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Introduction: In Dialogue with Asian American Studies

Recent years have seen a convergence of attention to the topic of American Orientalism, though the approach to it has varied according to whether the scholar’s main investment has been in explicating the specificity of U.S. empire or the marginality of Asian Americans. In the first category, studies by Melani McAlister and Christine Klein, on American culture’s relation to U.S. foreign policy, question the Manichean and enduring nature of all Orientalisms by describing the sentimental, integrationist characteristics of a liberalizing postwar American regime. McAlister and Klein describe an American global expansion premised upon the cooperation of racial Others as well as their exclusion, identification as well as demonization. Such concern on the part of McAlister and Klein to complicate our sense of U.S. national identity as “not imagined simply as male . . . [or] not always or simply white, even when racial divisions were being insistently reinscribed” (Epic Encounters, 273) calls attention to the relative centrality of multicultural discourse to the United States as compared with other imperial formations, a multicultural discourse that Asian American literary critics are less inclined to take seriously. In the second category, Lisa Lowe and David Liwei Li are more traditionally Saidian, considering Orientalism in the American context to be structurally enduring and, at core, a distancing operation. Lowe and Li describe a U.S. national identity that is constituted through the exclusion of the aliens on whom it depends, and among these the Asian immigrant serves as the exemplary figure.

Both accounts of the twentieth-century fate of American Orientalism have their validity, but my interest here is less in adjudicating between them than in observing their difference of premises. Their divergent assessments of American Orientalism suggest that, despite our intentions to the contrary, the problem of imperialism and the problem of racism are much easier to analogize than to articulate. For critics of empire the concern is with American incorporations of Asia, while for Asian Americanists the concern is with Asian exclusion from U.S. civil society. Instead of using one as the political template for the other, how can we come to a better understanding of the
nature of U.S global power and the modernity of race relations by theorizing them in relation to each other?

In some ways, the challenge before us is even more basic. The challenge lies with trying to think race historically. While the critical ascendance of the concept of racial formation in the past twenty years appears to have de-essentialized the discussion of race, racial formation theory has paradoxically relied upon a dehistoricization of racism to make its argument. Racial formation is officially defined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant as a “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.” The sociopolitical emphases of racial formation theory offered a corrective both to the nineteenth-century scientific contention that race has a biological basis and to the more intractable twentieth-century fiction that race names a cultural unity. Nevertheless, because racial formation theory emerged as a brand of postmarxism whose theoretical intervention was the irreducibility of race to class analysis, it overcompensated for past neglect by turning race into a kind of transcendental signifier, emphasizing the foundational status of racism to U.S. society at the expense of describing its historical variability. Omi and Winant hold racial formation to be the consequence of an ongoing interaction between a racializing state and racialized minorities. But how do the state’s racialized objects come to understand or perform themselves as racial subjects in the first place? Who it is that is bound to be racialized—all non-European populations, as it turns out, in Omi and Winant’s concern to draw a line between the hard exclusions of race and the soft assimilability of ethnicity—seems to be geographically predetermined. In a similar vein, Claire Jean Kim’s more recent and influential thesis of Asian Americans’ civic ostracization is built upon a tautological account of the relationship between white supremacy and white subjecthood: white subjecthood is constituted by white supremacy, and white supremacy is a function of white subjecthood. These are some of our most valuable theoretical resources for comprehending the socially constructed nature of race, but the history of racial formation they narrate is a nineteenth-century history, a history of origins more than of process.

In this regard, they are hardly alone. The powerful attractions of what I would call a “gothic narrative of race”—in which race is thought of as “haunting” our present—flow from the quite understandable desire to theorize persistent racial forms of subordination that don’t seem sufficiently explained by the usual applications of social theory to the specificities of U.S. class division. Nevertheless when the “relative autonomy” of race is claimed on the basis of the transhistorical endurance of its manifest forms—when, in other words, race is turned into a spectral figure—then our attention is more likely to be directed away from the material conditions that contribute to the reproduction of racialization in the present. Our perception is
blunted to the potential, and potentially radical, variability of racial forms. Thus, the expanding literature of racial formation notwithstanding, we still do not have a good understanding of the following: Who is it that gets to signify and identify as native or white? Who is it that signifies and identifies as alien or Asian American? What is the relationship between signification and identification? How has this relationship changed over time?

The need for the persistent historicizing of the racial subject has become even more urgent under the pressure of the transnationalization of our fields of knowledge. An example from the problems facing the concept-category “Asian American literature” will, I hope, illustrate why. More than a decade ago, Jessica Hagedorn had concluded her introduction to her fiction anthology, *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, with the sentiment: “Asian American literature, too confining a term maybe. World Literature, absolutely.” Hagedorn’s flirtation with the latter term begged the question as to why the book was nevertheless subtitled (and marketed as) “An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction.” It provoked literary critic Susan Koshy to wonder about the exceptionalist ambition of equating Asian Americans with “the world.” In retrospect, it is difficult to hold Hagedorn responsible for theorizing what is Asian American literature in the age of transnationalism when literary scholars have themselves been slow to assume the task. Today it is all too easy to agree that we should dispense with a restrictive definition of Asian American literary belonging, such as had once characterized the field’s exclusion of writers who seemed either too assimilated or too foreign. What is much more difficult to agree on is where to draw the line between Asian American literature and Asian anglophone literature, or for that matter Asian literature in any language at all. If in the early days the legitimation of “Asian American literature” had to confront a skepticism that there might be too few justifying texts, today the field’s integrity is perhaps even more challenged by the vertigo of too many possibilities.

Here are the criteria used by literary scholars King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi to explain what they chose to include in their annotated bibliography of Asian American literature. Published in 1988, the bibliography could not take account of the boom in Asian American publishing that has transpired since then, but it remains indispensable for Asian American literary scholars today because it has yet to be superseded by any newer, equally comprehensive effort. Rejecting the division drawn by Frank Chin and his coeditors in their 1974 anthology, *Aiianeeeee!* between so-called real and fake Asian American authors, Cheung and Yogi write:

the influence of overseas Asians—be they sojourners or immigrants with American-born offspring—cannot be ignored in a study of Asian American literary history. They are also authors who may regard themselves as expatriates or as regional
writers rather than as Asian Americans. We choose to list them because national and regional allegiances, which often vary with time, cannot easily be determined.

Criteria based on “Asian American sensibility” are inevitably subjective. They cannot be applied judiciously, since the various Asian cultural groups (and even members within the same group) immigrated to North America at different periods. . . . [W]e try to be inclusive rather than exclusive in our selections. We list works by writers of Asian descent who have made the United States or Canada their home, regardless of where they were born, when they settled in North America, and how they interpret their experiences. Our list also includes authors of mixed descent who have one Asian parent (insofar as we can trace their parentage), as well as authors who may not be permanent North American residents but who have written specifically on the experiences of Asians in the United States or Canada. . . . In some instances, we include works written prior to the authors’ settlement in North America.8

Note the emphasis on parental descent as the first principle of selection, as we move toward maximal ideological inclusiveness and maximal attenuation of the “American” link. (That is, the “American” in “Asian American” can refer either to the residency of the author or to the content of texts by nonresident authors.) In embracing pluralism and cosmopolitanism—both worthy values—how can we guard against an ever-greater dependency on biological notions of identity to help us order our epistemological projects?9 Maximal inclusiveness can mean that we fall back upon a minimal definition of “Asian American” that we might not want to have. Cheung and Yogi were ahead of their time in their impulse toward (anglophone) inclusiveness, the result of which has been the identification of a wonderfully broad and useful archive. Yet the delineation of that archive by a biologically based definition of authorial identity also suggests the urgency of a much-needed dialogue between social constructionist theories of race and ethnic literary studies. If, as cultural studies of Asian American racialization have subsequently shown, the Asian American is the figure that has been constructed by U.S. state and society as both radically inassimilable and exceptionally assimilable to U.S. national identity, then what are the areas of correspondence and noncorrespondence between this racial figure and sociological populations?10 The different responses we might get to this question are a matter of history.

To an extent, the racial reification in which ethnic literary criticism has participated stems from its original sense of needing to compensate for history’s omissions. In Elaine Kim’s pioneering study of Asian American literature in 1982, Asian American literary criticism was explicitly undertaken for the purposes of historical recovery. As Kim wrote:

For the purposes of this study . . . I have deliberately chosen to emphasize how the literature elucidates the social history of Asians in the United States. . . . But the fact that this book is not an attempt to appreciate the formal literary merit of Asian
American literature does not mean that I see no value in formal and stylistic interpretations; it only means that such interpretations were not my intention here. I feel certain that there are many more competent than I who will continue to address this question.11

By the mid-1990s, what was Asian American in the first place was more likely to become a topic of active discursive theorization, though the conclusion usually reached was that the discursivity of the identity indicated a necessary lack of historical and formal unity. In Reading Asian American Literature (1993), Sau-ling Wong therefore proposed that Asian American literature is best understood as a “textual coalition” whose “interests it is the business of the professional coalition of Asian American critics to promote.”12 Introducing a subsequent essay anthology on approaches to Asian American literature, Cheung adopted a similar reasoning but worried that, compared with political coalitionalism, trying “to link the literatures of historically, culturally, and linguistically diverse ethnic groups will become increasingly straining as their communities multiply.”13 Nevertheless, Cheung maintained that “perhaps the most important reason to maintain the designation ‘Asian American’ literature is not the presence of any cultural, thematic or poetic unity but the continuing need to amplify marginalized voices, however dissimilar” (Interethnic Companion, 4). Recourse to the idioms of civil rights strategy and coalition-building by the field’s most expert literary critics reflects a genuine fealty to the activist ancestry of ethnic studies—and the extraordinary difficulty of developing a historically self-reflexive model of textual selection. Not only has no one taken up the challenge left open by Kim to develop a formal analysis that could supplement the sociological justifications for presenting an “integrate[d] . . . Asian American literary voice” (Asian American Literature, xiv), the deconstructive critique of essentialism continues to underscore the social heterogeneity of Asian Americans to the point where the claim to Asian American identity can only be tendered on strategic, and “strategically essentialist,” grounds.

The strategic basis of Asian American identity in the current context of its contradictory academic reproduction—contradictory in that the recognition of its theoretical impossibility is coupled with the pressure of its curricular expansion—has tended to encourage certain political modes of thematizing Asian American identity as the only conceivable route to its consolidation.14 It has tended to discourage historical and formal kinds of inquiry into the constitution of Asian American identity, inquiry that might illuminate the precarious conditions of Asian American predication or the doubtful reasons for its ideological production. We might say further that the recognition of Asian American “heterogeneity” has even required the accompanying concept of Asian American “hybridity,” or the notion of minority culture as a counterhegemonic formation.15 In this respect, little has changed since the
days of the Aiieeeee! anthology when its editors sought to distinguish “Asian American literature” from literature that only happens to have been written by Asians in America according to the yardstick of resistance to Orientalist stereotyping. Though Asian American identity is now considered intersectionally feminist and queer in a way that breaks with that first generation of critics, Asian American culture is still understood as a reaction-formation to American racism. If the 1970s identified Asian American oppositionality with cultural nationalist pride, the 1990s identified it with postnationalist savvy. The shift may have reversed the content of what would count as good politics, but it repeated the original characterization of the Asian American by a culture of resistance. More recently, such political romanticization of Asian American culture has come into question by scholars such as Koshy and Viet Nguyen, who have pointed to the ways in which Asian American legal plaintiffs participated in dominant discourses of whiteness or how Asian American authors at times deployed ideologically dubious strategies to advance their literary careers.16 But whether Asian American subjects are thought to be complicit or subversive, the problem of theorizing “Asian American literature” remains one of how to move beyond a dualistic conceptualization of American and Asian American cultures, American and Asian American politics, American and Asian American subjects. To this extent, Asian American cultural studies can be said to have not yet moved beyond Orientalism—not so much in the sense that as Asian Americanists we are bound to reproduce Orientalist discourse, although this is a serious possibility, but that we have not found a way to exceed its critique.

The essays gathered here provide some methodological suggestions for today’s Asian Americanist—or, perhaps more appropriately, “Asian/ Americanist,” to follow David Palumbo-Liu’s term for marking the extent to which Asian American racialization has long involved the shifting location of an international boundary between the United States and Asia. To be clear, the essays have not been chosen simply because they traverse geographical regions outside the United States or exhume the imprint of older empires. We already know that to track the forms of U.S. global power in the Asia-Pacific and the attendant identities it has helped to articulate, we will have to be more comparative at several levels than we have so far been.17 The essays do display the benefits of comparativism—of languages, of nationalisms, of empires—but it cannot be claimed for their subject matter the representative mapping of an expanded, critical approach to “Asia.” Nor have the essays been collected simply because they entertain new source materials for the stories they tell, though this is surely an aspect of their interest. The archive represented here does indicate the significant contribution made by these essays as a grouping: the sense of the theoretical generativity of speaking
not of identity but of form, of trying to investigate race and nation through the relationship between aesthetic and social modalities of form.

Christopher Bush and Eric Hayot in particular would open our eyes to the nonanthropomorphic examples of race that its conceptualization as form allows. Steven Yao’s exploration of the poetic constitution of the Asian American subject similarly encourages an antihumanist skepticism toward lyric projects of racial self-representation. Their literary approaches to the constructedness of race reveal the textuality of the racial subject and eschew a conventionally liberal point of departure for racism’s critique. Takashi Fujitani’s consideration of the similarities between the United States and Japan in wartime unveils differences between historical forms of racism, an appreciation of which is necessary to grapple with the more multicultural yet more genocidal character of our racial modernity. Rosalind Morris suggests that the fictive ethnicity posited by Malayan nationalism—a nationalism that in this case rejected more multiracial alternatives—might be a function of a traveling genre, not just a discourse genre but specifically the literary genre of Britain’s imagination of Malaya that she calls “imperial pastoral.” Sanjay Krishnan supplements Morris’s interest in the intransigence of language to translation by demonstrating the potential contradictions immanent to the logic of universalism itself.

Equating the local with a “total or expanded form of value” and the global with the “universal equivalence” of the money form, Krishnan frames the interaction between local and global through a conflict of value forms. What’s involved in the process of globalization is thus not so much the homogenization of cultural content, as we are wont to opine, but the spread of a single style of depiction—what Krishnan calls the effects of an institutionalized mode of thematization. Given his stated goal of specifying the present-day task of literary criticism, his essay models for postcolonial scholars the payoffs of an attentiveness to form. Though Krishnan is the most explicit in sounding this methodological theme, the critical practices of the collection as a whole (which includes contributions from a historian and an anthropologist) suggest that the attention to form as such need not be the trademark of the literary critic. The question raised by these essays is not so much one of opposing form and content or text and context, but one that asks what their different approaches to form imply about form’s historicity and historical effectivity.18

For Fujitani, racism’s disavowal by the United States and Japan in wartime was not simply a lie; it effectuated a change in state practices that, irrespective of actors’ intentions, resulted in the reconstitution of previously excluded populations as new subjects of national welfare. In this instance, Fujitani’s research suggests that multiculturalism is best understood not as an ideology in the sense that its statement inverts a reality that is actually
racedly exclusionary. Rather, it is a discursive regime that exploits precisely through its inclusions. For Yao, a “family resemblance” between the Sino-Japanese subject of Cathay and the pan-ethnic subject of Asian American poetry shows high modernism to be a precondition of minority self-expression, without going so far as to posit the Asian American subject as a direct inheritance of modernist Orientalism. In this regard, the interest taken by Morris in a British colonial administrator’s translation of Virgil is similar to Yao’s interest in Ezra Pound’s translation of Li Po’s poems. It works to unite spaces typically thought of as far flung—in this case, Britain and Malaya—by establishing grounds of comparison for empire’s interpellated audiences. No causal responsibility for the incomplete universalization of English in colonial Malaya is laid upon L.A.S. Jermyn’s ambivalent translation of Virgil; there is the suggestion that the nostalgic form taken by Malayan postcolonial nationalism is a repetition of the georgic resolution of the contradictions of Britain’s own modern transition. Krishnan’s focus on the Malay writings of Abdullah Munshi, a local translator who worked for the British in nineteenth-century Melaka and Singapore, places a different inflection upon the formal agencies of translation. Krishnan’s essay does search out signs of colonialism’s interruption. However, insofar as the time of colonial transition is characterized by a mixed economy in which “the imperial institution pulls into the orbit of the universal equivalent the material relations of the less advanced society even as it draws on forms of ‘tribute’ and local institutional forms to achieve its ‘improving ends’”—insofar as this textual terrain is scribbled by a colonial translator of intermediate social position—such interruptions as those that are legible do not issue from an autochthonous space exterior to colonial power. Nor is the larger narrative of Abdullah’s effacement a tragedy of subaltern silencing. The observance of colonialism’s contradictory and uneven texture, or its close reading, holds out the possibility of defamiliarizing Eurocentrism—more than does any evocation of cultural resistance or the priority of Asian economic ascendance.

Krishnan’s approach to form as that which encodes cultural and economic meanings at once is derived from Marx’s account of the commodity; Bush’s and Hayot’s show the traces of Etienne Balibar’s conceptualization of the nation in terms of reification. In his signal essay, “The Nation Form,” Balibar refers to the nation as a form in order to emphasize both its materiality and its historicity. On the one hand, Balibar writes, “the privileged status of the nation form derives from the fact that, locally, that form made it possible (at least for an entire historical period) for struggles between heterogeneous classes to be controlled.” On the other hand, “there is a close implicit connection between the illusion of a necessary unilinear
evolution of social formations and the critical acceptance of the nation-state as the ‘ultimate form’ of political institution, destined to be perpetuated forever.”20 In Bush, the market circulation of ethnicized objects prized paradoxically for their artisanal properties calls for a more dialectically robust understanding of a racialization that—à la commodity fetishism—subjectifies through objectification. Hayot is interested in the formlessness and unrepresentability of Asiatic racial form, specifically the nerveless coolie as an emblem of our ideological accommodations to the necessary unity of modernity and suffering. Bush’s analysis of the Japanese object and Hayot’s of science fiction’s coolie figure approach the work of dereifying race by trying to recover the social mediation of its aesthetic forms. To the extent that such work proceeds from the intuition that form is inevitably a social relationship, the attention to form can constitute the starting point of a deeper historicization.21

Deeper historicization via closer attention to form. It is possible that this will lead us beyond the political and cultural dualisms of Orientalism, a commitment that is perhaps particularly necessary to grasp the postterritorial forms of power that mark the Asia-Pacific region. In many ways, the specificity of our late Orientalist modernity, our contemporary moment of the Asia-Pacific, still remains to be adequately described.22 The essays therefore emphasize the permeable and constitutive relationship between Asian and Anglo-American subjects; the often transcultural nature of colonial and neocolonial interactions; the coevalness of Asian and U.S. racial formations. Perhaps by virtue of their focus on the Pacific Rim, the essays notice the often pragmatic and nonrevolutionary nature of postcolonial nationalisms and the potentially derivative nature of minority subjectivity. For this reason too, I believe, they are particularly interested in retrieving the lessons offered by Asia’s proximate history of capitalist modernization for addressing the problems of our globalizing present.

Notes

The idea for this special issue has its origin in a workshop, “TransPacific Modernisms,” organized by Christopher Bush at the Society of Fellows, Princeton University, November 19, 2005. Two subsequent events, a seminar of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) held March 23–26, 2006, entitled “La Différence Humaine,” and a symposium at UC Berkeley on April 22, 2006, “After Orientalism: Working Across the Disciplines,” helped to further and
widen the conversation. We would like to thank those who took part in those events: Jonathan Abel, Anindita Banerjee, Timothy Billings, Tamara Chin, Eileen Chow, Christopher Connery, Wai-Chee Dimock, Susan Stanford Friedman, Jeannie Im, Pericles Lewis, Nguyen-vo Thu-Huong, Nguyen Nguyet Cam, Josephine Park, Julie Townsend, Carlos Rojas, Haun Saussy, Shannon Steen, Alan Tansman, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Sau-Ling Wong. We are grateful to the graduate-student members of the Asia Pacific American Working Group, who organized the Berkeley symposium: Carlo Arreglo, Marguerite Nguyen, and Janice Tanemura. Much is owed to the members of the editorial board of Representations and to Jean Day, the journal’s associate editor, for their assistance with pulling together this issue. The introduction benefited from extensive exchanges with Christopher Bush and the other contributors to this volume, as well as from the indispensable scrutiny of Stephen Best, Cathy Gallagher, Marcial Gonzalez, and Chris Nealon.


5. This is where I find myself diverging from Barbara Fields’s in many ways cogent critique of the contemporary discussion of race. For an analysis of race as a historical—and historically outdated—ideology of a slave republic, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States,” New Left Review 181 (1990): 95–118.


17. See Carolyn Porter’s 1994 essay where the obstacles to a more transnationally conceived American Studies are first defined. Though Porter was thinking about the potential for a U.S.–defined American Studies to actualize itself as Hemispheric Studies and Transatlantic Studies, her observations are also applicable to the difficulties of taking American Studies in a trans-Pacific direction; Carolyn Porter, “What We Know That We Don’t Know,” *American Literary History* 6, no. 3 (1994): 467–526.

18. In John Frow’s view, the notion that form consists of purely constructional devices and excludes a whole range of thematic material—the notion that, in other words, form is opposed to content—is a function of a mechanical materialism that reduces text to context, which is itself an ironic inheritance of idealist bourgeois aesthetics; John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History* (Oxford, 1986), 88.


...variable relations within specifiable material practices" (187). Balibar’s statement that “racism is a social relation, not the mere ravings of racist subjects” can be understood as consistent with this critical perspective. See Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism,” in Balibar and Wallerstein, Race, Nation, Class, 41.