Asian American Literary Studies, and: Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing, and: Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits (review)

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REVIEW ESSAY

Asian American Literary Studies. Edited by Guiyou Huang. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing. Edited by Rocío G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits. Edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn, and Gina Valentino. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

The impact of the global, the role of identity politics, the issue of aesthetics, and the frame of transnationalism, along with the methodological questions each of these raise for Asian American literary scholars, is integral to three recent anthologies: *Asian American Literary Studies* (2005), *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*, and *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* (2005). Individually and collectively, these collections constitute a significant and multifaceted dialogue about the history of Asian American literary studies and provide valuable future directions for the field. Additionally, the thematic foci of each anthology further stresses the unique nature of Asian American literary studies as a field marked by interdisciplinarity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity with regard to form and content.

Because of the specific thematic focus of each work, it initially seems difficult to conduct a comparative reading. Although the methodological frameworks are

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markedly different in each anthology, each collection does provide the reader with a brief history of the field of Asian American literary studies, and such a history is best embodied by the criticism and reception of Maxine Hong Kingston's body of work: *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*. These novels are discussed in each of the compilations, which is understandable given the authorial position Kingston holds within the American literary canon. Since its publication thirty years ago, *The Woman Warrior* has been and continues to be the focus of disciplinary debates about authenticity, form, genre, and identity, a fact that does not escape mention by the editors of each anthology. If we consider the ubiquity of Kingston's work as indicative of not only her significant position within ethnic American literary studies but specifically within Asian American literary studies, the thirtieth anniversary of *The Woman Warrior*'s publication provides an appropriate moment in which to examine where the field of Asian American studies has been and where it may be going.

The editors and some of the scholars found in *Asian American Literary Studies*, *Literary Gestures*, and *Transnational Asian American Literature* make specific and at times prominent mention of debates over Kingston's ethnographic representation and creative imagination, including Frank Chin's now famous assertion that Kingston's literary production reflects an inauthentic voice and racist agenda.[1] Although Kingston's work provides an entrée into a comparative analysis of each anthology, the direction each collection takes is markedly different with regard to Kingston's body of work. Moreover, such scholarly explorations of her texts are but one part of a much broader examination of the context of Asian American literature, which includes multiple genres (poetry, drama, fiction, memoir) and theoretical considerations (identity politics, aesthetics, and transnationalism).

For example, according to editor Guiyou Huang, his volume provides "a considerable array of global and interdisciplinary perspectives on the intersections of literary, political, cultural, historical, and social issues cutting across the broad discipline of Asian American studies" (11). The ten essays in the collection are divided into three sections—the role of war and the notion of self in Asian American literary productions and autobiography respectively; the problematics of binary notions of gender and issues of pan-ethnicity; and the examination of Asian and Asian American subjectivity through the lenses performance, language, and film. With regard to Kingston's work, Wenxin Li's "Gender Negotiations and the Asian American Literary Imagination" uses the Chin/Kingston debate to explore and deconstruct the tendency toward privileging a particular gender position at the expense of another formulation within Asian American studies (112). Li complicates the notion of a purely ethnic or gender-based analysis of

Kingston's work and, by extension, Asian American literature, through a dialogic and simultaneous incorporation of multiple identity subjectivities. Although Li uses texts and recapitulates arguments familiar to those within Asian American literary studies, the conclusion that as the field "moves from its formative stages of cultural identification" we as scholars must also "disinherit our historical burden of segregated gender consciousness" gestures toward a useful starting point in going beyond oppositional gender dynamics as the primary locus of articulating an Asian American subject position (126).

In some ways, Li's essay is emblematic of *Asian American Literary Studies* as a whole, which consists of essays that provide the reader with what has transpired within the field, at times complicating and at other times building upon past scholarship with contemporary considerations of the intersectionality that exists between disciplines and locations (e.g. local and global). Further, Li's use of multiple frames (in this case ethnicity and gender, literature and ethnography) is reflected in the anthology's other essays. Gayle K. Sato's "Asian American Literary History: War, Memory, and Representation," Cheng Lok Chua's "Asian Americans Imagining Burma: Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and Wendy Law-Yone's *Irrawaddy Tango*", Guiyou Huang's "Long a Mystery and Forever a Memory: God vs. Goddess in the Ethnic Novel," Rocío G. Davis's "The Self in the Text versus the Self as Text: Asian American Autobiographical Strategies," and Karen Fang's "Globalization, Masculinity, and the Changing Stakes of Hollywood Cinema for Asian American Studies" each bring together multiple disciplines to evaluate the role of global modalities in Asian American cultural production. The same can be written for Vincent H. Melomo's "'I Love My India': Indian American Studies Performing Identity and Creating Culture on Stage" and Christine Schloate's "Staging Heterogeneity: Contemporary Asian American Drama," which use the framework of performance in order to discuss questions of citizenship and heterogeneity. Amy N. Nishimura's "Speaking Outside of the Standard: Local Literature of Hawai'i" reflects the most "local" examination in that she evaluates the history and social function of Hawai'i Creole English as manifested in the day-to-day lives of those living in Hawai'i and Hawaiian writers.

Thus, *Asian American Literary Studies* presents the reader with a multiplicity of approaches and texts (both familiar and new to the Asian American literary canon), yet one of its strengths as a collection can also be read as one of its weaknesses. Although the collection is divided into three discernible sections, it is at times difficult to find a clear through-line in the anthology because of its rather large reach. The inclusion of essays which examine South and Southeast Asian American writers and cultural producers, along with specific analysis geared to-

ward Asian Pacific American modalities, further supports the tendency towards breadth within Asian American studies. This makes the collection useful in that it easily lends itself to the heterogeneous nature of Asian American studies as a field, yet also makes it difficult to evaluate as a cohesive body. Although the anthology's global perspectives productively challenge the dominant mode of reading Asian American literature solely within the context of the United States, such a construction does not readily accommodate a unified theoretical foundation or organizing principle.[2]

The "aesthetic" in Asian American literature provides a possible solution to the issue of theoretical cohesion within the field, and it is this focus which foregrounds *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing* edited by Rocío G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee, which explicitly explores the role of the aesthetic in Asian American literary studies. According to Lee, "Asian American literary scholarship of the late twentieth century has struggled to negotiate a balance between the immanentist understanding of literature. . . . and the countervailing attempt to argue that literature represents 'something else'—that a literary text is more than the sum of its identifiable (sociological, economic, political, historical) parts" (1). It is the balance between "materialist and formalist Asian American literary criticism" that is central to the *Literary Gestures*. Its eleven essays are organized around various interpretations of "the aesthetic," which has historically been defined "as a criterion of taste, value, sensory judgments, and ethics" and has often been supplanted in Asian American studies by more materialist concerns such as identity construction, relations of power, and political projects. Lee offers an alternative to reading aesthetic impulses in Asian American literature as contradictory to historical and materialist approaches, suggesting instead that the collection attempts to present "the complimentary possibility of a historically and materially engaged analysis that *also* recognizes the aesthetic as a rich critical variable" (1).

Again, Kingston's work illustrates some of the main arguments that undergird *Literary Gestures*. Although Kingston has in the past denied the role of representative spokeswoman, her assertion in a recent interview that she was "writing in a new way and defining a people. . . . claim[ing] America for *us* Asians" (emphasis added) suggests the very tension embedded in both current multicultural debates and literary studies—the role of the author as "native informant" often overshadows the role of author as a producer of a particular aesthetic.[3] Mita Banerjee's "The Asian American in a Turtleneck: Fusing the Aesthetic and the Didactic in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*" provides less a solution to this tension than a productive way of pushing toward an aesthetic framework that

accommodates the articulation of an anti-essentialist ethnic subjectivity. Banerjee argues for an approach that allows for an "open-ended didacticism" to work in tandem with aesthetic considerations, and maintains that *Tripmaster Monkey* is an ideal text for such a perspective because it "employs a *form* hitherto absent from Asian American literature as well as the theoretical discussion surrounding this literature" (55). Banerjee links the aesthetic to the political, creating a space in which to consider the two as complimentary and not antithetical to one another. Banerjee supplements this primary argument with a review of how Kingston's work has been received and the controversies surround such reception, an analysis of the role of performance in the text, and a concluding acknowledgement that Asian American literary studies has yet to find an adequate "synthesis between the field's earlier and its later developments" (69).

This sense of synthesis, embedded in the history of Asian American literary studies as born out of revolutionary identity politics and the separation between politics and aesthetics that remains a constant in the field, is a recurring theme in *Literary Gestures*. The collection is divided into four distinct sections that range from cultural politics to aesthetic categorization—"Asian American Critical Discourse in Academia," "Aesthetics and Ethnicity," "Intertexts: Asian American Writing and Literary Movements," and "Rewriting Form, Reading for New Expression." Mark Chiang's "Autonomy and Representation: Aesthetics and the Crisis of Asian American Cultural Politics in the Controversy over *Blu's Hanging*" highlights perhaps the most apparent instance of conflict between identity politics and aesthetics in recent Asian American scholarship with a close reading of the 1998 Association for Asian American Studies annual convention debate over the awarding of a Fiction award to Lois-Ann Yamanaka. Iyko Day's "Intervening Innocence: Race, 'Resistance', and the Asian North American Avant-Garde" applies Viet Nguyen's argument of the salience of "resistance" within Asian America studies to Asian Canadian writing.[4]

Theoretical in scope, these two essays are followed by Banerjee's essay on Kingston and analyses intended to illustrate varying definitions of the aesthetic through close reading of Asian American poetry, fiction, and drama. Christina Mar's "The Language of Ethnicity: John Yau's Poetry and the Ethnic/Aesthetic Divide," Gita Rajan's "Poignant Pleasures: Feminist Ethics as Aesthetics in Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Rao Badami," Patricia P. Chu's "'A Flame against a Sleeping Lake of Petrol': Form and the Sympathetic Witness in Sevdurai's *Funny Boy* and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Kimberly Jew's "Dismantling the Realist Character in Velina Hasu Houston's Tea and David Henry Hwang's FOB" reflect to varying degrees the need to reevaluate the field through an aesthetic lens, which becomes

more difficult to define precisely because of the heterogeneity of forms deployed by authors. Rocío G. Davis's "Performing Dialogic Subjectivites: The Aesthetic Project of Autobiographical Collaboration in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*" and Celestine Woo's "Bicultural World Creation: Laurence Yep, Cynthia Kadohata, and Asian American fantasy" continue this process of revision through a focus on memoir and fantasy respectively. Two pieces within the collection address Modernism as connected to Asian American literary production—"'A Loose Horse': Asian American Poetry and the Aesthetics of the ideogram" by Josephine Nock-hee Park and "'A New Rule for the Imagination': Rewriting Modernism in *Bone*" by Donatella Izzo.

Literary Gestures presents a convincing argument for reassessing the field of Asian American literature with regard to the question of aesthetics, and each of the essays included in the anthology illustrate the validity of such an approach. However, as is the case with *Asian American Literary Studies*, it is at times difficult to assess how each piece functions alongside the other, despite the thematic focus on aesthetics. Nonetheless, *Literary Gestures* does succeed in presenting an argument to reconsider and include aesthetics within Asian American literary studies, and the collection also emphasizes the need to acknowledge in our scholarly analyses the ways in which form can be evaluated alongside other functions, such as ethics, ethnic subjectivities, or sociopolitical reflections. Aesthetics represent important sites of inquiry for future Asian American literary scholarship, and thus, like *Asian American Literary Studies*, *Literary Gestures* serves to provide not only a map of where the field has been but to direct scholars to possible places it may be going.

This sense of movement within Asian American literary studies is further exemplified in *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn, and Gina Valentino. Transnationalism as a framework is certainly familiar to those within the field, yet the essays included in this collection illuminate both past and contemporary Asian American literary productions that incorporate multiple locations, histories, and narrative strategies. From Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* to Karen Tei Ymashita's *Tropic of Orange*, from Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* to Brian Roley's *American Son*, the texts focused on by the essays in the collection represent the most heterogeneous and most recently published of all the anthologies reviewed here. The collection consists of three distinct sections that are organized according to genre: fiction, memoir, and poetry (it should also be noted that some of the essays included in the collection have been previously published). The essays included in each section conduct close readings of texts

and analyses of how Asian American literary production in its multiple forms reflects various sites, which are defined in the collection as geographic yet also through "attitudes and postures, the arrested moment of identity in a place and time" (1). The notion of transit is expanded to encompass journeys to the U.S., passages of time, and diasporic histories.

In the first section, transnationalism, gender, sexuality, citizenship, intersubjectivity, and masculinity are examined in Cheryl Higashida's "Re-signed Subjects: Women, Work and World in the Fiction of Carlos Bulosan and Hisaye Yamamoto"; Liam Corley's 'Just Another Ethnic Pol': Literary Citizenship in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*; Ruth Y. Hsu's "The Cartography of Justice and Truthful Refractions Found in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*"; Stephen Hong Sohn's 'Valuing' Transnational Queerness: Politicized Bodies and Commodified Desires in Asian American Literature"; Gita Rajan's "Ethical Responsibility in the Intersubjective Spaces: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" and "A Temporary Matter"; and Eleanor Ty's "Abjection, Masculinity, and Violence in Brian Roley's *American Son* and Han Ong's *Fixer Chao*."

As in the other two collections, Kingston's work is prominently mentioned. An essay on *The Woman Warrior* appears in the second section, which is entitled "Memoir/Autobiography." Katherine Hyunmi Lee's "Poetics of Liminality and Misidentification: Winnifred Eaton's *Me* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*" juxtaposes two authors whose work has often been critiqued along the lines of authenticity. Lee argues for a reassessment of these works based on an acknowledgement by scholars of the importance of contradiction as it is manifest in at times conflicting identity politics. Such a layered frame of analysis is repeated throughout the collection, which uses transnationalism as a schema in which to discuss the intersectionalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality as reflected in the immigrant, migrant, and refugee subject.

Along with the previously mentioned pieces, essays in the "Memoir/Autobiography" and subsequent "Poetry" sections include Rocio G. Davis's "Begin Here: A Critical Introduction to the Asian American Childhood"; Srimati Mukherjee's "Nation, Immigrant, Text: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*"; Robert Grotjohn's "Kimiko Hahn's 'Interlingual Poetics' in *Mosquito and Ant*"; Jospheine Hock-Hee Park's "'Composed of Many Lengths of Bone': Myung Mi Kim's Reimagination of Image and Epic"; Maimuna Dali Islam's "A Way in the World of an Asian American Existence: Agha Shahid Ali's Transimmigrant Spacing of North American and India/Kashmire"; and Zhou Xiaojing's "Writing Otherwise than as a 'Native Informant': Ha Jin's Poetry." This rather lengthy enumeration of *Transnational Asian American Literature*'s essays reflects the diverse foci of the volume. This is

not to suggest, however, that the collection lacks a cohesive thread. The schema of transnationalism, which includes immigrant, refugee, and transmigrant subject positions, makes the framework for the anthology not only transparent but reflects a sustained and connected dialogue within the text.

There is one notable exception to this cohesion—Davis's "Begin Here: A Critical Introduction to the Asian American Childhood." Although Davis presents an interesting argument about the persistence of childhood narratives within selected Asian American autobiographies, the essay represents more of an overview than a close reading of a particular work, which admittedly sets it apart from other narratives. This sense of an overview and the lack of the textual specificity such an overview represents is perhaps most apparent in Davis's inclusion of Luong Ung's *First They Killed My Father*. Among Cambodian and Cambodian American readers, Ung's memoir has been the target of harsh criticism. They have critiqued the text as a fabricated, racist account of the Killing Fields.[5] Admittedly the inclusion of such a detail does not undermine or challenge Davis's central argument about the role of childhood in Asian American memoir; however, the omission illustrates a complexity to the text that is arguably elemental to understanding its particular position in Cambodian American literature. Moreover, the inclusion of this multi-sited, transnational debate seems an appropriate choice within the space of the collection. Nonetheless, *Transnational Asian American Literature* highlights new scholarship and possibilities using a framework that "sees nation-formation themes, often intrinsically tied to language strategies and formal features, as one subject rising from a set of historical dynamics that traverse and explain the collective body of Asian American literature" despite the arguably strong currency of transnationalism within Asian American studies (1).

In highlighting new literary scholarship through an interdisciplinary lens, *Transnational Asian American Literature* is similar to its counterparts *Asian American Literary Studies* and *Literary Gestures*. Each book provides the reader with multiple points of entry into Asian American literary studies, illustrating the extent to which the field has been shaped by different critical responses to Kingston's oeuvre. However, and more importantly, these anthologies emphasize the extent to which the field, like Asian American studies, is not static with regard to new approaches and readings. Although Kingston's work occupies a foundational position, it by no means serves as the final terminus for analysis. Rather, Kingston's work becomes a significant site of departure for Asian American literary scholars. Thirty years after the publication of *The Woman Warrior*, Asian American literature is still difficult to categorize because of its heterogeneity of form and content, and this fact destabilizes and undermines any essentialized assertion

that there is one Asian American voice. This is not a new observation, yet the reminder of the field's strength as one marked by diversity is still significant. As reflected in these recent essay anthologies, the variegated nature of such production forces scholars to continue seeking new critical approaches to accommodate adequately the multiplicity of narratives that characterize the ever-growing Asian American literary canon.

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Notes

1. Chin, Frank. "Come Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." *The Big Aiiieeeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature.* Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds. New York: Plume, 1991.
2. I want to thank Min Hiyoung Song for reminding me of Susan Koshy's essay, "The Fiction of Asian American Literature" (*The Yale Journal of Criticism.* 9. 1996, 315–346). Koshy astutely observes that Asian American literary collections often reflect simplistic and pluaralistic assumptions of Asian American identity without adequately addressing the social, historical, and theoretical weaknesses which characterize such assumptions.
3. Kam, Nadine. "Author Kingston returns to isles with thoughts on war and peace." *Star Bulletin.* Vol. 11, Issue 86. 27 March 2006. *http://starbulletin.com/2006/03/27/features/story02.html.* (accessed 26 July 2006). In the article, Kingston asserts, "I had a clear idea that I was writing in a new way and defining a people. I kept declaring that *China Men* would claim American for us Asians. I did not predict that there would be such a renaissance of ethnic writers."
4. Nguyen, Viet. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America.* Oxford UP, 2002.
5. The Khmer Institute claims,

> Although Ung's book is sub-entitled "A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers," it is apparent that she neither truly considers herself "a daughter of Cambodia" (except for the purpose of publicity) nor does she with any kind of accuracy "remembers." Unlike the acclaim and support given to the movie "The Killing Fields," many survivors of the Democratic Kampuchea regime find this book inaccurate, distasteful, and insulting. We believe in this case that misinformation is more dangerous than no information. It is sad that a person would distort and sensationalize such a tragic experience for personal gain. It dishonors the memory of the 1.7 million people who died and the legitimate stories of countless others who have and still suffer because of the Khmer Rouge. (<*www.khmerinstitute.org*> accessed 1 December 2004).