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Reading for Asian American Literature

Colleen Lye

What is Asian American literature? The past 20 years have witnessed a publishing boom in literature by US authors of Asian descent, but a scarcity of paradigms for its reading. On the face of it, this fact may seem surprising. In the 1990s, a critical mass of Asian American students in higher education fueled a second wave of Asian American studies program building at colleges and universities across the nation, aided by a new ascendancy of cultural studies that helped erode the intellectual hierarchy between English departments and ethnic studies. This cultural studies took its energy from a critique of Asian American identity as formulated during the first wave of 1970s program building, pointing to an increased ethnic multiplicity in US Asian populations and the various kinds of diversity this made visible. Asian American program building, however, bore a rather more paradoxical relation to Asian American cultural studies, whose intellectual energy stimulated institutional initiatives but whose identity critiques partially undercut their *raison d'être*. By the late 2000s, talk of an “Asian American studies in crisis” had become endemic at conferences of the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS).

The transnationalization of frameworks for the study of race and ethnicity has no doubt contributed to the fragmentation of Asian American identity along ethnic lines, and it is common to narrate the intellectual history of Asian American studies in terms of a movement from cultural nationalism to transnationalism and diaspora. However, it is also true that, if Asian American identity was a period product of the cultural nationalism of the late 1960s, it inevitably partook of the internationalism of the Third Worldist movements of 1968 and was already in some measure a response to the arrival of new immigrants under the aegis of 1965 immigration reform.¹ To

this extent, it is useful to think of Asian American identity as an identity that has from the beginning been in crisis. Like all identities, Asian American identity is imaginary, except only more so. It makes a fanfare of its catachrestic nature, which has to do with the fiction of pan-ethnicity.² A historicization of the imaginarity of Asian American identity – rather than the strategic suspension of the recognition of its characteristic imaginarity – may be our best hope for intellectually conserving the category. This chapter is motivated by the challenge of how to read for “Asian American literature,” once we accept that neither ethnically aggregative nor synecdochic modes of representing it will do.

The problem is that “Asian American literature” exists largely at the level of the course syllabus, scholarly research monograph, or publishers’ catalogues, rather than at the level of an individual text. It is the title given to an assemblage of texts chosen by an instructor, scholar, or publisher to teach, interpret, or purvey. Because there are over 30 named Asian and Pacific Islander (API) ethnicities as of the 1990 US Census, the most quantitatively comprehensive course or catalogue instantiations of “Asian American literature” are easily accused of being incomplete. Because of the uneven and unequal nature of the claim to Asian American identity exercised by various API ethnicities – which is the product of the historical contingencies of Asian American racial formation – a reliance on representative ethnic examples, no matter how robust, involves a synecdochic fallacy (Lye 46). The first scholarly survey of Asian American literary history, Elaine Kim’s *Asian American Literature* (1982), soon became an easy target for the social experience it claimed the literature to represent and for the new or minor ethnicities it neglected.

In the 1990s, Asian American cultural studies by and large turned toward thematic and topical ways of reading literature, discovering new political purposes for it that centered on reversing evidence of American belonging into evidence of anti-imperialist, antinationalist critique. In the 2000s, a “formal turn” in Asian American criticism sought to do aesthetic justice to Asian American literature by seeking to sever the ethnic once and for all from the ethnographic. Regardless, both kinds of approaches have eschewed essentialist definitions of Asian American identity but generally avoided the question of defining the criteria for the literary archive.

If Asian American is a sociohistorical construction rather than an identity defined by biological descent, how does this affect the definition of Asian American literature? What is the relationship between Asian American as a racial formation and Asian American as a literary formation? First-wave Asian American literary history – for example, Kim’s – delighted in the interchangeability of literary and historical evidence. In theorizing the interaction between literature and history, second-wave Asian American literary history would be more interested in the material specificity of literary as compared to other kinds of textual sources, and cognizant of the historicity of the Asian American concept. A notable example in this vein, Jinqi Ling’s *Narrating Nationalisms*’s anticipatory rereading of Asian American literature, provided something other than a reflectionist account of its historical relevance, but demonstrated that such theoretical rigor required temporal and ethnic delimitation. The fact is, in

seeking an account of the longer story of Asian American literary evolution, we still have no effective replacement for Kim's work. Yet if in the 1980s Asian American literary history took its license from a paucity of research into Asian American social history, despite the new robustness of Asian American social history, the need for Asian American literary history might be seen to be all the more urgent now because, in the context of what social scientists note to be a continually weak racial formation, Asian American literature is arguably a primary force in the institutionalizing of Asian American social reality.

From its beginnings in Third Worldist and antiwar movements in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City in the 1968 epoch, Asian American identity has been political. Asian American electoral behavior became a topic of political science study in the 1990s, a decade when the numerical growth of the Asian American population and the turn toward interest group lobbying among pan-ethnic organizations combined to promise a newly influential Asian American voice in statewide and national politics. As it turned out, Asian Americans continued to exhibit patterns of severe underrepresentation among registered voters and elected officeholders (Brackman and Erie 231). In the instances of the few career Asian American politicians that existed, these tended to be crossover leaders who identified least with the Asian American community (Brackman and Erie 237). The fact of political underrepresentation is usually attributed to the internal diversity preventing Asian Americans from being perceived as unified actors in public policy (Nakanishi 93). Beyond the problems of perception, others have questioned the real social hold of the pan-ethnic identity upon US Asians, especially new arrivals from Asia, who as of 1990 constituted the majority of the Asian American population (Lien 52–3). A 2004 survey of individuals of Asian descent disclosed that only 15% identified first as an Asian American, while two thirds chose to identify themselves by ethnicity (Lien, Conway, and Wong 17). The primacy of ethnic self-identification is shown to be capable of coexisting with identification with the Asian American label, but the salient point is that “Asian American” tends to surface as a secondary, situational identity. While Harold Brackman and Steven Erie interpret Asian American electoral invisibility to signify a disposition toward “politics by other means” (i.e., based on indirect influence), Pei-te Lien argues instead that Asian Americans have tended to pursue power less through mass means (whether voting or demonstrations) than through elite-based tactics, such as litigation, campaign donations, and lobbying to influence politics and policy (Brackman and Erie 231–3; Lien 81).

If it is the case that, in the realm of politics, Asian American identity describes an elite modality – comprised of elite varieties of political practice undertaken by political elites – what might this imply about Asian American literature? As I have earlier stated, Asian American literature is not a natural artifact; it is a category disseminated primarily through the collating activities of teachers, researchers, and publishers. To some extent, writers (such as Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong in their 1974 anthology *Aiiieeeee!*) have also been active agents in the construction of the pan-ethnic literary category, particularly

before the institutionalization of Asian American studies as an academic field. But the growth of academic criticism and of commercial literary publishing since the 1970s has tended to witness a tension between academics and writers and an active resistance on the part of many of the latter to the pigeonholing pressures of the label. In a magisterial theorization of the institution of Asian American studies, Mark Chiang describes Asian American literary and cultural studies as sites in the academy for "the conversion of political and cultural capital" (Chiang 9). Not unlike the leader of an Asian American community organization or lobby group, the scholar who claims "belonging to the Asian American field" is staking a claim "to the capital of the field as one who has the ability to represent or speak for Asian Americans as a group" (Chiang 13–14).

Whatever the failures and impasses of the original Asian American Movement, pan-ethnic coalitions have historically articulated the identity to a left or liberal politics (Fujino 128). Lien's research shows that, though in the 1990s the Asian American electorate may have evinced a three-way split between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, where pan-ethnic community organizational elites managed to exercise influence they have tilted Asian American voting support toward liberal agendas and Democratic Party candidates (Lien 196). If so, and if educational institutions are one of the primary sites for the construction of Asian American identity, where students often learn for the first time to think of themselves as Asian American subjects, then we might begin to develop an answer for what might be politically at stake in choosing to disseminate "Asian American literature." Asian American studies is an ideological apparatus through which college students of various ethnicities are interpellated as Asian American racial subjects, many of whom go on to become involved in pan-ethnic professional organizations or pan-ethnic community organizations that are themselves engaged in the work of racial formation. As the scene of student activist demand for the creation of Asian American studies courses, from the beginning of the Asian American Movement college campuses were a main arena of pan-ethnic identity construction.

What has been Asian American literature's contribution to the social construction of the pan-ethnic identity and how has this varied, depending on the character of Asian American racial formation at the time? This, then, is what second-wave Asian American literary history might be tasked with investigating, since an Asian American literary history should perforce have a historicized account of Asian American literature. An incorporation of the historicity of Asian American racial formation into our understanding of Asian American literary periodization may well necessitate a non-linear narrative, one that no longer conforms to the serial, cumulative structure of Asian American history narration to which we have become accustomed. In a critique directed at the homogenizations of Asian American history narration, Sylvia Yanagisako has observed the predilection of 1980s courses to present Asian American history as a succession of immigrant groups struggling against racism and nativism (281). Cultural criticism of the 1990s alerted us to the potential for Americanist teleology perpetuated by this historical narrative. Yet this teleology has proven difficult to

transcend given that the racializing effect of Asian Exclusion upon disparate groups remains Asian American studies' best explanation for the unity of Asian American identity, which orients the latter toward a politics of recognition. It is only more recently, in the work of the most recent generation of literary critics, that we are offered glimpses as to how to practice an alternative literary history that could be postnational and still, in some form, pan-ethnic.

New Directions for Literary History

Three recently published works of Asian American criticism open up new possibilities for conceptualizing Asian American identity beyond ethnic aggregation or synecdoche: Lisa Yun's *The Coolie Speaks* (2008), Jodi Kim's *Ends of Empire* (2010), and Mark Chiang's *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies* (2009). That they convey the historicity of the racial form through an appreciation of the textuality of its sources makes a strong case for literature's centrality to Asian American history. To be sure, these works do not present themselves as literary history in any formal sense, but their historicist insights do suggest exciting possibilities for its renewal. At minimum, they help to fill in some of the gaps reflected by contemporary literary history's symptomatic absence ever since the displacement of the "claiming America" paradigm by transnationalist trends shifted attention toward ethnic diasporas and eroded the political grounds for the pan-ethnic identity.³

Lisa Yun's *The Coolie Speaks* discovers and analyzes a new archive of coolie oral and written testimonies collected by a Chinese commission to investigate conditions of indentured labor in Cuba in 1874. The report of this commission resulted in the banning of coolie traffic to Cuba, where Chinese coolies had been introduced in 1847 and slavery was not abolished till 1886. The temporal coexistence of Asian indentured labor and African slavery under similar conditions of abuse led Yun to reconsider the typical notion of the coolie as a figure of transition between slavery and free wage labor regimes in the Americas. The coolie makes visible the modernity of labor coercion and the fictitiousness of the freedom of contract. The introduction of the coolie as a significant topic of nineteenth-century labor history also disturbs a binary (black and white) model of race. But the coolie is not only a figure useful to the deconstruction of dominant racial paradigms and Enlightenment truths. The coolie is also a subject of whom Yun believes it is possible to ask, "what did [he] have to say?" (xv). Though solicited by a commission that served British competitive interests and that was built on international consensus, coolie petitions and testimonies can nevertheless be read as "acts of resistance," polyvocal accounts of daily struggle, and a mass indictment of a brand of slavery cloaked in official representations of "agreement" (47, 59, 143, 175).

Yun's is equally a literary intervention as it is a historical reinterpretation. In demonstrating the intimacy between Chinese and Afro-Caribbean histories of coercion and insurgency, Yun posits the coolie narrative as a generic analogue to the slave narrative. Insistently transnational, Yun is explicit that she is not about "recuperating" the

Cuban coolie as a “minority American” subject (xxi), and finds even “transPacific” to be too restrictive a label for an Asian migration to the Americas that often followed transatlantic routes (xxiii). Nevertheless, just as the slave narrative has long represented an ancestral beginning for African American letters, the coolie narrative might be seen as an origin point for Asian American literature, with “American” here functioning as a hemispheric rather than national designation. The final chapter of her study skips forward in time to discuss a 1927 communal biography of Cuban Chinese merchant society by a Chinese mestizo writer, one that did not manifestly feature the coolie but that is officially dedicated to – and, in Yun’s reading, textually “haunted” by – the coolie of the nineteenth century. Thus, Yun’s disclosure of a genealogical relationship between literature of the supposed middleman minority and subaltern speech of the anticolonial coolie can be seen to model a method of Asian American literary history.

Yun’s materialist treatment of the coolie as a racialized labor form also models a potential for a trans-ethnic approach to the Asian American subject. “I use the term as one that calls upon a racialized history, as ‘coolies’ especially referred to Asian bonded labor and no other” (xx). Though her Cuban case study entailed a focus on coolies of Chinese origin, the fact that both Chinese and Indian indentured labor was trafficked by European colonial powers means that the coolie as a figure is not associated with a singular ethnicity, which is why “coolie” so often signifies a sensationalist stereotype of “Asiatic labor.” As such, the coolie can be understood as designating a sociohistorical racial formation rather than a species of ethnic descent. More expansively, the coolie might be taken to figure contract labor as a generalized mode of production, and thereby include the social histories of Japanese and Filipino migrants as well. The latter’s modes of arrival in the Americas certainly reflected very different structures of international and colonial relations, but it would be possible to theorize their comparable conditions of constrained mobility and racial segmentation. In the era of Asian indenture and exclusion, the notion of the coolie (or contract labor) narrative presents a promising way of reading for Asian American literature non-anachronistically. Occasions of interethnic collaboration and conflict between Japanese, Indian, and Filipino migrant workers have long been an area of research in Asian American working-class history. But until Yun’s coining of the “coolie narrative,” early Asian American literary history has lacked for theories of textual forms that could be understood as constitutively trans-ethnic (rather than aggregatively or synecdochically pan-ethnic).

Jodi Kim’s *Ends of Empire* also provides us with a historicized frame for reading texts as Asian American literature. Here the material determinant is the US Cold War in Asia, which involved an “unruly set of engagements . . . in . . . most of Asia” and not just one nation (31). Kim conceptualizes Asian American literature and culture as a critical “afterlife” or “translation” of the Cold War, which she interprets as both a historical period and an epistemology that exceeds its historical “eventness” (3). *Ends of Empire* is a historicizing extension of Lisa Lowe’s thesis that Asian American culture is a critical response to a US national culture that constitutively excludes it. By pro-

viding a putatively materialist explanation for Asian exclusion, Lowe's work reinforced a structural view of anti-Asian racism as an essential attribute of the US nation-form, with the effect that the variability of its forms and roles – despite the significant differences in Asian American social status after the 1960s – became less of a research question. Indeed, Asian American racial formation itself became something of a neglected topic in Asian American cultural studies, which saw advances in the psychoanalytic theorization of the Asian American subject but materialist conclusions as to its impossibility (Chuh). Kim's grounding of Asian American literature within the context of the Cold War's production of Asian Americans reunites Asian American political critique with a historical account of the Asian American subject. In the post-World War II era, Asian Americans are subjects located within a US imperium that extends across the Asian continent. While US colonization of the Philippines since the turn of the twentieth century has long established a framework for reading Filipino American writing as an exilic rather than immigrant literature, Kim's emphasis on the Cold War's mass displacement of Asian populations now also allows for the reading of other post-World War II ethnic literatures according to a paradigm of "refuge migration," a term borrowed from Ji-Yeon Yuh (237). To be sure, this model of "Asian American literature" as Cold War literary formation cannot be perfectly all-inclusive. As Kim explains, her textual selection had to be based on where the Cold War happened to be publicly waged and guided by which literary works happened to thematize it (31–2) – as it happens, works by Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese American authors.

Kim's notion of Cold War refugee migration literature provides us with a non-essentialist way of reading for Asian American literature after 1945. Kim is ambiguous as to the date of the Cold War's expiration, echoing Tobin Siebers that "[t]he history of the Cold war is in part a history of false endings" (Kim 4). Her deliberate ambiguity on this point licenses a selection of texts that, in ranging from 1982 to 2002, can be understood to be of contemporary relevance; however, in her readings the particular events of interest tend to be past cataclysms, such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japanese American internment, or the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In this sense, "history" in Kim's handling of twentieth-century letters, like Yun's, is of a spectral sort, one whose violence against Asians is located in an unacknowledged past. Though *Ends of Empire* does not itself read texts in terms of their socially contemporary meanings, a project that would require more specification of the Cold War dimensions of US-Asian relations after 1989, the work it undertakes invites others to pick up this challenge.

For the exploration of the historical agency of Asian American literature, Mark Chiang's *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies* provides a promising lead. Where Yun's work encourages us to locate the materiality of the Asian American in labor history, and Kim's in the geopolitics of its Cold War formation, Chiang's locates the materiality of the Asian American in its post-1960s academic institutionalization. Chiang demystifies "Asian American" as a community or a people and, following Pierre Bourdieu, asks that we consider its operation as a "category" and a "field"

(Chiang 10). Since Chiang's focus is the pursuit of cultural capital within the university, he leaves open to others the task of examining the interaction between academic versus other kinds of organizational claims to Asian American representation. The value of Chiang's analysis is that it scrupulously distinguishes between political and academic spheres of representation, and allows us to understand Asian American representation as a means of self-representation for an intellectual class (of writers, artists, scholars, and critics). While no doubt politically deromanticizing, his focus on cultural capital – which re-raises the question of why someone might choose to become Asian American – is what enables a renewal of the category in a “nonrestrictive and nonessentialist” vein (10). Following from Chiang, Asian American literature would be defined as literature that makes claims (or can be read as making claims) to Asian American political representation, in which what is at stake is intellectual legitimacy (Chiang calls it cultural capital accumulation).

The nonrestrictive, nonessentialist textual archive implied by such a conceptualization points in at least two provocative directions for how we might conceive “Asian American literature.” To some extent, these are already present in the way in which Asian American studies is being practiced, researched, and taught. One direction involves recognizing that Asian American writing may in large part be composed of nonliterary texts, that is, if we adhere to a restrictive definition of literature to mean fictional or imaginative works. There are more nonfictional than fictional authors who directly ponder the meaning of Asian Americanness, evoke its existence, theorize its politics, seek its history, and give it discursive life. This likely explains why Asian American literature courses offered in English departments, even when not deliberately conceived as cultural studies courses, are as likely to populate their syllabi with writings by Gary Okihiro, David Palumbo-Liu, and other professional Asian Americanist scholars as with novels, poetry, and drama. In some ways, the relative extensiveness of Asian American representation in scholarly writing compared to imaginative writing may help explain the predominance of Asian American cultural studies and the perpetual underdevelopment of Asian American literary studies in the academy. If we are to take seriously that Asian American literature is where Asian American representation is to be found, it may mean that the textual field is one that cannot be based on a restrictive definition of literature.

Alternatively, it is possible to keep imaginative literature at the center of the field if we are willing to delink the criteria for textual inclusion from authorial descent. The second direction for Asian American studies implied by a representational notion of the Asian American is one that would define the Asian American text as an American text that engages in the imaginative construction of Asia and Asians. Given the centrality of Imagism to American modernism and other brands of Orientalism to American literature in general, an Asian American literary archive construed in this way would not lack for materials. Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Displacements* (2002) pioneered literary criticism of this type by choosing to look at the ethnic object strictly “from the perspectives of language and literature” (2). In Huang's words, “transpacific displacement” is a “historical process of textual migration of cultural meanings, mean-

ings that include linguistic traits, poetics, philosophical ideas, myths, stories" (3). Huang's reconceptualization of "ethnic literature" as "ethnographic literature" – replacing the notion of a literature that represents an ethnic subject with the notion of a literature that creates an ethnographic image – allows him to range across a textual set that includes Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell alongside Maxine Hong Kingston and John Yau.

In recent years, the appearance of more and more scholars pursuing a dialogue between modernism and Asian American literature, particularly in poetry, suggests that one of the most vibrant sectors of Asian American literary criticism is promising to displace the ethnic canon altogether, or at least one founded on a divide between the aesthetic and the ethnic. Textualist ways of redefining the Asian American archive show themselves to be particularly friendly to translingual methods. The pursuit of research along these lines – particularly within comparative literature departments, whose late participation in Asian Americanist conversations is now proving influential – owes to the fact that their students tend to be the ones with sufficient linguistic competency to take "transnationalism" beyond the level of thematics to the level of the source materials themselves. For Huang, the transnational sources of American modernism imply the transnationalism of American literature in general, of which Asian American writing can now be seen as an exemplary rather than outlying part.

With a focus on the image of China and the Chinese language in American poetry, Huang's chosen archive does not model a solution to the problem of the Asian American as synecdochic fallacy. However, his recuperation of Pound for Asian Americanist concerns is in itself a powerful gesture. Imagism after all presents an image of the Orient, not of China, and not necessarily even of China in an imaginary sense. Since the ideograph in Pound's poetry comes via Ernest Fenollosa, whose knowledge of the Chinese language was mediated by Japanese translation, the Orient of Pound's imagination was in some sense constitutively trans-ethnic. Josephine Park's *Apparitions of Asia* (2008) proceeds from the Sino-Japaneseness of Fenollosa's linguistics, which forms a starting point of an American Orientalist tradition inclusive of Pound's *Cathay* and Snyder's *Zen* – and relevant to the poetic inventions of David Hsin-Fu Wand, Lawson Fusao Inada, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Myung Mi Kim. Huang's and Park's collations of Asian American poetry alongside American modernist poetry suggest a way forward for theorizing the literary significance of Asian American writing, its historical engagement with American literary tradition and aesthetic ideology. Park retains a distinction between what is Asian American literature and what is American Orientalism on the basis of authorial identity, whereas Huang quite radically dissolves this boundary altogether by combining all his texts under the sign of ethnographic writing. At the same time, insofar as the ethnographic seems to index a particular ethnicity, it is Park's focus on Orientalism that logically compels a diverse (East Asian) ethnic selection of literary examples. In general, the relocation of Asian American literature within representational conceits such as Orientalism or ethnographic writing encourages the envisioning of Asian American courses and research agendas detached from authorial background and focused around the form and function of texts.

A representational notion of the Asian American presents a way of conserving the category in the wake of anti-essentialist critiques of identity. This conceptualization of Asian American literature is one that would not elevate texts because they are assimilationist or nationalist, nor prioritize those that claim America or subvert it. In this account, the Asian American text is not one that represents Asian Americans, since there can be none such. Rather, the Asian American text is one that is – or can be shown to be – engaged with a problematic of Asian American representation. To this extent also, such a model of the Asian American literary archive can never consist of a given set of texts, but is constantly subject to redrawing as a result of the activities of textual and historical interpretation.

Asian American Historiographic Fictions

Certain imaginative texts do recur as the most regularly taught and analyzed examples of Asian American literature. Among them, works by Maxine Hong Kingston and Chang-Rae Lee head the list. This is not only because Kingston and Lee write novels, and novels are popular. Nor is it simply because, in the context of a field that consists of a large number of occasional writers and memoirists, they have each produced a sustained body of fiction. Kingston and Lee are treated so often as “representative” Asian American authors because their work is preoccupied with Asian American representation as a problem. While there are many authors who thematize particular ethnic histories, only some thematize how representation mediates literature and history, or explore the relationship between the project of writing and the historicity of Asian American identity. Moreover, it is because Kingston’s and Lee’s works operate at both levels, indexing an ethnically specific history and interrogating its means of historical representation, that the Asian American identities they entertain seem to be constitutively trans- or interethnic. Kingston and Lee are, of course, post-1968 authors, that is, authors who postdate the naming of Asian American identity by the Asian American Movement and the establishment of Asian American studies programs. However, their works show an express interest in the present’s reconstructions of the past, and are, even when set in contemporary times, readable as historical fictions of Asian American racial formation in earlier periods. In this final section of the chapter, I turn to the historiographic significance of Kingston’s and Lee’s imaginative works, legible according to each of the new, historicizing concepts of Asian American literature discussed above: Asian American literature as coolie narrative, Asian American literature as Cold War formation, and Asian American literature as cultural capital.

First, Asian American literature as cultural capital. Both Kingston and Lee have produced *Künstlerromans* that stage the Asian American writer as confronted by a vexed yet inescapable relationship between aesthetic and political representation. In Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), Wittman Ah Sing is an aspiring writer in the late 1960s who is searching for an Asian American art form that can create commu-

nity. Community must be created because community does not already exist: its origins are lost, uncertain, or constituted by performance, even in the case of his own family tree. Wittman's quest for an avant-garde Asian American art arises out of a condition of ethnic tribelessness, in which there is no preexisting family that could be coded as a natural ethnicity. For example, Wittman's father Zeppelin, whose occupation as gold miner references the most seemingly authentic Chinese American historical ancestry, is a "pure Chinese" and yet was "proud to be taken for whatever, especially by one of their own kind, Mexican, Filipino" (Kingston, *Tripmaster* 200). The ethnic syncretism of Wittman's theatrical sources similarly results in something other than a restoration of old Chinatown culture. Of his art's revolutionary effect, we are left far more unconvinced. Partly, this is because all along, Wittman's rebellion against routinized work, mass consumerism, and state documentation occurs in social isolation as individualized, antic responses to one-dimensional society. *Tripmaster* presents the opportunity for us to inquire into the prospect of an Asian American art in the absence of a political purpose for Asian American representation. The novel seems to be asking: can the representation of Asian American culture itself supply the content for an Asian American politics? Beneath the narrator's mock-celebratory tone, how does the play's formlessness, its seeming recalcitrance to description, offer a judgment on this question?

By contrast, Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) centrally thematizes the problem of Asian American political representation by telling the story of a Korean immigrant politician in Queens, New York, whose temporary success and ultimate downfall hinge on his mistake of treating democratic political association as if it were a "natural" ethnic family. The councilman's failed quest for mayoral office implies the impossibility of Asian American attainment to political universality, or a structural contradiction between being Asian American and a universally representative subject. Perhaps because Lee is explicitly engaged with Asian American identity as a political form, the social formation imagined here is radically elastic. John Kwang's "people" are

Koreans, Indians, Vietnamese, Haitians, Colombians, Nigerians, these brown and yellow whatevers, whoever, countless unheard nobodies, each offering to the marketplace their gross of kimchee, lichee, plantain, black bean, soy milk . . . selling anything to each other and to themselves. (Lee, *Native Speaker* 83)

Where economic globalization introduces cultural diversity, political representation seeks the forging of new collectivities out of market atomization.

The problem of Asian American political representation is framed by the novel as one of aesthetic representation, in that the politician's story is the subject of the protagonist's secret reporting, whose writing style becomes more "fanciful" as he tries to break free of his assignment (Lee, *Native Speaker* 147). Lee casts the Asian American writer as corporate spy whose professional success, parallel to the predicament of the Asian American politician, is structurally tied to betrayal of community. Just as the politician seeks to transubstantiate a political formation from numbered lists (of

financial contributors), the writer keeps discovering after all that he is generating lists not poetry, information not literature. If there will in the end be no aesthetic autonomy from the economic incentives that have commissioned Henry Park's intellectual labor, *Native Speaker* is also insistent that the economic is inseparable from the political. Park's truly dreaded reader is not his boss, but the firm's anonymous clients who may be intelligence agencies of undemocratic regimes or the United States' own Immigration and Naturalization Service, the enemies of all diasporic peoples. Of course we, the readers of Lee's novel, are the final audience of Park's craft, and as such we are forced to ponder the complicities between reading for Asian American literature and federal surveillance of undocumented immigrants as yet another level of the ambivalence of subaltern representation. With Paul Pyun in *Aloft*, Lee opts for a direct portrayal of the Asian American writer, whose relegation now to the role of minor character appears to be a condition of his professionalization as an author of unreliable inspiration married to a college professor. Thus, even in the novel that, with its white protagonist, is considered to have strayed from the terrain of "Asian American literature," the question of the relationship between Asian American writing and US racial formation – in this case, how the Italians became white – remains Lee's means of exploring the social institutionality of Asian American literature.

The inter- or trans-ethnic dimensions of Asian American identity are even more visible if we attend to the Cold War themes in Kingston's and Lee's texts. In many ways, the sense of Lee's waxing canonicity for Asian American studies might be understood to result from precisely Lee's grounding of Asian American character in the more contemporary dynamics of US geopolitics in Asia. While Lee's celebrity has partly to do with his representation of Asian American identity through the historical experience of a "new" Asian ethnicity (new only in the sense of the recentness of Korean American visibility), it is not reducible to it. Lee's second novel, *A Gesture Life* (1999), became an instant classic of Asian American studies in its innovative approach to the model minority myth. Where other Asian Americanists had typically resorted to exposing the Asian exclusionist currents in US society that thwart immigrant assimilation, Lee here unveils the damaged refugee migrant behind the façade of the good immigrant. In Doc Hata, Lee creates a character paradoxically popular and isolated in a small, largely white, upper-middle-class suburban town. To his neighbors presumptively Japanese American, Hata is slowly revealed to have been a Korean adoptee who'd served as a medical officer in the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. Lee's version of the Asian American is thus an ethnically nested subject, a product of Korea's colonization by Japan, whose war crimes it has been the convenience of a Pax Americana to overlook. If *A Gesture Life* fully replaces the tragic immigrant tale with an uncanny narrative of exile, Lee's geopolitical framing of the issues is already implied by the earlier novel, where Park finds himself employed in the defeat of Third World political aspirations by a Nixon-like employer who is always "lurking about, snooping somewhere," trailed by a hapless dog named Spiro (Agnew) (Lee, *Native Speaker* 28).

Kingston has been so foundational to first-wave Asian American history writing that it is easy to overlook the ways in which her writing exceeds its imagination. We tend to think of Kingston as the paradigmatic “1970s” author whose intent to claim America has been superseded and updated by Lee’s post-1990s transnationalist savvy. In fact, her work richly accommodates a symptomatic reading of the Cold War’s making of the Asian American. *The Woman Warrior* (1976), after all, was published after Nixon’s visit to China but before the normalization of relations under Carter, right as the Cultural Revolution was winding to a close with the trial of the Gang of Four. The text’s famous improvisation upon Chinese tradition can be read as indexing this odd interregnum, when American apprehension of contemporary Chinese reality was newly possible yet still greatly mediated by the myths of the “bamboo curtain.” The uncertain truth of Chinese reality in the text can be read to register the material power of such geopolitical determinants upon the historical consciousness of Chinese immigrants and their US descendants who were made exilic by the United States’ nonrecognition of the People’s Republic after 1949.

The notion of the Asian American as the necessarily fictionalizing subject who arises in a geopolitical communications breach is carried forward from *The Woman Warrior* to *Tripmaster Monkey*, which also entangles the fate of Asian American art in the gears of a US war machine. Pondering his mother’s performing troupe and its basis in the US war effort of the 1940s, Wittman resolves, “At the war rallies, they performed their last, then the theater died. I have to make a theater for them without a war” (Kingston, *Tripmaster* 190). The ironic truculency of this Vietnam-era peacenik is not merely a satirization of Asian American nationalist machismo. Wittman’s aggressive outbursts are cousin to the martial mode of self-empowerment fantasized by the Asian American as inhibited woman warrior – both symptoms of a racial subject engendered by war. The sense of war’s permanence has to do with the shifting scene of the military theater of operations during the Cold War (so that there is always some Asian country with which the United States is at war), as well as with the Cold War’s confusing reversal of the World War II status of Japan and China. Kingston’s war theorization of Asian American racial formation helps explain why, though its cultural content conspicuously draws from Chinese sources, identity is continually staged through interethnic antagonism and ethnic blurring. In *Tripmaster*, for example, the “American of Japanese Ancestry” paradoxically assimilated by internment’s injury serves as a necessary foil to the alienated Wittman, and hence Lance Kamiyama is his natural partner in their shticky parodies of Orientalist stereotypes (87, 126). Why else, too, does Wittman have a grandmother who speaks a mysterious “language of her own” that sounds Japanese but maybe isn’t (191)? While Lee’s Asian American is agonistically Korean Japanese, Kingston’s is Japanese Chinese, and one that is similarly produced by war’s material conflicts.

If Kingston and Lee share a view of history as violence, their approaches to it are, however, differently historical. This can be seen in Kingston’s willingness to inhabit the viewpoints of earlier generations and Lee’s circumspection about its advisability.

Lee's history is fundamentally a traumatic specter within the present. The magical capacity of Kingston's characters to talk with the dead attests to a greater belief in the value of historical reconstruction. However, a danger of her resort to fiction's séance-like power is a potential hypostatization of history, in which what is communicated is the essential homogeneity of immigrant experience. Generations of "China Men" blur into one character. In *The Woman Warrior*, war becomes an immanent metaphor for an identity defined by the gauntlet "Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia" (49). Lee's punctual concentration on the injuries of the Second World War treats war as more of a historical explanation for racial formation even if it typifies a kind of history that eludes recovery.

For their significance as historiographical interventions, the differences between Kingston and Lee might finally be clarified if we consider their work in light of a coolie paradigm of Asian American literature. Kingston's *China Men* (1980) represents a pioneering effort to portray the lives of Chinese contract laborers in Hawaii and the US mainland. Its influence was such that it became a source text for the historian Ronald Takaki's documentation of Hawaiian plantation life.

For a long time, Asians in this country were not allowed to tell their stories, sometimes even to talk. In Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *China Men*, Bak Goong goes to Hawaii, where he is told by a foreman that laborers were not permitted to talk while working. . . . After work, resting in the camp away from the ears of the foreman, Bak Goong tells his fellows workers: "I will talk again, Listen for me." . . . Then, one day, the workers dig a wide hole, and they flop on the ground "with their faces over the edge of the hole and their legs like wheel spokes." Suddenly their words come tumbling out. . . . Today we need to fill the shouting holes, to listen to the Bak Goongs of the past and learn their secrets. Their stories can enable us to understand Asians as actors in the making of history and can give us a view from below – the subjective world of the immigrant experience. (Takaki 120–1)

Kingston's fictional representation of "talk story" helped Asian American history writing testify to the perspectives of contract laborers that had been suppressed by nineteenth-century employers and twentieth-century historians alike. In recovering the speech of the coolie, Yun's work can be seen as following in the footsteps of a representational effort initiated by Kingston. At the same time, Yun's stress on the profound involuntariness of coolie labor puts into bold relief the ideological consequences of Kingston's Promethean topoi. Even accounting for the material differences between the use of contract labor in Cuba versus US territories, Kingston's *China Men* are depicted as world adventurers in the tradition of Crusoe, leaving home at will, occasionally impressed by local tyrants, and essentially Wild Men by nature. Kingston's portrait would have us humanize the Chinese contract laborer as a classically modern individual, while Yun's coolie would have us question the latter as a falsely universal ideology.

In the end, Kingston's historiographical project is fundamentally comic, which is perhaps a concomitant of giving voice to the subaltern. By contrast, Lee's commitment

is to remark the subaltern's tragic silencing. Faithful to the depiction of Korean Americans as a largely postwar formation, Lee does not provide literal portraits of coolies. His fictional imagination is, however, haunted by a veiled figure of slavery, in this case not male contract or indentured labor but female sexual exploitation. Whether in the instance of the comfort woman in *A Gesture Life*, the maid-like second wife of Park's father in *Native Speaker*, or the wife who drowns herself in *Aloft*, Lee continually lodges within his Asian American genealogies an ancestral figure of unfreedom. This silent figure forms the contrasting backdrop to contemporary Asian American *Bildung*, even as resonances between past and present generations confirm a pattern of gendered racialization. The connections disturb certitudes of biological descent and myths of ethnic purity. Just as K's compulsory sexual service to the Japanese military means that the paternity of her unborn child remains to the end in question, the progressive darkening of Hata's line suggests that a raised consciousness involves awareness of shared histories of racial oppression.

In fact, starting with *Native Speaker*'s portrait of black-Asian urban tensions, Lee's work throughout is fascinated by the inevitabilities of Asian-black-white triangulation. So too is Kingston's. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman's avant-gardist aspirations are always framed as a potential copy of black radical chic. *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* remember a "black grandmother" who had been brought back to China by a maternal grandfather on one of his trips to the "West, Bali or Hawai'i or South America or Africa" (*China Men* 86). Blackness in the family tree signifies the interracial contact involved in a Chinese transnational labor migration that was historically coeval with colonial slavery. Even beyond trans-ethnicity, Kingston's and Lee's ventures into the prehistory of the Asian American yield a knowledge of transracialism.

This recovered knowledge does not mean, though, that either author would place a vital bet on the power of Afro-Asian solidarity, Third Worldism, or, for that matter, any collective form of resistance. Lee's characters are fundamentally solitary creatures, narcissists, or orphans of their own making. Despite her more working-class settings, so are Kingston's *China Men*, and Wittman after them. Perhaps Kingston's and Lee's literary genius is that they have tapped the truth of Asian American political expression, which social scientists through empirical means have found to be perennially nascent. Or, perhaps their successes show that what signifies as literary achievement is inextricable from a sense of political estrangement, which may have something specific to tell us about the historically available modes of narrating the subject of Asian American literature.

NOTES

1. For the embeddedness of Asian American identity in the Third Worldism of the 1968 student movements, see Karen Umemoto's account of the role of Asian American students in the San Francisco State strike on behalf of a Third World College.

2. For Asian American as a "catachrestic" formation, which indicates that "there is no literal referent for the rubric 'Asian American,' and, as such, the name is marked by the limits of its signifying power," see Koshy (342).
3. For the canonical critique of intellectual transnationalism's threat to Asian American studies' political purchase, which perforce needs to be grounded in a US local, see Sau-Ling Wong.

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