corporate images being aligned with the Games themselves. Although we might like to imagine some “pure” Olympics dedicated to the healthy pursuit of competition and community untainted by the marketplace, the Olympics cannot possibly be separated from that which in fact constitutes our global community, the international flows of culture and commerce. The Olympics is a marketing event, selling us a global vision even as it promotes the mundane products of its corporate sponsors.

A. Big Family, Small Threat

This interlacing of global vision and corporate image can be seen in an especially vivid way in a United Parcel Service (UPS) advertisement broadcast during the Games.³ In this ad, UPS uses both Olympic imagery and images of ethnically marked locales to suggest that despite our apparent differences, we are in fact one big family, joined together under the benevolent guidance of UPS. The commercial opens with a scene of children draped in various national flags moving through an abstract representation of an Olympic stadium as the narrator states, “The Olympic Games: celebrating the notion that it truly is a small world.” The camera then shifts to a series of local shots that show UPS trucks, planes, and couriers moving through a desert scene, an elaborate Chinese festival, a Swiss ski village, and the courtyard of the Louvre museum. Over these images we hear, “Unless, of course, you’re UPS, bringing things to the Games in Atlanta from every corner of that small world. Every day we serve over 200 countries and territories, speak 43 languages, and deliver overnight to a world that still measures 25,000 miles around.” The ad closes with adult runners bearing various national flags finishing a race and embracing each other, as the voice-over concludes, “Oh, we are one big family; it’s just that the family is a little spread out. UPS. Worldwide Olympic Sponsor.”

In this commercial, we see a condensed version of the Olympic vision of the relation between cultural difference and

global community. The contrast between separation and togetherness is also a contrast between faraway and near, between inaccessible and immediate. Cultural specificity, in costume or architecture, is geographically localizable, filmed as part of a specific landscape that is traversed by some sort of vehicle. In contrast, the images corresponding to the “small world” (the children at the beginning) or the “big family” (the runners at the end) are eerily unlocalizable, dreamlike images that happen in an idealized nowhere. While the Olympics are in Atlanta, the ad seems to imply that the global family that is established is everywhere and nowhere. There is also a subtle historical narrative played out in this ad. “Every corner of that small world” that UPS reaches is envisioned primarily as historically backward, dwelling or arising out of the past. Thus, the visual for “every corner of that small world” is a desert scene of Arab bedouins and their camels, absolutely removed from history, technology, or modernity, and having access to the movement of history only through the benevolent intervention of UPS, as embodied in the flight of the UPS airplane that takes us there. A similar perspective informs the sumptuous scene of a Chinese festival, equally calculated to give us the frisson of the faraway and also the quaint premodern folkways of a distant people. The historical narrative is most immediate in the last “exotic” scene, that of the courtyard of the Louvre museum in Paris. The contrast between the classical architecture of the museum’s original buildings in the background and the futuristic Pei pyramid in the foreground repeats and reinforces the implicit message of the commercial: what makes the world so small, what makes us a big family, is the universal, global march of progress. One of the things that makes this ad such an effective promotion for UPS is the way it associates the march of progress with UPS and makes UPS the agent of that progress. UPS positions itself as mediating between the distance of geography and the nearness of family, between the primitive conditions of elsewhere and the progress of “here”; UPS is what makes family possible, despite these vast distances. In this ad, the difficulties of 200 countries, 43 languages, and 25,000 miles are conquered by UPS, leaving us to enjoy the resulting unity and sense of family that is thereby made possible.

NBC's coverage of the Games played up similar themes by treating the athletes as ethnically neutral in the competition, while on the other hand emphasizing the particularities of their home countries in the individual athlete profiles. While the profiles were intended to add human interest and depth to the competitions, a perhaps unintended side effect was to treat ethnicity as something the athletes left behind in order to compete in the Games. The implicit message, then, is that ethnic differences are overshadowed or overcome by the global community of the Olympic Village. In a movement from periphery to metropolis reminiscent of the trajectory of UPS, the athletes must leave behind their individual pasts and their familial or ethnic particularity to join in the Games. And as in the UPS ad, geographical movement is allied with historical development. The athletes are depicted moving simultaneously through space, from villages to cities and from various countries to Atlanta, and through time, charting their development from childhood to mature, cosmopolitan athlete.

The asymmetry that such images establish and maintain between a premodern elsewhere and a futuristic here operates in part to naturalize the global asymmetry of capitalism, an asymmetry alluded to in the ad by UPS's reminder that it is "bringing things to the Games in Atlanta from every corner of that small world." We are the beneficiaries of the products and resources of the rest of the world; the world appears here as little more than an overgrown shopping mall. In this context, the metaphor of family that concludes the UPS ad becomes extremely important. Depicting the global community as a family works powerfully to suppress any possible conflict of interest or dissatisfaction with this global distribution of labor and production—if we are all members of the same family, then all of us will share in the benefits of this global order. The history of conquest and exploitation that underpins the current relations between First and Third Worlds, between global producers and global consumers, between the providers of raw materials and those who enjoy the final products, is entirely effaced. In its place is a mythical narrative of familial unity in which the local, the specific, or the particular serve only to provide color and texture. In this global vision, images of ethnicity may persist, but

divisive differences in interest, position, power, or opportunity have been effaced.

The images and narratives that I am teasing out of this ad are by no means unique to UPS or to the Olympics. Indeed, if they were unique, it is unlikely that they would have anywhere near the impact or the credibility they maintain. Rather, they draw on a rich and continually renewed fund of images, metaphors, and myths that are propagated in various media and that repeat in numerous guises the message that the global community is familial, nonconflictual, and essentially homogeneous. Part of the effectiveness of these images arises from their success at providing an imaginary resolution to the contradiction between the dangerous but inevitable persistence of ethnic identity and the narrative of modernity as universalization. This contradiction is resolved by rewriting difference as ethnicity, reducing such difference to pleasurable but harmless spectacle, and further neutralizing it by banishing it to a temporally and spatially distant elsewhere.

B. T-shirt Diplomacy

The tag line of an ongoing Hanes campaign advertising T-shirts, underwear, and casual wear is familiar to many: "Just wait till we get our Hanes on you." These ads typically emphasize happy, beautiful people lounging or playing in loose, comfortable clothes or underwear. The song, which describes how wonderful you will feel when you wear Hanes, features a second voice singing, "I just can't wait, can't wait." This voice is of course meant to be our voice; we are the ones who just can't wait to get our Hanes. In return, we are promised gratification, comfort, and happiness of such profundity that our need becomes urgent: we just can't wait. I mention this advertising campaign because it provides the implicit intertext for the commercial Hanes prepared for the Olympics, a commercial that plays on the theme already established in this ongoing campaign.⁴ It is interesting to consider how the promise of Hanes gratification in the U.S. market shifts to another register when Hanes takes on the world, Olympic style. As in the U.S. ads, Hanes continues to promise gratification to the wearer. The most significant difference in the Olympic ad is the emphasis on the differences of the

various people wearing Hanes. Thus, Hanes makes itself a player on the global scene, working not simply to clothe the world in Hanes-wear but, more important, working to unite a divided world through the universal language of the T-shirt. In its depiction of people around the world putting on Hanes T-shirts, Hanes becomes truly transnational, covering every body with the same skin as though to show that if differences in the past were only skin deep, today even the skin can be changed.

The ad establishes a sharp contrast between ethnic identities and Hanes identity by narrating the displacement of ethnic or national identities by a universalizing corporate identity. The ad begins with a series of portraits of individuals, each marked in a different way by some particular ethnicity, whether by skin color, costume, or setting. The voice-over names each of these individuals, stating, "To some, people are either Brazilian or Norwegian, Indian or Chinese, South African or Dutch." This sequence is followed by a repetition of the same portraits, this time showing each individual in a Hanes T-shirt, while the voice adds, "To us, it is much simpler; people are just small, medium, or large." What some see as "deep" differences — the South African and the Irish—Hanes sees as irrelevant; Hanes sees only "small, medium, and large." The ethnic differences of Indian or Chinese with which the commercial begins are implicitly divisive, while the correct image of the world according to Hanes is one distinguished only by the neutral measure of T-shirt size. The ad closes with a chorus singing, "Just wait till we get our Hanes on you."

But if we compare the voice-over with the corresponding images, we will discover that the "small, medium, and large" of Hanes's vision is not the neutral nondivision that the voice-over seems to imply. "Small" is a small dark boy in a tropical setting, outside culture or civilization; "medium" is a dark woman standing outside a hut, simultaneously signifying domesticity and primitivity; while "large" is a light-skinned all-American male, attractive and muscular, his shirt marked with both the Olympic insignia and "U.S.A." While the cultural or ethnic differences of nations or peoples are here neutralized and displaced by the scientific measurement of small, medium, and large, the imagery that accompanies this contrast in fact repeats and reinforces very deeply rooted hierarchies of difference: the

colonial hierarchy of primitive vs. civilized, the racial hierarchy of dark-skinned vs. light-skinned, as well as the patriarchal hierarchy of children, women, and men. By renaming the differences signified by these hierarchies as sameness under the unifying sign of the T-shirt, the interlocking and mutually reinforcing simultaneity of colonial, racial, and patriarchal hierarchies is thus effaced. That is, Hanes relies on and reinscribes the very differences it is denying in order to give visual and emotional force to its message.

As an example of this double-edged appeal to difference, consider the drama of Westernization as it is enacted over and over in this commercial. Each strange and exotic native body is shown twice, in a pattern of “before and after” comparisons. These natives seem to welcome the Hanes invasion, only too happy to cast off their traditional ways for the tastes, styles, and values of the West. Ornate costumes are presented as the “everyday” style of these cultural others, a style that marks on the surface the exotic variety of cultures that Hanes will bring together under the banner of the 100-percent-cotton Tee. The formal stylized display of traditional costume, which typically includes sartorial codes of gender, age, and social status, is thus contrasted to the easy informality, the egalitarian casualness, and the comfortable unisexness of the T-shirt. Thus, the trauma of cultural or economic colonization is recast *for the colonizer* as a narrative of pleasurable metamorphosis. There is a sexual narrative here, too, if we understand the T-shirt no longer as underwear, but as the ultimate negation of sexuality, at least as it is worn in this commercial. The erotic temptation of the native body is veiled by the T-shirt that renders all bodies interchangeable. The sensual or erotic display of the native body is thus tamed and civilized by the more modest, understated T-shirt. We are meant to take pleasure in the display of the other’s body, while remaining reassured that the sensuality initially suggested has been adequately controlled. We are also meant to take pleasure in the other’s manifest delight in the gifts they have received from us, from the United States, or from Hanes. Thus, the history of colonial encounter and Western imperialism is renarrated to be simultaneously superficial—only a matter of clothes—as well as progressive—our clothes make your life bet-

ter. The other enjoys his or her transformation; the other “just can’t wait.”

Here, too, we see the flow of commodities outward, from Hanes to those others, with apparently no reciprocation (except the unstated flow of money back to Hanes). The commercial further mystifies the relations of production that underpin this path of consumption; where, after all, do these T-shirts come from? It was a scant three months between the public scandal surrounding Kathie Lee Gifford’s clothing line, which revealed the horrible conditions of Third World sweatshop production of major label clothing items, and Hanes’s Olympic celebration of putting clothes on those same Third World peoples, this time recast as happy consumers. In light of what is left out or distorted by Hanes’s global vision, one might be struck by the equivocation of the tag line — “Just wait till we get our Hanes on you” — which seems to play quite closely with an alternative reading, just wait till we get our *hands* on you. Is there not in Hanes’s promise to clothe the world in comfort also a threat? Perhaps this is a hint at the sinister side of Hanes’s transnational future, a dark and violent underside that is suppressed by the upbeat tone of the ad. What violence might be expected at the hands of Hanes as it extends its global reach? And alternatively, how might the global community imagined by this Hanes commercial also be allied with some form of violence?

III. The Alien Threat

To consider the relation between global community and violence, I want to turn to the summer blockbuster film *Independence Day*, released shortly before the 1996 games.⁵ Like the real event of the Olympics, the fantasy events of *Independence Day* play out in a ritualized form a particular vision of global unity. *Independence Day* is the story of an alien invasion that threatens to destroy all human life on earth. Although all of earth is threatened and major cities in every country are destroyed, we see the story entirely from the point of view of events in the United States, where the president teams up with a nerdy cable repairman, an alcoholic crop duster, and a heroic air force pilot to save the world. To say that this film is “patriotic” is an understatement; but its patriotism is expanded, identifying American

patriotic fervor with the global struggle for human existence. Rooting for the global community is identical to rooting for the United States. This film, in fact, makes this identification explicit in a number of ways, not the least of which is the title and date: *Independence Day* was released to coincide with the already existing U.S. holiday of Independence Day, and the events depicted in the film take place on July 3 and 4. The alien attack becomes an occasion for the constitution of a new global community, where the global community is understood as an expanded version of America. As the president rallies the last of the ragtag troops for a final, climactic, all-or-nothing assault on the aliens, the spectator is swept up in the rhetorical appeal of a world united by the threat of a common enemy. The president's words ring out:

Mankind. The word takes on a new meaning for all of us today. If any good has come from this savage and unprovoked attack on our planet, it is the recognition of how much we humans share in common. . . . It has shown us the insignificance of our thousand petty differences from one another and reminded us of our deep and abiding common interests. . . . And if we succeed [in battle]. . . . the Fourth of July will no longer be known only as an American holiday, but as the day when all the nations of the earth stood shoulder to shoulder and shouted: "We will not lay down and die. We will live on! We will survive! Today we celebrate our Independence Day!"⁶

Even the most cynical critic might be swept away by this special-effects frenzy, a thrill ride that demands as its price of admission only that you accept the initial premise: that the fundamental threat to life and humanity is a slimy and wholly evil alien. In *Independence Day*, the dangerous difference has been externalized, projected onto the repulsive and horrifying body of an absolute other who must be not simply controlled but absolutely obliterated in order to assure the coherence of the "community of mankind" that remains. This film provides a prototypical illustration of the splitting of ethnicity into a good form that can be recuperated and a dangerous form that must be expelled or destroyed. The film literalizes this distinction as a species difference: the differences between humans are superfi-

cial, while the difference between alien and human is absolute. Thus, the team of heroes simultaneously relies on ethnic stereotypes (the Jewish intellectual, the African-American fighter, the WASP man in a suit) while presenting a community of harmonious multiculturalism in which ethnic differences fail to register, much less matter. The alien, on the other hand, is, well, an alien. But we should notice that the alien-ness of the alien is not altogether unfamiliar even in human terms. I would suggest that the alien is depicted in precisely the same way as traditional American nativist or racist discourse has variously described Blacks, Mexicans, or Chinese: the alien does not speak our language, is hideously ugly, is violent and inclined to criminal behavior, looks or acts like an insect, and smells bad. Because it is a film in the genre of "save the planet from the alien invasion," *Independence Day* does away with the problem of perspective or point of view. There can be only one perspective in this scenario, the perspective of humanity. In this framework, the aliens are absolutely evil and the humans are absolutely good. Thus, the complexities of so-called ethnic conflict in real life are made absolutely simple and clear. While the humans originally seek a peaceful community with the alien, the alien seeks only to destroy. It is therefore because of the fundamental evilness of the alien that the existence of the alien cannot in any way be reconciled with the existence of the global community.

But notice also the necessity of this alien to the existence of the community. The two are interdependent: it is against the community that the alien is identified and demonized, and it is in its common struggle against the alien that the community is unified. Such a view would suggest not only that the community needs the alien in order to become a community, but that the community in effect *produces* the alien in order to define itself by projecting otherness outward. Within the imaginary world of the film, the alien appears to exist before the community. But if we consider the production of a film such as *Independence Day* as the expression of some public fantasy or desire, the alien menace as it appears in the film becomes a projection of a collective fantasy of a menacing other. It is in this way that one might conclude that the community produces the alien. Yet this production is obscured by the film's representation of the alien as existing prior to the community and as threatening the com-

munity from outside. In other words, the power of *Independence Day* as a narrative lies in its ability to reverse the relation between alien and community. The community constitutes itself by projecting difference onto the excluded other; *Independence Day* transforms this relation into the scene of an absolute other who arrives from elsewhere to threaten the already existing community. Thus, the cultural work of narratives like *Independence Day* is not confined to establishing the absolute difference or the “bad ethnicity” of the alien other. Such narratives also work to efface the interrelation between constituting a community and producing an enemy. Effacing this connection makes it all the easier to conclude that the best response to an alien threat is violent destruction.

Independence Day provides a particularly stark example of the representational operations that divide the good ethnic community from the bad alien other. But this division, and the exclusion or destruction it implies, is working every day around us to shape and give a simple explanation for contemporary conflicts at the local, national, and global levels. Popular representations of perceived threats to the well-being of the community such as illegal immigrants and Islamic fundamentalists, two popular versions of the bad or alien ethnic, rely on a logic much like that of *Independence Day*. For example, Islamic fundamentalism is represented as the absolute antithesis of modernity and Western civilization. We are frequently told that Islamic fundamentalists want to destroy the West. When terrifying or unexplained events occur, such as the Oklahoma City bombing or the crash of TWA flight 800, they are immediately blamed on Islamic fundamentalism, which is characterized as the source of absolute evil and destruction. My point here is not to argue whether Islamic fundamentalism as a singular phenomenon exists, or what it means to the various people who claim it; rather, I want to suggest that the popular image of Islamic fundamentalism is one example of the projection of an alien otherness that establishes and guarantees the boundaries of the good community. The popular representation of Islamic fundamentalism serves a crucial purpose: it provides a mechanism for establishing an idealized community by minimizing, suppressing, or effacing internal difference, and then in turn projecting it outward, where it reappears as a threatening, alien force.

IV. Border Control

Independence Day gave us the thrill of obliterating aliens from outer space. However, in current discussions of the identity and security of the national community, it is not space aliens but immigrant aliens that are the occasion for political debate and posturing. While those immigrants most objectionable — dark-skinned, unskilled laborers — may come from many different places, including South or Central America, Asia, or Africa, the immediacy of the border with Mexico makes the question of Mexican immigration most politically volatile. Unlike the virtually invisible Canadian border, the U.S.–Mexican border is envisioned as a war zone, a border along which America itself is continually put at risk. Especially in California and throughout the Southwest, it is the specter of the illegal Mexican alien that inspires calls for an ever more stringent and exclusionary stance toward immigration.

Contrary to the nativist images that depict Mexicans as an invasive force that would destroy “our” standard of living, Mexican immigrants have historically played a vital role in the U.S. economy, especially California’s agricultural sector. The history of U.S. Border Patrol efforts in the twentieth century is one of alternating periods of leniency toward undocumented immigration followed by efforts at mass deportation; this oscillation in policy has led to the popular characterization of the U.S.–Mexican border as a “revolving door.” The revolving door has served as a means of controlling, but never stopping, the flow across the border. However, the current debates about the border neglect this history, instead depicting undocumented workers as a threat to the nation, stealing jobs and resources from “real Americans.” In the 1990s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has been expanded and more aggressively deployed, instituting border guards and patrols under the auspices of Operation Blockade, Operation Hold-the-Line, Operation Gatekeeper, and Operation Guardian. As these names suggest, the INS is viewed increasingly as a militarized force, holding the line against the enemy threat from without.⁷

Like nativist rhetoric, the film *Independence Day* dramatizes an alien invasion in the near future. The space aliens are a powerful, dangerous enemy against which we are nearly helpless.

They are like locusts; their intention is to devour the planet and then move on. There can be no negotiation, compromise, or coexistence. In *Independence Day*, it's either us or them. If we can't hold the line and fend off the invasion, life as we know it is finished. This doomsday scenario given play in the film might seem at the least an exaggeration of the characterization of the threat of the "alien invasion" in real life. But the hysterical rhetoric that resulted in the passage of California's Proposition 187 might suggest that the Mexican alien threat is viewed in similar ways, as an imminent invasion of countless "insects" who threaten to overpower and overwhelm by the sheer force of their numbers, devouring all our precious resources, including jobs, schools, health care, and welfare dollars, and leaving us with nothing.⁸ *Independence Day* thus gives us a fantastical correlate to the politicized image of the border under siege, giving us an alien so inhuman, so singularly evil, that no response seems too extreme. Viewed through the lens of *Independence Day*, the threat of an alien invasion along the southern border can be made to appear frightfully real.

Such representations are dangerous not only because they provide a simplified vision of a complex problem but, more important, because they justify the militarization of the border and the accompanying escalation of violence against those who would attempt to cross it. By making violence appear to be the only possible response to a threat of invasion, such representations also make it more difficult to recognize the actual balance of power that pits the accumulated force of the INS backed by the U.S. government against the efforts of those attempting to cross the border. As the Border Patrol has become more militarized, human rights advocates have documented a disturbing pattern of violence and abuse on the part of border agents engaging in apprehension of documented and undocumented immigrants.⁹ At the same time, because of increased patrols and obstacles at easy crossing points, people are forced to attempt a crossing in more isolated or dangerous areas, where many fall prey to criminals, and others are injured or risk death from the elements. In this way, the "national security" that is meant to be effected at the border inverts itself into a perpetual condition of insecurity for those named as a threat.

Is there another way to understand the function of the border and the status of the alien beyond the divisive and violent vision offered in *Independence Day*? In the global community represented in the film, the inassimilable bad alien is absolutely other to the good community, separated by an impenetrable boundary that distinguishes us from them. But if we look a little more closely at the complex dynamics of labor and economy that characterize the ongoing conflicts along the U.S.–Mexican border, it becomes difficult to view the border as a static and absolute division. The border meant to distinguish and separate “us” from “them” is not an absolute boundary of separation. Rather, it is a complex and shifting scene of conflict and confrontation that does not have a simple geographical or social locale. At the same time, the identities of those on either side of the border are not easily distinguished and cannot easily be sorted into a coherent system of differences. People are not absolutely divided by this border: families straddle the border and individuals move across and back many times throughout a lifetime. Nor is culture divided or distinguished by the border. It is impossible to locate the end of Mexican culture or the beginning of U.S. culture in the complex border regions of the southwestern United States. Likewise, Mexican border cities such as Tijuana are in many ways inseparable from the United States; in Tijuana, one can spend U.S. dollars and speak English just as if one were in San Diego on the other side of the border. Thus, the U.S.–Mexican border does not separate two distinct and distinguishable entities. Rather, the border serves as a mechanism of control that serves primarily to regulate the flow of cheap labor. A vision of the border that would take these complexities of interpenetration and interdependence into account would also make explicit the implicit divisions of labor and power that underpin scenes of global community, divisions that are maintained by various kinds of border patrols.¹⁰

V. Conflict and Community

In the seductive and glowing image of the happy global family as imagined by the new corporate sponsors of the future, the deepening global divisions of labor and profit are recast as a global homogenization of consumption, creating a positive and

unifying world culture. And in turn, real conflicts over land, food, human rights, or self-determination are transformed into “ethnic conflicts” that are either recuperated as merely superficial differences of style or projected into the realm of the irrational and the antimodern. But if conflict in the context of globalization is to be taken seriously as something more than an anachronistic and destructive resistance to the progressive force of modernity, perhaps our first task must be to begin to recognize and resist the easy ethnicization of conflict that allows us to attribute dissent and discord to anachronistic, evil, or irrational ethnicities.

We need to pay more attention to the way in which the representation of conflicts as caused by “bad ethnicity” makes those conflicts appear both necessary and incomprehensible. The construction of the “bad ethnic” allows us to forget to ask about the experiences, perspectives, or needs of others. Instead, the bad ethnic is represented as irrational and out of control; the only possible response appears to be to try to subdue or manage the actions of the bad ethnic. We should also be alert to the way in which various groups are “ethnicized” — that is, grouped together as having a common nature, common lifestyle, common values, and so on—even if from a social scientific perspective they might not be considered an ethnic group. “Bad ethnicity” appears in relation both to domestic conflicts and international issues. Consider the following examples of “bad ethnics”: terrorists, welfare mothers, homosexuals, drug users, communists, Arabs, Serbs, Bosnians. Each of these is seen in various ways as threatening “our” security, “our” values, “our” way of life, or “our” democratic institutions. The popular response to each of these imagined threats is police actions of control, exclusion, or elimination. If, for example, the plight of so-called welfare mothers can be attributed to their “bad ethnicity,” that is, their alleged deviant habits and values (such as laziness, leeching off the state, promiscuity, and so on), then we feel not only justified but perhaps righteous in demonizing and punishing them. That is, the “good” community uses the explanation of “bad ethnicity” to justify excluding and guarding against the encroaching dangers of the “bad” alien other. But what of other social and economic factors such as the unemployment rate or the collapse of the urban industrial economy that might

contribute to the poverty of urban single mothers? These are more complicated issues that are evaded when “bad ethnicity” is blamed for every social or political ill.

Imagining conflict as an “alien invasion” and responding to the perceived threat by securing the border works as a stopgap between the complexity and uncertainty with which we are faced every day and the desire for an easy fix, one which will allow us to continue unchanged and unchallenged. Media spectacles from *Independence Day* to the Olympics to the coverage of the presidential election work to constitute the “we” as a homogeneous community of interest, and to exclude fundamental conflict or dissent by displacing it to the dangerous outside to be met with fear and suppressed by security measures. The global transformations and displacements we are witnessing cannot but be conflictual. But identifying as evil aliens those who have been denied opportunities, or those who object to or seek to change the relations of power or their place, shifts the realm of conflict from politics to police. Policing the border and suppressing or eliminating anything that appears threatening does not make the community more secure. Rather, such policing serves only to foreclose any debate about who or what the community ought to be. So long as we believe in the “good ethnic” and the “bad alien,” we will be unable to imagine or bring into practice a just or inclusive community, a community worthy of the name.¹¹

Notes

1. For various perspectives on the invention of ethnicity, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991).
2. On the power of the U.S. media to shape international perceptions, see especially Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
3. Ammirati, Puris, and Lintas, New York, for United Parcel Service, 1996.
4. The Arnell Group for Hanes Hosiery, 1996.
5. *Independence Day*, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1996.

6. From the novelization of the film *Independence Day*, by Dean Devlin & Roland Emmerich and Stephen Molstad (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 238.
7. Timothy J. Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S. – Mexico Border, 1978 – 1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home* (Austin: CMAS Books, University of Texas at Austin, 1996); Wade Gramh, “Masters of the Game: How the U.S. Protects the Traffic in Cheap Mexican Labor” in *Harper’s*, July 1996, 35–50.
8. California Proposition 187, passed on November 8, 1994, would deny publicly funded services, particularly health and education, to undocumented immigrants. The constitutionality of this measure continues to be contested in court. For a summary of the law’s provisions and implications, see Stanley Mailman, “California’s Proposition 187 and Its Lessons” in *New York Law Journal*, 3 January 1995: 3.
9. Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S. – Mexico Border*, 83–94.
10. For examples of such alternative border visions, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Cheech Marin’s 1987 film, *Born in East L.A.*, dramatizes this alternative border vision in a parodic form.
11. Many recent critics have proposed various notions of multicultural communities that would recognize and be responsive to conflict. See especially David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1994); Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*; and Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, eds., *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).