

Guest Editors' Introduction

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, Asian American studies has been simultaneously a site for the critique of knowledge formations and a site for the generation of practices aimed at social change. The contemporary shift in the demographics of the Asian population within the United States, and the international, political, social, and economic forces of which those demographics are an index, are currently initiating reformulations of the objects and methods of Asian American study. The essays in this volume, we think, are both integral to and symptomatic of these reformulations. They persist in linking epistemological critique with projects for social and economic justice, yet most of them redefine the terrain of the “political” in ways that suggest the necessary challenge to notions of political subjectivity and practice defined exclusively within the public sphere of the U.S. nation-state.

Asian immigration to the United States began in the mid–nineteenth

century with the developing U.S. economy's demand for inexpensive labor.¹ In the period from roughly 1850 to World War II, Asian immigration was a site for the eruptions and resolutions of contradictions between the national economy and the political state, and from World War II onward, it was the locus of contradictions between the nation-state and the global economy.² By the same token, Asia was the site for U.S. expansion—from the colonization of the Philippines to the military occupation of Japan to the wars in Korea and Vietnam. In the first period, the contradiction between the economic need for inexpensive, tractable labor and the political need to constitute a homogeneous U.S. nation was “resolved” through a series of legal exclusions, disenfranchisements, and restricted enfranchisements of Asian immigrants that simultaneously “racialized” these groups as “nonwhites” and consolidated immigrants of diverse European descent as “white.” Acts restricting and regulating the possibility of Asian American settlement and cultural expression were promulgated against the Chinese in 1882, South Asians in 1917, Japanese and Koreans in 1924, and Philippine immigrants in 1934. Because historically economic forces and exigencies have been mediated through the legal apparatus, which racializes and genders immigrant subjects, for Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, class struggles have always intersected with and been articulated through race and gender discriminations. In the latter period, the capitalist imperative has come into greater contradiction with the political imperative of the U.S. nation-state, with capitalism requiring an economic internationalism and the state needing to be politically coherent and hegemonic in world affairs in order to determine the conditions of that internationalism. The expansion that led from U.S. colonialism in the Philippines to wars in Korea and Vietnam violently displaced immigrants from those nations; the aftermath of the repressed history of U.S. imperialism in Asia now materializes in the “return” of Asian immigrants to the imperial center.³

Both the racialized, gendered character of Asian immigrant labor within the emergence of U.S. capitalism and U.S. colonial modes of development and exploitation in Asia indicate that U.S. capital has historically accumulated and profited through the differentiation of labor, rather than through its homogenization; in the global expansion of the capitalist mode, the racial and gendered character of labor has been further exaggerated, refined, and

built into the regime itself. Since the 1980s, global restructuring has reorganized the former mode of production and shifted many manufacturing operations to Asia, Latin America, and other sites in the neocolonized world; this reorganization also produces a greater “pull” for new immigrants, especially women, to fill insecure assembly and service-sector jobs in the United States. The international division of labor defines the sites in which the contemporary contradictions of the national and the international converge.⁴

Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued that racialized groups within the United States are formed in the ongoing dialectic between the racial state's repressions and exclusions and the oppositional social movements that contest the state, so that race is “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.”⁵ The contradictions of Asian immigration at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians “within” the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets. At the same time, Asians have been linguistically, culturally, and racially marked as “foreign” and “outside” the national polity. Thus, late nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants labored in mining, agriculture, and railroad construction but were excluded from citizenship and political participation in the state.⁶ The contradiction of immigration and citizenship took a different but resonant form during World War II, when U.S.-born Japanese Americans, who were nominally recognized as citizens and hence recruited into the U.S. military, were dispossessed of freedoms and properties explicitly granted to citizens, officially condemned as “racial enemies,” and interned in camps throughout the western United States.⁷ Philippine immigration after the period of U.S. colonization animates yet another kind of contradiction. For Filipino immigrants, modes of capitalist incorporation and acculturation into American life begin not at the moment of immigration, but rather in the “homeland,” already deeply affected by U.S. influences and modes of social organization. The situation of Filipino Americans, or U.S. Filipinos, foregrounds the way in which Asian Americans emigrating from previously colonized sites are not exclusively formed as racialized minorities within the United States but are simultaneously determined by colonialism and capital investment in Asia.⁸ South Asian immigrants in the

United States have a complex racial formation that has been determined by the histories of British colonization of the subcontinent, U.S. immigration legislation, and migrations to the United States not only from South Asia but from Canada, Britain, and East Africa as well.⁹

A series of acts passed between 1943 and 1952 repealed Asian exclusion and set quotas limiting immigration from Asian countries; these acts also lifted the bar to citizenship that dated back to 1790 and permitted immigrants of Asian origin to become naturalized as citizens for the first time. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished the quotas established by the repeal acts. Owing to this act, the majority of Asian Americans are today Asian born rather than U.S. born, and new immigrant groups from South Vietnam, South Korea, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan have rendered more heterogeneous the already existing Asian American group of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent. The changing population of Asian immigrants can be said to constitute the newest “racial formation” of Asian Americans.

If the advent of new immigration constitutes a “new formation” of Asian Americans, it has also initiated new questions that have ramifications for the research and study of Asian American history, epistemology, subject formation, and cultural and social practice. To account for the historical pasts and presents of these new immigrants, we believe there will need to be a variety of connections between Asian studies and Asian American studies, though these encounters will surely have to take account of the long history of dissymmetry between the two fields, the differences in their disciplinary imperatives and in the privileges of their institutional locations, and the large gaps between the subjects and knowledges posited by each field. We have chosen to place this volume of essays with *positions* because we hope to foster and facilitate new critical discussions between progressive scholars of East Asia and those in Asian American studies. In these new critical discussions, in the words of Min-Jung Kim, one of the essayists collected here, “each group [would] be willing to open up their works to ideological transformations that may at times destabilize their own authority.” Indeed, the dialogue between the first two essays, by Kim and Helen Heran Jun, is an instance of the kind of critical discussion we might hope to initiate. Kim relates the emergence of Korean American nationalism to the history of Korean nationalism under

Japanese colonialism and U.S. imperialism, arguing that the history of U.S. imperialism has ruptured the ties between contemporary Korean nationalism and Korean American nationalism. Jun's essay moves in another direction, extending the analysis of the complex relations between and exclusions of Korean and Korean American nationalist formations throughout the contemporary period of global restructuring. Jun focuses specifically on the effects of state, dissident, and oppositional nationalisms on working women both in Korea and in the United States, and she analyzes strategies and practices in which nationalist formations have been opened and rearticulated to enable lines of affiliation across national borders.

Like Kim's and Jun's essays, important new Asian American projects continue to link epistemological critique with the struggle for social change, and to achieve this linking by addressing the historical, political, and economic shifts of the last thirty years. Many important pressures have changed the questions we ask and the objects we ask about, but we would characterize the most significant as:

1. the "post-Fordist" restructuring of global capitalism that employs "mixed production" and "flexible accumulation" and permits the exploitation of Asian workers both in Asia (in the "newly industrializing countries" of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, as well as in the "free trade zones" of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and the Philippines) and in the United States;
2. the changed demography of the Asian American population as the result of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which increased and diversified Filipino, Korean, Southeast Asian, and South Asian communities in the United States;
3. the colonial and neocolonial role of the United States in the Asian states from which these new "Asian American" communities emigrate;
4. the failure of citizenship and civil rights to guarantee equality of opportunity and resources to poor, racialized, and gendered communities in the United States, together with what Glenn Omatsu has termed the "one-sided class war" of the 1970s and the "corporate assault on poor communities of color in the U.S.," which have made it so important to understand the racialization of Asians in relation to the racialization of other groups of color.¹⁰

As Asian American studies reckons with these different conditions, previous methods and paradigms are reevaluated, and what constitutes “political” intervention is redefined in ways that combine historical modes with new practices.

In the essays by Oscar Campomanes and Viet Thanh Nguyen, as well as those by Jun and Kim, we can see that studies that place “Asian Americans” within both the U.S. national/global/international determinations rearticulate a commitment to the earlier project of linking critiques of knowledge formations to social change. Campomanes argues that we must relocate Asian American studies within an analysis of U.S. imperialism and the present state of global capitalism, and see the Asian American predicament as part of a “world-historical drama” that recognizes that “the U.S. formation is only one among many such multicultural encounters (or ‘multisided convergences of various peoples’) during and after global colonization.” Nguyen’s essay places the theme of the Vietnamese woman’s body in Le Ly Hayslip’s work within the context of the U.S. war in Vietnam and an international economic framework. While immigration, racialization, and “internal colonialism” within the modern U.S. nation-state have been the central paradigms and “narratives” for understanding Asian American subject and group identities, these essays suggest that “Asian Americans” are not exclusively determined by their “American” histories; rather, they seek to understand that Asian Americans at present include groups of immigrants emerging out of U.S. colonialism and neocolonialism in Asia. Indeed, all of the essays in this volume conceptualize Asian Americans as simultaneously formed within both U.S. national and global frameworks. Since the contemporary social formation conjoins forms of the modern U.S. state (citizenship, law, police, military) with the “postmodern” movements and forces of the global economy, the subject that emerges from this conjunction cannot be captured strictly by the concept of the national and its public sphere. “Becoming a national citizen” cannot be the master narrative for the Asian American subject. The essays collected here suggest that the current social formation entails a subject narrated less by modern civil rights discourse and more by the histories of U.S. wars in Asia, immigration, and the current global economy.

If an interrogation of the “modern” state in relation to the “postmodern”

forces of globalization is one of the “new questions” in Asian American studies, other issues that currently animate the field are the critique of “modern” epistemologies and the recognition of the limitations of post-Enlightenment paradigms, even the political economic analysis on which much discussion of Asian immigration and globalization has relied. Several of the essays shed light on which practices, subjects, and knowledges are occluded when the political economic discourse becomes the exclusive “master narrative.” Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s essay investigates the “Asian/American woman” as a problem of knowledge within the social sciences, and analyzes the representational modes through which the Asian female working body in the transnational flow of capital and labor is spatially and temporally disciplined. While her essay is undeniably concerned with the disciplining and exploitation of Asian women in assembly-line manufacturing and sex work, she also examines the location of “Asian/Asian American women” as the produced object of discourse. She cautions against analyses of domination that visually fetishize the Asian woman’s body at work and privilege the “mobile, disembodied agency of capitalist accumulation.” Eliza Noh’s essay is likewise critical of the U.S.-Asia sex trade, yet she too foregrounds the discursive modes through which the ecumenical campaign to end Asian sex tourism constructs “Asian sexuality” as deviant, oppressed, and in need of Christian moral conversion. In their different discussions, both Kang and Noh cast a shadow of skepticism on discourses of emancipation. Gayatri Gopinath’s essay also critiques narratives of modernity and their attendant assumptions of universal progress, development, expansion, and visibility. Gopinath traces the representation of women’s homoerotic sexual practices in the international context of the “queer” South Asian diaspora. In its remapping of the “home” as a female homoerotic site, which contradicts the western political discourse of visibility, publicity, and enlightenment, Gopinath’s essay is likewise suggestive about what “modernity” privileges and which contradictions it suppresses.

As discussed above, the populations that make up immigrant communities in the United States have changed since 1965. However, as Eithne Luibheid argues in her essay, while the Immigration and Nationality Act “opened” the United States to new immigrants, it also created an apparatus that produced differentiated categories of “the immigrant” for surveillance

and regulation. At the moment, immigration to the United States is symptomatic of global capitalist restructuring, and “the immigrant” is now a highly targeted object of the current nationalist agenda. Immigration has always been a site for policing by the U.S. nation-state, yet in the wake of California’s Proposition 187 and the current welfare reform, the categories of “legal” and “illegal,” “citizen” and “noncitizen,” “U.S. born” and “permanent resident” are newly articulated modes for discriminating against and extracting low-wage labor from immigrant communities. The need to protect immigrant communities while a “national crisis” is being constructed around “the immigrant” has given rise to a variety of “Asian American” projects that are generating new activist practices and suggesting cross-group cross-national modes of organizing. These immigrant-focused projects emerge in opposition to the attempts to deny post-1965 immigrants from Asia and Latin America medical care and schooling, and work against the labor exploitation and racial harassment of immigrants enabled by the policing of citizenship. Peter Nien-Chu Kiang’s activism and research are directed at securing just schooling and social equity for the children of new Southeast Asian immigrant communities, particularly bilingual Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian immigrant children in Massachusetts; his essay here argues for a shift in Asian American strategies and practices in light of the new Asian immigrant populations.

Another concern of the essays in this volume is the creation and maintenance of solidarity across racial and national boundaries. Jun’s essay, for example, explores the rearticulation of “nationalism” as a vehicle for relations between workers in the Asian “homeland” and workers in immigrant sites, or for relations between Asian immigrants and other racialized peoples in the United States. Anuradha Advani’s narrative describes strategies for organizing South Asian immigrant taxi cab drivers in New York City, pointing to the limitations of racial, national, and gender identity-based modes of practice in this particular organizing effort. The interrogation of national and ethnic identity is also the subject of Enrique Bonus’s ethnographic study of “oriental” grocery stores in the Filipino immigrant communities of Los Angeles and San Diego counties. Bonus conceives of these “local” stores as transnational social spaces where ethnic identity is marked, practiced, and negotiated amidst ongoing immigration from and return to

the Philippines. All of these essays reevaluate social practice, activist strategies, and the definition of racial, national, and ethnic "identities" with respect to the new Asian immigrations.

The essays in this volume break new ground in Asian American studies. While focusing on the cultural and epistemological ramifications of new immigrants from Asia, they resituate and revise the discussions of Asian American racial formation, Asian American knowledges, and Asian American culture. As the formation of Asian Americans within the United States is placed in dialectical relation to international histories and locations, the objects and methods of neither Asian American studies nor Asian studies can remain the same.

Elaine H. Kim and Lisa Lowe, Guest Editors

Notes

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- 1 See Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich, eds., *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
- 2 This argument is elaborated in Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).
- 3 On the post-1965 immigration from Asia see Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng, eds., *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
- 4 On the specific operations of the global economy see Swasti Mitter, *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto, 1986); Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994); M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Aihwa Ong, "The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 5 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 6 On nineteenth-century Chinese immigrant labor see Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil:*

- The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), and Sucheng Chan, ed., *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882–1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).
- 7 On the history of the internment of 110,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans during World War II see Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano, eds., *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986); Peter Irons, *Justice Delayed: The Record of the Japanese American Internment Cases* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); and Gary Y. Okihiro, *Whispered Silences: Japanese Americans and World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).
 - 8 See Yen Le Espiritu, “Colonial Oppression, Labour Importation, and Group Formation: Filipinos in the United States,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 1 (January 1996): 29–47. For a coherent distinguishing of Filipino Americans, or “U.S. Filipinos,” from other Asian American groups see the essays in *Critical Mass* 47, no. 3 (September 1995), ed. Oscar V. Campomanes.
 - 9 The racial formation of South Asians in the United States has been well analyzed in the work of Kamala Visweswaran, “Diaspora by Design: Flexible Citizenship and South Asians in U.S. Racial Formations,” *Diaspora* 6, no. 1 (fall 1997); and Vanita Sharma, “Contesting Histories: The East India Company and South Asian Immigration to the United States,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian American Studies, Seattle, April 1997.
 - 10 See Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston: South End Press, 1994).