

Teaching Asian American Studies In A Liberal Arts College: One Asianist's Reflections

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In several papers I received recently from college students in a first-year writing seminar, this is how they described the family members who are the protagonists of Gish Jen's novel *The Love Wife*: "The Bailey-Wong family consists of Blondie, an American; Carnegie, a Chinese-American; Wendy and Lizzie, two adopted Asian girls; and Bailey, the natural son of Blondie and Carnegie." In fact, every member of the Wong family is American by citizenship, four of them by birth. Carnegie is a second-generation Chinese American. Of the two daughters, one is adopted from China, the other is of unknown Asian heritage and born and adopted in the United States. Blondie, as one can readily guess from that descriptive nickname, is Caucasian, and she alone merits being named American. This was very frustrating to me. The seminar class had had numerous conversations about precisely the issue of the unconscious equation of white with American and vice versa. We had discussed how, in Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker*, the Korean American protagonist's description of his Caucasian wife as "My American wife,"¹ disclosed his alienation from full participation in and claim to American society. To break that unthinking equation between race and citizenship and to draw attention to the exclusionary subtext of that equation were among the basic aims of my course. And at least with some students, I seem to have failed.

Further, just as students readily associate American with Caucasians of European heritage, they are even more ready to conflate Asian and Asian American, so that geographic origin, no matter how remote, trumps any subsequent affiliations for persons of Asian heritage in the United States. A hint of this thinking can be seen in the descriptions in the student papers quoted above of the two adopted girls as "Asian." Similarly, students will use Japanese for Japanese American, Korean for Korean American, etc. so that the second is unproblematically subsumed under the first. Such essentialist thinking finds further expression in the students' desire to read

¹ Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 9.

ethnographically the behavior of Asian Americans represented in literary texts as reflective the norms of some native culture, rather than an accommodation to or negotiation of their place in America. Thus when confronted with the variously silenced protagonist of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, students will remark on the stereotypical quietness of the Asian or Asian American woman, despite Kingston's explicit characterization of her Chinese mother and Chinese women in general as loud, and her complex examination of the sources of the protagonist's silences. So too, the Japanese American family in *When the Emperor Was Divine* is described as "introverted," turning the stereotype into a matter of negative personal psychology. More often than not, students will overlook any causal relationship between the protagonists' behavior and the historical experiences—the internments—that shape their lives and psyches.

These student responses, which I get year after year, led me to look more widely at how the study of Asia and Asian America is conducted on college campuses. In the remainder of this paper, I will concentrate on some observations about the sites of study and how they participate in or try to overcome essentialist thinking. It should be noted that I am not an Asian Americanist by academic training, and I teach on a campus with no specialists in that field. The following remarks are my attempt to place my experiences in teaching Asian American literature in a larger context and to find solutions to the kinds of problems I have encountered.

Asian Studies and Asian American studies are distinct fields, differing in origins, academic missions, and research interests, which serve as intellectual, ideological, and structural boundaries.² Analyzing the trajectory of her academic career from an Asianist to Asian Americanist, Dorinne Kondo argues that "the genesis of the two fields—in Orientalism on one hand, and in the struggles of the 1960s, in the case of Asian American studies—could not be more opposed."³ "All of us who are in the Asian studies field," she notes, "are to some degree the beneficiaries of an Orientalist geopolitical legacy."⁴ Others have argued that Area studies are predicated on the notion of distance and difference; "those from whom *information* [italics in original] flows are sedimented into objects of (area) study, whereas those from whom *knowledge* [italics in original] flows are coetaneously empowered with the subjective authority to evaluate

² Shirley Hune, "Asian American Studies and Asian Studies," in *Color-Line to Borderlands*, ed. Johnella Butler, 227-239, (Seattle: University Washington Press, 2001), 229.

³ Dorinne Kondo, "(Un)Disciplined Subjects," in *Orientations*, ed. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa, 25-40, (Durham: Duke University Press), 35.

⁴ Dorinne Kondo, "(Un)Disciplined Subjects," 35.

that information.”⁵ Kondo and others acknowledge that the Asian studies field can no longer be monolithically characterized as politically and theoretically conservative, but with a few exceptions, the field has not turned its attention to the “Asia within America,” preserving geographic distance and difference.

For its part, Asian American studies also attempted to define Asian America as distinct from Asia.⁶ Reacting, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the invisibility in the academe of non-majority populations and their exclusion from the political and cultural spheres, the pioneers of Asian American studies called for curricula more inclusive of racial minorities. These demands were made not so long after historical events, chief among them the Japanese American internments, which had explicitly questioned the possibility of one group of Asian Americans’ political loyalties being confined to the United States. In response, the Asian American studies field suppressed any ties to the geographic, other space of Asia. To borrow Maxine Hong Kingston’s description of her purposes in writing *China Men*, the founders of Asian American studies were “claiming America.”⁷ Ironically however, as Sylvia Yanagisako argues, “Asian American studies has responded to [the] demand for exclusive national allegiance by including within its field only those people, relations, communities, and institutions, located on US soil,” thereby “reaffirming the typology of geopoliticocultural spaces of area studies.”⁸ Yanagisako further goes on to warn: “In envisioning Asians in the United States as cultural subjects who share something beyond their political location in a particular national space, Asian American studies risks affirming an essentialist representation of Asian Culture.”⁹

The distinction between the two fields plays out on many of our campuses. In the last quarter of the 20th century, East Asian studies at least has been relatively well supported both by government and corporate funding, allowing more and more institutions to add programs. Majority students have seen future, economic benefit in the study of East Asian languages.

⁵ Kandice Chuh, *Imagining Otherwise*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 90.

⁶ A concise overview of the distinct histories of the two fields can be found in Kondo, “(Un)Disciplined Subject;” Sucheta Mazumdar, “Asian American Studies and Asian Studies: Rethinking Roots,” in *Asian American: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, ed. Shirley Hune, Hyung-chan Kim, Stephen S. Fugita, and Amy Ling, (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1991), 29-44; and Shirley Hune, “Asian American Studies and Asian Studies: Boundaries and Borderlands of Ethnic Studies and Area Studies,” in *Color-Line to Borderlands*, 240-64.

⁷ Quoted in Jinqi Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1998, 111.

⁸ Sylvia Yanagisako, “Asian Exclusion Acts,” 175-189, in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, 186.

⁹ Yanagisako, “Asian Exclusion Acts,” 186.

However, our “East of California”¹⁰ campuses are unlikely to have an Asian American studies program. Asian American studies has not attracted the same level of financial support as Asian Studies; it has not been shaped by governmental policies or students’ career aspirations. Further, the numbers of Asian American students on our campuses are low; A Higher Education Data Sharing Survey of 2000-5 shows that the enrollment of Asian American students in Midwestern liberal arts colleges averages around four per cent of the student body. That figure is too small for most faculty and administrators to look upon as a clientele for a particular set of courses. More important—since such programs and courses should not merely be a function of student populations—Asian Americans as a significant group of people in the United States or as an academic field are invisible to the administration and most of the faculty.

In consequence, the sites where most of our students are likely to encounter Asian America when it has not fallen unseen into the divide between black and white, are scattered courses in the English and history departments. The move to include Asian America, as well as other ethnicities, peoples of color, etc. in the offerings of these departments is part of the multicultural or diversity initiatives we have all seen on our campuses since the 1980s. David Palumbo-Liu contends that “one way to understand the recent interest in diversity is to see it as a mode of managing a crisis of race, ethnicity, gender, and labor in the First World and its relations with the Third...”¹¹ I will not reproduce that argument here, but several points more closely related to teaching and the reading of texts should be noted. First and most obviously, non-mainstream texts remain segregated into their designated spaces of difference as exemplars of differences. My concern is less, as some Asian American scholars have feared, that only European-derived texts are considered Literature (with a capital L), than that Asian American or other “ethnic” texts are presented as “authentic, unmediated representations of ethnicity”¹² or in David Palumbo-Liu’s words, “ethnic texts as proxies for ethnic peoples.”¹³ Likewise as Kandice

¹⁰ I take this phrase from The East of California Network, “a caucus within the Association For Asian American Studies that promotes the regional interests of the Association’s Midwest and East Coast regions.” See <http://chnm.gmu.edu/eoc/resources/startingprograms/introduction.htm>.

¹¹ David Palumbo-Liu, “Introduction,” in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu, 1-27, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1995), 6.

¹² Palumbo-Liu, “Introduction,” *The Ethnic Canon*, 12.

¹³ Palumbo-Liu, “Introduction,” *The Ethnic Canon*, 13. See also Christopher Douglas, “Reading Ethnography,” in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, ed. Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, 101-124, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). Douglas notes that “by reading Chinese American fiction ethnographically,

Chuh describes it, “Otherness appears principally as an *idea* [original emphasis], one devoid of the contradictions and complexities that inscribe and describe people’s lives.”¹⁴ With the authors conflated with their protagonists, and the protagonist with the culture, the texts are understood to be expressions of culture, either that of an ahistorical, monolithic, “original” Asian culture or some under-conceptualized notion of an “Asian American” one.

Given the above, and in the absence of Asian Americanists on our campuses, I urge members of the Asian studies field to become more familiar with the Asian American field and to take greater responsibility for teaching about Asian America. But I do so cautiously and with some hesitation. On one hand, the inclusion of Asian America under the Asia umbrella may, ironically, only encourage a further conflation of the two. Housed and administered together, associated with the same faculty, the two programs could be perceived by students and other faculty as a single academic field focusing on Asia.¹⁵ Would we not be reinforcing the essentializing focus on racial or geographic heritage over all the myriad differences among various groups of Asians and Asian Americans? To borrow Lisa Lowe’s words, “disciplinary fields simultaneously produce and manage their objects of study...”¹⁶ On the other hand, an academic background in Asian studies may make it less likely that we would see Asia as culturally monolithic or historically undifferentiated. In addition, the field of Asian American offers exciting challenges to the kinds of essentialisms I have mentioned above. The various attempts Asian American scholars have made to trace and define the relationship between the two terms Asia(n) and America(n) disclose how unsettled and contested they were historically and still remain. And, just as the ideological and political premises on which area studies were

contemporary white American readers are rediscovering their own cultural-psychic coherence... their own unproblematic place within American society.” p. 19.

¹⁴ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 18.

¹⁵ Combined programs of Asian Studies and Asian American Studies are relatively rare. Several campuses of the state university system of New York offer such programs, as does, also on the East coast, University of Massachusetts Amherst and Wesleyan University. In a state where most institutions offer independent programs in Asian Studies and Asian American Studies, California State Long Beach combines them. In the Midwest, Loyola University of Chicago offers a minor for which students must take courses both about Asia and the Asian diaspora.

¹⁶ Lisa Lowe, “Epistemological Shifts: National Ontology and the New Asian Immigrant,” 267, *Orientations*, 267-276.

founded have been reexamined in recent years,¹⁷ so too scholars of Asian American Studies have begun to reexamine the foundational division between Asian and Asian American Studies.

Issues of essentialism have troubled the Asian American field since its beginnings. In the debates concerning who, what experiences, or what viewpoints constitute Asian America,” Frank Chin’s attempt to exorcise the stereotypical, orientalist’s “Asian” from Asian America are well known. Thus in his introductions to *Aiiieeee* and the *Great Aiiieeee* and elsewhere, he writes of a “fake” and a “real” Asian American, the former including “first-generation immigrants who maintain strong cultural ties to their countries of origin while fulfilling the subservient stereotype of the humble and passive Oriental”¹⁸ and Asian American authors who offered or fabricated images of Asian Americans and their culture as fundamentally other, fulfilling white stereotypes.¹⁹ Chin himself emphasizes the masculine heritage of railroad workers and internment camps.

What might be termed Frank Chin’s counter essentialism has been contested on various grounds: the absence of consideration of gender and class and of the rapidly changing demographics of the Asian American population, post 1965. Among my own students are those whose parents arrived from Vietnam or Korea when the students were still young, Korean adoptees, biracial students, and those whose families have been in this country for four or five generations. A shift to the plural “Asian American literatures and histories,” adding on new places of origin as well as axes of difference: generation, gender, sexuality, and class, etc. is one solution, but with such extensive and continuous fracturing, what Asian America might be beyond a collection of parts is left unclear. At times, an Asian American identity is deferred and projected into the future. One scholar writes, “Distinctions among the various national groups sometimes do blur after a generation or two when it is easier for us to see what we share as members of an American racial minority.”²⁰ Such a formulation attempts to escape the

¹⁷ See Kondo, “(Un)Disciplined Subjects,” 25-40, as well as Rey Chow, *Leading Questions*, also in *Orientations*, 189-212. Devoted to this issue as well is *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Susan Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996): 315-346, 325.

¹⁹ Patricia Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 65, 64-89 passim. For an insightful discussion of Frank Chin’s attempts to define Asian America, see David Leiwei Li, “The Formation of Frank Chin and the Formations of Chinese American Literature,” in *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, 211-224. For a discussion of the disputes between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston concerning the nature of Chinese American literature, see “*Tripmaster Monkey*, Frank Chin, and the Chinese Heroic Tradition.” in Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 169-187.

²⁰ Elaine Kim quoted in Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” p. 326-7.

essentializing of place of origin over all other differences and the myth of assimilation, but cannot fully propose an alternative vision.

At the same time that the field was beginning to focus on demographic changes, new perspectives of poststructuralism, transnationalism, diaspora, and postcolonialism called into question the “implicit framing principles of nation-based fields like Asian American studies.”²¹ Transnationalism and notions of diaspora proclaim national borders increasingly irrelevant in formations of identity and culture, while postcolonialism call for the investigation of the complex encounters and power imbalances between East and West, first and third worlds. These theories have made visible the complex histories of multiple shifts of national residence, of dispersed families and displaced persons (at times in direct consequence of US imperialism), or those who regard the US as “simply one of many possible places to exercise their portable capital and portable skills.”²² Likewise, poststructural theorizing has destabilized all notions of referentiality, identity, subject, and knowledge. Thus for example, explicitly contesting the manner in which “orientalism seeks to consolidate the coherence of the West as subject precisely through the representation of “oriental” subjects as homogenous, fixed, and stable,” Lisa Lowe asserts that the “noncorrespondence between the orientalist object and the Asian American subject ultimately expresses the limits of such fictions.”²³ More radically, Kandice Chuh theorizes “‘Asian American’ [is] a term *in difference from itself*—at once making a claim of achieved subjectivity and referring to the impossibility of that achievement” and argues for conceiving Asian American studies as a “subjectless discourse,” [creating] the conceptual space to prioritize difference by foregrounding the discursive constructedness of subjectivity”²⁴

For my teaching, I have discovered that these new theoretical frameworks have resulted in nuanced approaches to Asian American literary texts. These are but a few examples. In her challenging book, Kandice Chuh argues in her readings of John Okada’s novel *No No Boys* and Chang-rae Lee’s *Gesture Life*, that we “need to trace deeply the global contexts within which

²¹ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, p. 3. Numerous texts deal with this vast subject, and many are cited in this paper. See also the special issue of *Amerasia Journal*, “Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies,” edited by Michael Omi and Dana Takagi, vol 21, numbers 1 and 2, (1995).

²² Sau-Ling C. Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” *Amerasia Journal* 21, no. 1 and 2 (1995), 1-29, 5.

²³ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 67.

²⁴ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 8. 9.

both national and transnational subjectivities are formed.”²⁵ In *Imagining the Nation*, David Leiwei Li reads Asian American texts to “reveal the historical contradiction of a United States caught between the utopian impulse of democratic consent and the residual practice of national inheritance... to illuminate the inextricable but often repressed relation between the acts of Asian exclusion and American national formation.”²⁶ Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong discusses not only gender but how images of Asians and Asia are deployed for a majority audience in Amy Tan’s novels, in her article, “‘Sugar Sisterhood’: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon.”²⁷

It should not be thought, however, that the issue of an Asian American identity has been settled for good. The history of disenfranchisement of those racialized as Asian in America as well as the original activist stance of Asian American studies to address inequities in rights, citizenship, full participation in American society dispose members of the field to question the advisability of surrendering that identity. In her discussion of the deployment of poststructural theories in Asian American studies, Sau-ling Wong nonetheless concludes that “a commitment to the place where one resides” ... on which Asian American studies was founded, is what today’s Asian Americanists must not lose sight of amidst the enthusiastic call for denationalization.”²⁸ Lisa Lowe acknowledges that “Asian American” is not a natural or static category,” but argues that “it is a social constructed unity, a situationally specific position, assume for political reasons. She proposes as “strategic essentialism” in which “specific signifiers of racialized ethnic identity” can be used “for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of

²⁵ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 15.

²⁶ David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 1, 3.

²⁷ Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, “‘Sugar Sisterhood’: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” in Palumbo-Liu, ed., *The Ethnic Canon*, pp. 174-210.

²⁸ Sau-ling C. Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” 19. In her essay, “Whither Asian American Studies” Sucheng Chan also questions the wisdom of jettisoning the US focus for a transnationalist or diasporic one. She notes generational differences and the transnational origins of younger scholars who do not share the activist history of the earlier generation. Sucheng Chan, *In Defense of Asian American Studies*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005) 175-197. In contrast, Susan Koshy takes strong issue with Wong’s formulations, which she deems “a simplistic notion, and noting that “the issue of ‘commitment’ holds a particularly painful history for Asian Americans whose loyalty has been historically impugned by racist allegations...” Koshy, 341.

“Asian American” so as to insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower.”²⁹

As a teacher who confronts the invisibility or essentialization of Asians/Asian Americans on her campus every day, I feel that perhaps Lowe’s notion of strategic deployment is still useful. On campuses where Asians and Asian American faculty, staff, and students are so under-represented, those of us who are the seemingly designated representatives face the double challenge of invisibility within black/white discourse and, when noticed, the dulling force of essentialization. To answer the first of these, we need to assume a strategic essentialism just to be seen and heard. The second part of Lowe’s proposal allows us to question and challenge again and again not only the conflation of Asia(n) and Asian America(n) but the use of such myths as that of assimilation, model minority or of innate, sedimented cultural difference. On most of our “East of California” campuses, Asian American students and faculty will never escape classrooms where we are a numerical minority. Thus to teach Asian American texts means to confront majority students’ contradictory notions of “we are all/become Americans” and the easy slippage between Asian American and Asian, both being forms of resistance against true differences of history and experience in the United States. My readings in Asian American studies have given me tools to overcome that resistance. I would like the texts I teach to be a space for the Asian American students to discover a sense of “we,” where they see reflected the complex and ongoing negotiations of their lives.

²⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, p. 83.