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Multiculturalism in a Transnational Frame: Post-racial Discourse and the US Furor of African-Chinese Lou Jing

In the US, the discourse of “post-racism” has enjoyed a great deal of public attention ever since the Obama campaign and certainly after Obama’s election. Yet, the “mistaken identity” incident this summer that unfortunately led to the arrest of famous Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates has cast serious doubts on whether the US has become a “post-racial” society. This is the larger context that structures ongoing US debates on whether we are witnessing the “end of multiculturalism” and the rise of alternatives. This paper attempts to provide some tentative thoughts to these timely and urgent questions by focusing on the conspicuous media attention - particularly from the US - two Chinese citizens have recently received: Lou Jing, a 20-year-old Shanghainese, who made the last 30 in the Chinese version of Pop Idol [Go! Oriental Girl] this past October, and Ding Hui, a young man from Hangzhou, who was picked earlier this year by China for her national volleyball team. Neither event would have attracted unusual notice from the Chinese public or US media but for the fact that these two young people belong to a small, and for China, novel category of mixed-race citizens, i.e. children of African fathers and Chinese mothers. Their emergence into the limelight has triggered a heated internet debate about what it means to be Chinese. Both have been widely discussed on Chinese blogs as frank curiosities: Netizens comment on their white teeth, Ding Hui’s athleticism and Lou Jing’s sense of rhythm. On the show, the presenters repeatedly referred to Lou Jing as “chocolate.” While the US media has been rather quick to “expose China’s racism,” few have also reported Chinese people’s outrage directed at the blunt display of racism. Furthermore, by her own admission, Lou Jing had “never experienced racism” until she entered the competition. This paper argues that multiculturalism as a Neo-liberal discourse and project is neither dead nor of use to the future, because it is currently engaged in “third worlding” other countries. However, multiculturalism as a social justice discourse and New Leftist/Feminist project may be at risk to die a slow death unless we resuscitate it. And one way to do so would be to engage both discourses in a genuine global or transnational dialogue about how to disengage race from ethnicity, ethnicity from citizenship, and citizenship from gendered categories of identity. A detailed discussion of the case of Lou Jing will highlight how we can begin to think the work of thinking multiculturalism in a transnational frame.