

UCLA

CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Q&A with Rachel Lee

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zk8f0vv>

Author

UCLA Center for the Study of Women

Publication Date

2012-02-15

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>



Q&A with Rachel Lee

CSW ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR TALKS ABOUT HER HISTORY AND HOW HER PROJECT ENTITLED “LIFE (UN)LTD” DEVELOPED

THE DAUGHTER OF IMMIGRANTS, Rachel C. Lee grew up in suburban New Jersey and attended a small high school with only about five hundred students. Of those, she “was one of three Asian Americans, maybe ten people of color in my high school.” Looking for a larger, more diverse environment, she enrolled at Cornell University, where she majored in English. After graduating, she received a George W. Woodruff Fellowship at Emory University, where she stud-

ied with Hortense J. Spillers. In 1991, she arrived at UCLA to pursue a Ph.D. in English Literature. After holding a post-doc at UC Berkeley, she joined the faculty at UCLA in 1995. An Associate Professor in English and Women’s Studies, she was appointed CSW Associate Director in September of 2011. Her year-long project is “Life (Un)Ltd.,” which will address the impact of recent developments in the biosciences and biotechnology on feminist studies. Recently, she kindly sat down

and chatted with *CSW Update* about her history and the development of her project.

What drew you to studying English literature?

I wish I could say that my experience reading an Elizabeth Bishop poem in high school transformed my life leading me to major in English as a college freshman, but that was not the case. I ended up in literature because it was my way of rebelling against my parents’ desires for me to become a (medical) doctor. Erin Ninh’s “tiger daughter” book, titled

Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature, explores precisely this phenomenon of Asian children resisting model minority expectations (to become employed in lucrative professions) by reading novels.

At Cornell, I was a creative writer and wrote a creative honors thesis. Cornell had virtually no requirements for the English major beyond Shakespeare. Even though I took American literature classes, I wouldn't say I had a sense of nineteenth-century American literature. I took contemporary American literature classes, women's literature classes—one with Henry Louis Gates on African American women writers—Shakespeare, some poetry seminars, and a slew of creative writing workshops. During two years of graduate work at Emory University, I later filled in what I had missed of “the canon.”

At Emory working with Hortense Spillers, I started thinking seriously about Asian American Literature as a subfield of specialization. I contacted King-Kok Cheung and she offered to read a paper on Maxine Hong Kingston that I was

presenting for an upcoming conference at Stanford. She also recommended that I apply as a transfer student to UCLA, which I then did.

How did you become a feminist?

Part of my feminist formation started in college with *How to Suppress Women's Writing* by Joanna Russ. The book consists of phrases that people say to denigrate women's writing in an offhand, subtle way. It's one of those consciousness-raising books. That was my introduction to feminism. It wasn't until graduate school that I started thinking about race. In fact, it was one of my friends from high school who said, “By the way, have you read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*? I was taught it by my teacher Gloria Jean Watkins (aka bell hooks).” She gave it to me and I said, “No, I haven't.” The cover of that book had a little girl interwoven with a dragon—quite orientalist. I didn't want to read it. I later read it in graduate school and found it amazing. I couldn't believe that my friend from high school had a bead on how I might want to know about this book before I knew I wanted to know about it.

How has your research focus developed?

When I entered graduate school, the field of Asian American studies had just begun shifting from a cultural nationalist approach (emphasizing male heroism) to more transnational ways of rethinking the field. To my mind, while this shift was a positive development, opening up new ways of thinking about Asian American studies and Asian American literature, the question still remained: what happens to women? What happens to the study of gender and sexuality? My book was trying to model frameworks for the literary study of Asian American texts that attended to the global and the local (feminized domestic sphere), but I did so through a focus on “America” and its contradictory stature as both a symbol of liberal inclusion (granter of rights to all citizens) and an imperial power spreading influence and military bases in the Asia-Pacific.

After finishing that book, I began research and writing on the topic of race as performance (indebted to Butler's articulation of gender performativity) but also by way of thinking about performers on stage who made race central to their acts: Margaret

Cho, the stand-up comedian; Cheng-Chieh Yu, a Taiwanese American dancer who has training as a martial artist; Denise Uyehara, whose recent work engages militarism's effects on detained, interned, and occupied peoples. Central to each of these artists' performances was the plasticity of their bodies. At the same time, I began teaching a class called "Narrating through Body Parts" which covered the poetic form of the blazon (a kind of ode to a specific body part, usually of a woman), novels and short stories focused on a singular body part—for example, Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (about her cancer of the jaw and her reconstructive surgeries), Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (about the tongue and hands of a professional gay, Indochinese cook), Nancy Mairs' *Waist-High in the World* and Lauren Slater's *Lying* (about the sclerotic and epileptic brain, respectively), to name a few—pairing these with readings from medical anthropology and STS on transplantation ethics, the bioeconomy, and biopolitics. From this nexus of research and teaching interests emerged the *Life (Un)Ltd* project.

I'm also working on a monograph titled *The*

Exquisite Corpse of Asian America, parts of which I presented at a CSW faculty symposium a while back. One of the inspirations of this book has been the controversies over the *Body Worlds* exhibits. Since 1998, this popular entertainment has drawn millions of visitors to its displays of plastinated cadavers, dissected and posed in striking arrangements. At the same time, these shows have spawned legal disputes and legislative action in California, New York, Pennsylvania and the U.S. congress. The intense scrutiny of these corpses arguably lies in their violating notions of the human: their breaching of somatic integrity—exemplified in a flayed specimen's holding his "coat" of skin in his hand—and their flagrant use of body parts as profitable commodities. For the scholar of race and postcolonial studies, the question that immediately arises is "Does race matter to the encounter with these corpses?" Or put another way, "How is it that these visceral fragments assume Chinese identities—that of 'possibly tortured and executed prisoners,' according to one attorney general's office?" *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*, takes up such

questions in its examination of Asian American performances, literature, and new media, as each of these genres fixates on a body part. The book's gambit is that the very construction of body parts as "Asian," and the role that "Asian Americans" themselves play in that construction, helps us evaluate the possibilities and limits of racial analysis at a time when the ways of specifying persons has proliferated in dizzying fashion: for instance, according to race, gender, sexuality, and class, but also disability, religion, national citizenship, technological fluency, investment in militarism, consumption habits, and so forth.

I see this monograph and the *Life (Un)Ltd* project as two avenues of exploring the same sort of issues clustered around biopolitics, race, and gender. In terms of the CSW's mission to foster cross-disciplinary conversation, *Life (Un)Ltd*'s primary aim is to bring together people on campus who are thinking gendered sexuality in relationship to biomedicine—for example, through medical interest in reproduction, intersexuality, or even regenerative medicine—in relationship to

those in race studies whose interests include the history of tropical medicine, and the extension of some lives (for example, organ recipients of the wealthy metropolises) via the curtailed lives of others (for example, organ sellers in perpetual debt). My aim is to foster opportunities to bring both these groups into conversation with those interested in how cultural narratives make a difference to how we think race, generation, and gender.

Why did you want to do the project through CSW?

CSW has a fantastic track record for bringing scholars from various places on campus together. It is a wonderful instrument in building and sustaining bridges across the sciences and the humanities. Being accountable to my CSW colleagues means having to entertain the question of how to translate what I like about stories or narrative to someone who likes data. How can I suggest to someone who looks at a certain phenomenon from a sociological perspective that, yes, I see the value of looking at it that way but can we also talk about how a social phenomenon is narrated or artistically assembled? That “how” may make all the difference in the

level of intensity, the immersiveness, the emotional impact of whether to care about that data in the first place.

—
erin Khuê Ninh is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian American Studies at the UCSB. She is the author of *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, which was published by NYU Press in 2011.

Hannah Landecker is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at UCLA. Her focus is the social and historical study of biotechnology and life science, from 1900 to now. Her book, *Culturing Life: How Cells Became Technologies* (Harvard University Press) was published in 2007. Her current project, “American Metabolism,” looks at transformations to the metabolic sciences wrought by the rise of epigenetics, microbiomics, cell signaling, and hormone biology.

Susan M. Squier is the Brill Professor of Women's Studies and English at Pennsylvania State University, where she directs the Science, Medicine, Technology in Culture program. Her books include *Babies in Bottles: Twentieth Century Visions of Reproductive Technology* (1994), *Playing Dolly: Technocultural Formations, Fantasies, and Fictions of Assisted Reproduction* (1999), and *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine* (2004).

Judith Roof is a Professor in the Department of English at Michigan State University and codirector of the avant-garde performance group SteinSemble. She is the author of several books, including *All about Thelma and Eve: Sidekicks and Third Wheels. The Poetics of DNA* (2007).

Before her death in 2011, Joanna Russ was a Professor in the Department of English at the University of Washington. In addition to writing *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), she wrote many novels, including *On Strike Against God* and *The Female Man*.

Hortense J. Spillers is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English At Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (2003) and editor (with Marjorie Pryse) of *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985).

King-Kok Cheung is a Professor in the Department of English at UCLA. She is the author of *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993) and the editor of *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers* (2000) and *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1996).

Gloria Jean Watkins is better known by her pen name of bell hooks. She is the author of many influential books, including *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), and *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000).

Cheng-chieh Yu is an Assistant Professor in the Department of World Arts and Culture at UCLA. She is a choreographer of dance theater works that explore Asian Diaspora issues and continually challenges notions of an Asian and Asian-American profile. Her works include “Hood, Veil, Shoes: A Dance Work,” “Dancing Mother Courage,” and “The Good Person.”

Frank Chin is a playwright and author. His works include *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1991), *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), and *Bulletproof Buddhists and Other Essays* (1998).