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Asian American Studies Must Be Defended!

Celine Parreñas Shimizu

The seemingly unprecedented visibility of figures such as Amy Chua and Jeremy Lin in U.S. popular culture creates anxieties among Asian American studies scholars. Timothy Yu's blog post "Has Asian American Studies Failed?" for instance, asks if Asian American studies is getting left behind in a place of irrelevance as the discourse seems to move elsewhere, primarily to the web. Yu asks, "Why don't we see Asian American scholars being quoted in the media or publishing books that reach a wide audience?" This question is not only premature but also misinformed about our multipronged and multifaceted work as scholars.

Measuring the efficacy of the discipline of Asian American studies in terms of failure and success assumes that a broad audience signifies we reap real fruit for our labor. Instead, we need to situate this anxious question about the relevance of the field squarely within the logics of racism and anti-intellectualism, in the fashionable discounting of Asian American narration in historical knowledge as well as the frequent bashing of the academy in popular culture. Moreover, this question can give in to the blinding allure of celebrity in achieving status as public intellectuals—which can look more glamorous than publishing sustained and substantial scholarship of more than five thousand words. Rather than focusing on measuring success and failure, we need to acknowledge the myriad fronts where Asian American studies already shapes and intervenes in public discourse. Rather than prioritize the arena of the web as the privileged site of discourse that we must enter, we need to appreciate the multiple arenas we should, and do, occupy in engaging the struggles surrounding knowledge production.

To focus on the arena of the web means we encounter the instruction to "dumb down." It's an instruction articulated too frequently by blog and other web publishers. Such a demand adheres to current anti-intellectual attacks on the enterprise of academic inquiry and ultimately demands us to butcher our work so as to pander to an audience that either does not care or demands sensationalist sound bites. Unlike participating in the academy, participating in the blogosphere can mean joining contests that inflame and misinform. The question of the failure of scholars to extend their work should also lay fault to those who do not read our work, such as legislators who fail at their responsibility to research, so as to understand more truly the history of the problems we face. How many legislators read law reviews, scholarly articles, and books? And if they don't, why don't we call them out?

It is unfair to frame the relevance of Asian American studies in terms of failure or success, or ivory tower versus public discourse, when Asian American social

scientists and humanists have a long history of political and social intervention. Sociologist Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (my sister) testified at the U.S. Civil Rights Commission during the Association for Asian American Studies annual meeting in April 2012. Alongside law enforcement, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations committed to the rescue of trafficked women, she presented a very different assertion based on empirical evidence from her latest book, *Illicit Flirtations*, which comes out of her field work as a hostess in Japan's nightlife industry. Instead of affirming the U.S. classification of Filipina migrant workers to Japan as victims of trafficking, she argues that the United States instead performs a violation of their civil rights by preventing their migration and limiting their wage-earning opportunities. Asian American studies interventions in the discourses of trafficking are necessary and happening, despite the many obstacles fueled by moral panic and the long-running framework of rescue.

The historian Judy Wu shows us how the relevance of Asian American studies can manifest in the efforts of cities to understand their history. In Chicago and San Francisco, the life and work of Margaret Chung, an important Chinese American lesbian figure, will be commemorated in the form of a memorial at each place as a result of Wu's public scholarship. Similarly, my colleague Xiaojian Zhao's history of Chinese Americans directly aids in the work of not only commemorating but also documenting the lives of Chinese Americans in the community of Santa Barbara. The question of the failure of Asian American 'studies diminishes the tremendous work emerging, ongoing, and established by these social scientists and historians.

Moreover, the claim that we talk among ourselves to our detriment also ignores that we are in fact teachers who often live in isolation—solely responsible for Asian American studies in our universities and colleges. Harvard University, for example, hired its first faculty member in Asian American studies this past year. And in creating syllabi, practicing our pedagogy, and building institutions in the academy, our charge is to teach students to think, read, and write critically so as to create responsible and educated citizens of the future. We do more than simply talk among ourselves. We write, research, read, listen, and learn with future leaders and thinkers as well as with institutions that don't always value our perspectives. Our meeting rooms, halls, and classrooms are sites of struggle and debate for which we need support.

The challenge for us as academics at this moment is twofold. First, we must not concede to the idea that we are somehow failing simply because we work in our quiet rooms reading and writing with care. In this moment, the movement to the web seems to threaten the seriousness of the academic enterprise *if framed in a binary of web as success versus academia as failure*. In reality, many bloggers

look to academic research, and many academics write for the web—such as David Palumbo-Liu’s efforts on *truthout* and *Boston Review*—all the while conducting a long career with a vigorous research and robust publishing agenda. Second, we cannot aspire to achieving stature by privileging popular culture writing. It is not enough to respond to Amy Chua and write about Jeremy Lin, and then wait for the next opportunity to latch on to the next prominent Asian American figure to emerge so as to ride those coattails to web prominence. Our training enables us to research, write, think, and read critically and analytically. The fascination with the power of the web cannot diminish the enterprise we need to keep up and further establish in the arena of the academy and all the fronts we occupy! In this way, the success/failure frame diminishes how, at age forty, our field is very young, with much more work to do, including publishing scholarship in the top journals and via the best academic presses. Not everyone is capable or equipped to write well-cited and well-argued scholarly work so as to shape the discourse in and beyond the academy. Our work is so nascent in the academy that we cannot surrender to the allure of the web; rather, let’s shoot for a truly deep, game-changing intervention that will last a hundred years.

Indeed, we in Asian American studies have much work to do as the academy weathers attacks in popular culture, such as when the work of the professoriate is misinterpreted as taking fifteen hours per week at supposedly exorbitant salaries. We must increase awareness of the hierarchy of knowledge production, including the history of power, in determining what is of value. We need to educate others on the process of research and especially the production of Foucauldian subjugated knowledges. We need to build institutions, raise funds, and create endowments that last. We need to nurture faculty and diversify the professoriate. We need to create positions, establish departments, and tenure professors. Tenure means the freedom to occupy positions that may not be popular, but more than anything it enables responsible knowledge. For Asian American studies, tenured professors can signal the establishment of speaking subjects who emerge from the insurgent and insurrectionist position of subjugated knowledge. We occupy positions that allow for a non-sycophantic relationship to other knowledge producers, for our accountability relies on the critique we produce, the struggles we represent, and the anxieties we encourage if they lead to identifying creative tactics that undermine power narrating power of which web discourse often represents.

In March, I was invited to preside as the sole media scholar at the 2012 San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival’s Summit on the “Present/Future,” organized by award-winning independent film producer Karin Chien and celebrated curator Chi-hui Yang, who programs for the Flaherty Seminar,

the Museum of Modern Art, and Comcast. Filmmakers, venture capitalists, film production company heads, television producers, YouTube stars, nonprofit media directors, curators from around the world, and bloggers convened to discuss the status and direction of Asian American media production in a dynamic format. Over two hundred people attended this meeting, which was broadcast online and featured a Twitter feed alongside the presentations. Within the four-and-a-half-hour event, I historicized the Asian American cinema movement, much like Asian American cinema scholarship, as an ongoing struggle of knowledge production. That is, it tries to create new visibilities and explores the limits of making racialized representations, including delinking racial essentialism from authorship and content, so as to show how the power of cinema dramatizes the complexities of communities. This cinema tells stories that exceed racial victimization and positive/negative images. I also offered challenges, including pointing to Asian American web discourse as male-dominated, sexist, and homophobic. I was able to do these things because I am a full professor with tenure, which allows me to live a life like an open nerve, intensely attending to analyzing inequality, and to speak about it without fear. To see so many of the next generation of scholars shut out of the tenure track and thus unable to reach such a position is painful, and highly detrimental to the important work of speaking truth to power in our society. In the face of attacks on the academy and intellectual work, the enterprise of Asian American studies must be defended.

Finally, I must emphasize Asian American studies is strong because it is not unanimous. Some of us work at the forefront of the struggles for legislation, some of us shift thinking and create deep understanding of social problems through literature, and others unleash imaginations in identifying unexpected solutions to these problems through the power of culture, all in different areas and groups whose histories are contentious. Our debate, our disagreements, and our nonunitary voices can never fall under a singular anxiety, of feeling left behind by popular culture or feeling unasked or unacknowledged. Some of us have no anxiety about our relevance, necessity, and importance, for it is very clear that we are at the heart of the most important debates of our times. We must take care not to speak of a collective anxiety regarding our relevance as Asian Americanists, for we work in such different disciplines, areas, and contexts. Multiple arenas of discourse exist wherein Asian Americanists are already making an important impact and promising more—as we find the most effective ways for us to create knowledge that matters—without forsaking our responsibility as scholars in the academy. Indeed, Asian American studies must be defended, and forge ahead.¹⁶

Notes

1. "Has Asian American Studies Failed?" *tympan*, December 20, 2011, <http://tympan.blogspot.com/2011/12/has-asian-american-studies-failed.html>.
2. "Has Asian American Studies Failed? Continued," *tympan*, December 29, 2011, http://tympan.blogspot.com/2011/12/has-asian-american-studies-failed_29.html.
3. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
4. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The Digital Film Event* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.
5. William Petersen, "Success Story: Japanese-American Style," *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966, 180.
6. "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S." *US News & World Report*, December 26, 1966, 73.
7. Anthony Ramirez, "America's Super Minority," *Fortune*, November 24, 1986.
8. Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 39.
9. Vijay Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 171, 80.
10. Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 129.
11. The Coalition of Graduate and Employee Unions "Casual Nation" report finds that women and people of color are disproportionately affected by the casualization of university teaching, representing a majority of part-time and adjunct faculty and a minority of tenured professors. This report is available online at <http://www.2110uaw.org/gseu/archive/GSEU%20Library/Casual%20Nation.pdf>. Also see two reports compiled by the American Federation of Teachers, online at www.aft.org: "Fairness and Equity: Standards of Good Practice in the Employment of Part-Time/Adjunct Faculty" (2002) and "The Growth of Full-Time Non Tenure-Track Faculty: Challenges for the Union" (2003).
12. *Threadbared*, <http://iheartthreadbared.wordpress.com/>.
13. In responding to Rothstein's review, my wife Sharon Mizota, a Japanese American art critic whose parents both spent their early childhood in internment camps, observed that if (1) there's a learning center at Heart Mountain that (2) a *New York Times* art critic would end up reviewing, these likely suggest the triumphs of Asian American studies, not its shortcomings.
14. Edward W. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (September 1982): 1–26.
15. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Triste Tropique*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (1955; repr., New York: Penguin, 1992).
16. Celine Parrenas Shimizu thanks Shelley Lee, Juliana Chang, and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas for your encouragement and critique.