Postcolonial Theory and the United States

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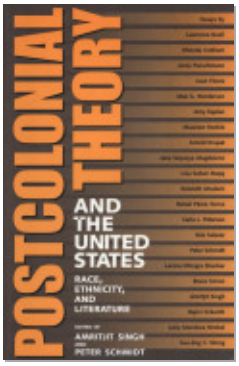

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Denationalization Reconsidered
Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads

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Introduction

"Denationalization Reconsidered" first appeared in 1995, in a special issue of *Amerasia Journal* entitled "Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies," edited by Michael Omi and Dana Takagi. I wrote it as part of a field-specific dialog within Asian American studies concerning future scholarly and institutional emphases, without intending it to be a general theoretical pronouncement on ethnicity, postcoloniality, or any number of components of contemporary Asian American experiences. The essay addresses Asian Americanists in the American academy, whose institutional positioning, in my view, calls for priority-setting and choices in one's work. Nevertheless, the essay apparently touched a nerve in a wider circle than I had anticipated. When the editors of this volume kindly afforded me an opportunity to revise the essay, I decided, after some thought, to forgo the chance to further clarify my views, defend them against possible misunderstandings, amend my blind spots, or adjust my biases. Instead, I opted for a reprinting of the original essay together with a brief headnote updating the reader on relevant recent developments in Asian American studies, presented in hybrid chronological/thematic order. I feel that this combination better respects the historical moment at which it was first published and the "life of its own" that it has taken on since then.

The year after the "Thinking Theory" volume appeared, *Amerasia Journal* published a special issue, "Transnationalism, Media and Asian Americans," which, in the words of editor Russell Leong, "gathers together essays that utilize historical analysis, ethnographic approaches, and literary strategies to look at interrelated global and domestic conditions that shape the lives of Asian Americans in the late 20th century" (Leong 1996: iv). In this issue, Arif Dirlik's lead article, "Asians on the Rim: Transnational

Capital and Local Community in the Making of Contemporary Asian America" (1996), reviews the new Pacific formation and raises the question: "The original vision of Asian America may no longer be able to contain the forces shaping Asian America. But is it, therefore, irrelevant?" (15) He calls for a "deeply political answer" (15), part of which is a recognition that many of the problems giving rise to the Asian American movement in the 1960s have persisted in reconfigured form. Citing "Denationalization Reconsidered," he affirms the possibility of a significant role for Asian America in "the reassertion of local welfare against the globalizing forces of transnational capitalism" (18).[1]

A direct refutation of the "denationalization" notion can be found in Susan Koshy's essay, "The Fiction of Asian American Literature" (1996). Koshy argues that the concept is "fundamentally flawed" (340), since it falsely opposes the national and the transnational, the domestic and the diasporic. Even the term itself, with connotations from neoimperialist theory, introduces disturbing potential for right-wing political interventions. Furthermore, she sees a "confusion at the descriptive and conceptual level of key terms like 'transnational,' 'international,' and 'borderless economy' " (341). Koshy takes issue most strongly with my idea of the need for "commitment to the place where one resides," hearing in it painful and ominous echoes of Cold War demands on "loyalty" from Asian Americans (341–2). Thus she judges "Denationalization Reconsidered" "conservative in its conclusions" (342), and suggests that it may hinder new developments in Asian American studies. Calling the term "Asian American" catachrestic—with no literal referent and always exceeded by its postulated meaning—Koshy predicts that "the politics of Asian Americans will be more and more defined by issue-based strategic alliances with other groups as a way of responding to the political complexities of the nineties" (341).[2]

Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) is a theoretical analysis of Asian American racial formation and cultural politics based on the premise that from the start, Asian immigration to the United States has been the locus of contradiction between the nation-state and the global economy: that while U.S. capital's needs for labor have placed Asians within the U.S. nation-state, Asian Americans have been marked as "foreign." In this formulation, a global perspective is integral, rather than additional, to any definition of the Asian American formation. "Thus, 'becoming a national citizen' cannot be the exclusive narrative of emancipation for the Asian American subject. Rather, the current social formation entails a subject less narrated by the modern discourse of citizenship and more narrated by the histories of war in Asia, immigration, and the dynamics of the current global economy" (33). Lowe's thesis also stresses the structural nature of the othering of Asians in the U.S.: "American national culture takes up the role of resolving the history of inequalities left unresolved in the economic and political domains" (29). She therefore posits an inherently oppositional aesthetic for Asian American culture, "an aesthetic of infidelity and disidentification" (32).

In 1997, Elaine Kim and Lisa Lowe edited a special issue of *positions: east asia cultures critique* to "facilitate new critical discussions between progressive scholars of East Asia and those in Asian American studies" (viii). "As the formation of Asian Americans within the United States is placed in dialectical relation to international histories and

locations, the objects and methods of neither Asian American studies nor Asian studies can remain the same" (xiii). The essays selected all "conceptualize Asian Americans as simultaneously formed within both U.S. national and global frameworks" (x). In diverse ways, the contributors address significant shifts in the last three decades impacting Asian Americans: post-Fordist global restructuring, post-1965 immigration and resulting changes in demographics, the colonial and neocolonial role of the United States in the Asian states from which the new "Asian American" communities emigrate, and the failure of citizenship and civil rights toward racialized groups of color in the United States.

Another anthology exploring connections between Asian studies and Asian American studies is edited by Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa. Entitled *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* and forthcoming from Duke University Press, this volume explores such topics as the disciplines and subjects of Asian and Asian American studies; differentiations between "Asianness" and "Asian Americanness"; rethinking the discursive fields in terms of the consequences, benefits, and dangers of looking beyond nationally-defined disciplinary boundaries; and print cultures, specifically journal publications, reflecting some of the aforementioned shifts.

R. Radhakrishnan, one of the contributors to the Chuh and Shimakawa anthology, has collected his many previously published essays on ethnicity and diaspora in one volume, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* (1996). Some of these explicitly address Asian American (specifically, Indian American) identity (e.g., "Is the Ethnic 'Authentic' in the Diaspora?"; 203–214); others offer theoretical considerations of terms such as nation, hybridity, subalternity, and postcoloniality relevant to the Asian American condition. All the "meditations" proceed from an understanding of the "diasporic location" as "the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one's place of origin with that of one's present home" (xiii). In "Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity," Radhakrishnan recommends that "the diasporic be named as the 'ethnic' " (176) and defines the "ethnic mandate" as "to live 'within the hyphen' and yet be able to speak" (175–6). He suggests that "diasporic communities need to make a difference within their places/nations/cultures of residence" and ally with each other "relationally" (176).

A different theorizing of the hyphen than Radhakrishnan's is made by David L. Eng in "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies" (1997), where he argues for "risking the hyphen," or a "hyperbolization" of the hyphen (37), in order to disrupt too comfortable and uncritical an alignment of home and nation-state, and to keep in view the Asian or diasporic element in Asian American studies. Examining contradictions highlighted by the "double meaning of *domestic* as both the "public space of the masculine (nation-state) and the private realm of the feminine (home)," as well as Asian American cultural nationalists' earlier attempts to purchase a public Asian American male identity through devaluation of a "[feminine and homosexual] private realm" (35), Eng proposes a broadened definition of queerness as "a critical methodology for evaluating Asian American racial formation across multiple axes of difference and in numerous local and global manifestations" (39), in a context of continued movements of transnational capital, immigration, and labor. Other scholars who have investigated the intersection between "Asian Americanness"

and "queerness"—both of which have been defined as deviance by the U.S. nation-state at various points in its history—including Gopinath (1997) and Puar (1998).

The slash or solidus, rather than the hyphen, is used in David Palumbo-Liu's interdisiplinary study, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999), to signal a complex undecidability in Asian American identity. The term Asian/American implies both exclusion and inclusion, both distinction and movement between the two terms. Beginning with the 1920s, Palumbo-Liu analyzes various materializations of Asian American identity in both a nation-state context and a diasporic context.

Another recent book-length study, David Li's *Imaging the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (1998), while primarily a work of literary criticism, provides a critical theory of Asian American identity in the chapter on "Difference and Diaspora." Among other things, Li argues that the Asian American formation itself is not automatically a solution to, but rather a problem in and of, the contradictions of the nation; and that the regional Asia-Pacific idea is not necessarily ameliorative.

Though a group-specific anthology, Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini's *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (1997) expounds, in its introduction (Nonini and Ong 1997), a conceptualization of transnationality that would be of interest to Asian Americanist students of diasporic conditions in general. Nonini and Ong take "an affirmative view of diaspora" ' (18) and suggest that the "mobility" of diaspora Chinese, taking the form of a "guerrilla transnationalism," "challenges and undermines modern imperial regimes of truth and power" (19). Each of such regimes to which diaspora Chinese are subject—the Chinese family, the capitalist workplace, and the nation-state—requires "the localization of disciplinable subjects," which the mobile Chinese seek to elude (23) by working the interstices between national spaces and identities. "What is invoked, or when, depends on particular circumstances and the configuration of social relations that constitute our everyday world" (25).

A direction for future investigations of "Asian Americanness," alluded to only tangentially in my essay, concerns information technology. Cyberspace has been theorized as a leveler of physical and social differences, a home to all affiliative "imagined communities," and the ultimate deterritorializer—"denationalizer," if you will. The impact of cyberspace on Asian American subjectivity and community formation merits exploration in light of several facts: the "imagined community" of Asian Americans has been forged on an awareness of, and commitment to resisting, inequalities imposed on their racialized, gendered, sexualized, classed, and otherwise marked bodies; links between Asians in diaspora are facilitated by the internet; Asian Americans have been heavily involved in high tech in a wide range of roles from assemblers and engineers to entrepreneurs and consumers. Complexities in this situation have been analyzed by, for example, Rai (1995), who studies the "crosshatched" dynamics in the construction of a diasporic Hindu identity on electronic bulletin boards; Nakamura (1995), Chun (1999), and Ow (forthcoming), who identify the reinstatement of Euro-American normativity and reinscription of dominant stereotypes of Asians in cyberspace; and Shu (1998), who, using the case of Asian transnational professionals, argues for models of identity formation and mobilization based on participation in information technolo-

gies. "Can [the] permeability between Asian and Asian American identities, which has been facilitated and mediated by information technologies, be considered as a new way to reconstruct the conventionally defined 'Other' within the U.S. cultural context?" (Shu 1998: 152). Palumbo-Liu (1999) examines the projection of "Asia Pacific" into liquid capital and a "borderless" cyberspace.

Last but not least, two recent events focus some of the debates touched on in "Denationalization Reconsidered." The 1996 campaign finance scandal, like the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, emblematizes for many the dangers of conflating Asian and Asian American, foreigner and citizen, and of the revival of the specter of the "Yellow Peril." To the extent that John Huang and his associates can be seen as bearers of and spokesmen for transnational capital, the scandal also raises questions about the meaning of the "Asian American community" and who should represent it. L. Ling-Chi Wang's "Race, Class, Citizenship, and Extraterritoriality: Asian Americans and the 1996 Finance Campaign Scandal" (1996) presents several ways of analyzing the racialization of political corruption and argues for a focus on the restoration of democracy. (See also Palumbo-Liu [1999] for a cultural studies analysis of mainstream media coverage of the scandal.)

Secondly, several Asian economies crashed catastrophically in 1997–98.[3] The events happened too recently to be significantly reflected in scholarship in Asian American studies. Nevertheless, given the role played by the fact—now cast in serious doubt—of Asian ascendancy in certain varieties of theorizing about new concepts of Asian American identity, a newly diminished picture of Asia's promise might provoke yet more rethinking. The chapter "Fear of a Yellow Planet" in Eric Liu's volume of personal essays, *The Accidental Asian* (1998: 115–44), touches on the allures of the idea of a "borderless Chinese tribe" (123) and his misgivings as a Chinese American about them.

In this essay, I would like to address what I consider to be a theoretical crossroads at which Asian American cultural criticism has found itself. For some time now, Asian American cultural criticism—by which I simply refer to implicit or explicit analysis of Asian American subject formation and cultural production—has been undergoing dramatic changes from whose influences no one in the field of Asian American studies can be exempt. Not only have these changes been shaping the practice of individual scholars, but they have been exerting mounting pressure on the field to reflect on its own operating assumptions and, if necessary, modify them. I will use the term *denationalization* to try to capture the complexity of these cultural phenomena, of which I will single out three for scrutiny.

The first is the easing of cultural nationalist concerns as a result of changing demographics in the Asian American population as well as theoretical critiques from various quarters ranging from the poststructuralist to the queer. This has made possible a complication of identity politics as articulated in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as opened up other axes of organization and mobilization including class, gender and sexuality. Concomitantly, permeability has been increasing in the boundaries between Asian Americans and "Asian Asians," once a rallying point for the Asian American movement; as well as between Asian American studies and Asian studies, two disci-

plines with very distinct histories and institutional locations, and vexed, at times openly antagonistic, relations. The expanding intercourse between the two fields is, among other things, a response to new patterns of economic and political power affecting the relative positioning of Asia and America. In turn, this repositioning arises from a larger global movement of transnational capital, whose cultural consequences include a normalization of multiple subjectivities, migrations, border-crossings.[4] The sweep of the postmodern condition has made it more and more acceptable to situate Asian Americans in a diasporic context—the third component of the denationalizing trend I wish to investigate. A *diasporic perspective* emphasizes Asian Americans as one element in the global scattering of peoples of Asian origin, in contrast to what I call a *domestic perspective* that stresses the status of Asian Americans as an ethnic/racial minority within the national boundaries of the United States. Together, these three changes have taken on the force of something of a paradigm shift in Asian American studies.

The 1995 special "theory" issue of *Amerasia Journal*, whose primary audience appears to be the community of Asian Americanists, provides a perfect occasion for me to air my concerns about denationalization. I believe a political question of constituency and mission underlies questions of application encountered daily by academic practitioners of cultural criticism. This question must be addressed collectively in the face of a trend that, to some, appears to promise novelty, intellectual excitement, delivery from the institutional ghetto of ethnic studies, or even, perhaps, better funding.

The Easing of Cultural Nationalist Concerns

I will begin with a clarification. The switching between "Asian American cultural criticism" and "Asian American studies" in the preceding paragraphs is not done randomly. My remarks will concentrate on the former domain, although I believe their implications concern the field as a whole.

On the issue of denationalization, within the Asian Americanist community there has actually been a kind of disjuncture between the history/social science contingent and the literature/cultural studies contingent. The national boundaries of the United States have never been as intense a point of contention for the former as for the latter. From the start, Asian American historians and social scientists have been interested in immigration; of course, in immigration studies border-crossing is more a given than a cultural proposition to be debated.

Furthermore—and I will elaborate on this later—in a sense it is misleading to cast the current debates on "theory" in Asian American studies (of which denationalization is one manifestation) solely in terms of an unprecedented contemporary occurrence due to external influences. The "pre-post" period—the period before concepts from poststructuralism and postmodernist theories found a hearing in Asian American studies—was already witness to much critical interest beyond the domestic American scene. The activists who founded Asian American studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s were influenced as much by the Cultural Revolution in China as by "domestic"

American events like the civil rights movement or the black power movement (Chan 74–75). The anti-Vietnam War movement, which jolted many Asian Americans into recognizing their commonality with the "gooks" as well as among themselves, is inherently transnational in outlook. So too is the internal colonialism model, which, by drawing analogies between colonies in the traditional mode in the Third World and race relations within U.S. boundaries, allowed Asian Americans to talk about their history beyond terms set by narratives of Americanization dominant in the 1940s and 1950s. As Sucheta Mazumdar puts it, "the very genesis of Asian American Studies was international" ("Asian American Studies and Asian Studies" 40). (In this sense, my term "denationalization" is something of a misnomer, as it suggests deconstruction of an establishment where seeds of that deconstruction have been present from the start. For lack of a comparably complex organizing term, however, I will continue to use "denationalization.")

Nevertheless, it remains true that in the early days, transnational concerns had a way of looping back to the domestic once political lessons had been extracted. The linkage between the two was more in the nature of inspiration and analogy, with "foreign" spheres of struggle lending strength and legitimacy to the American minority political enterprise. The Asian American cultural nationalist project as articulated by the *Aiiieeeee!* group[5] was characterized by a cluster of domestic emphases, and the subsequent development of this project did involve a certain ossification of identity politics. Early Asian American cultural criticism was spearheaded by American-born and -raised, Anglophone, mostly male, Asians (Espiritu 50); it features certain premises—anti-Orientalism, valorization of working-class ethnic enclaves, "claiming America"[6]—that explicitly or implicitly discourage, if not preclude, critical attention on things Asian. (Gender enters the equation in that, with things Asian implicitly theorized as feminine, cultural nationalism is committed to an aggressively masculinist agenda.) In fact, it seems anything that threatens to undermine the demonstration of the "indigenization" (the "becoming American") of Asian Americans must be scrupulously avoided.[7] Thus subscription to an indigenization model of Asian American experiences, whereby a person of Asian ancestry has to earn the designation of "Asian American" by acquiring "American" credentials on "American" soil (e.g., railroad-building, writing in English), informs the cultural nationalist project even as it seeks to critique and resist the model's assimilationist teleology. Fear of exoticization so prevailed (compounded by other obstacles such as English monolingualism among many American-born cultural critics) that literature produced by immigrants in the Asian languages has, for a long time, been neglected, and only recently has the disavowal of Asian influences abated noticeably within Asian American cultural criticism (e.g., Cheung, "Woman Warrior"). For the cultural nationalists, then, the U.S. borders turn out to take on as much significance as for white nativists. *Asian America,* a quasi-geographical term that became current in the 1970s and continues to be important,[8] with no territorial sovereignty/ integrity to underwrite it, appears to me to suggest a yearning for the kind of containing boundaries and contained site enjoyed by the dominant society, a nation-state.

While the above account of cultural nationalism has left out much—nuances, contradictions, as well as later developments—there is some truth to the view that since

the mid 1970s, some weakening of the aforementioned domestic emphases has been taking place, resulting in a broader cultural space for more Asian Americans. I need not rehearse the details of the feminist critique of cultural nationalism, which has been well presented by Elaine Kim and King-Kok Cheung, among others, and is familiar to most readers of *Amerasia* (e.g., Cheung, "Woman Warrior"; Kim, "Such Opposite Creations"). What may need highlighting is the fact that theoretical challenges have come from other quarters as well. For example, Shelley Wong mounts a class-based critique of the heroic invocation of railroad building in Asian American nation-building, which becomes implicated in American capitalist discourse and the disciplining of the industrial subject. From a gay studies perspective, David Eng notes how Asian American cultural nationalism has been pursuing its agenda of reclaiming masculinity by reinforcing compulsory heterosexuality and suppressing the presence of the Asian American homosexual. Oscar Campomanes has suggested that the presence of Filipino American literature "problematizes some of the claims of Asian American literature as a constitutive paradigm." By calling for a reconceptualization of Filipino writing in the U.S. as a "literature of exile and emergence," rather than a "literature of immigration and settlement whereby life in the U.S. serves as the space for displacement, suspension, and perspective" (49, 51), Campomanes is not only expressing a Filipino American concern. Rather, he is also giving voice to a complaint shared by several other groups. The new Asian American demographics, in which East Asians no longer predominate, have made for a complication of the alignments created in the 1960s and 1970s. For the recently arrived (such as Vietnamese Americans) or long-established but recently vocal groups (such as South Asian Americans), their cultural specificities and historical relationships with U.S. imperialism may be much more complex than has been recognized in an identity politics derived largely from East Asian American experiences.

Shelley Wong, Eng, and Campomanes are just a few of a new generation of critics who have been disrupting the apparently consensual theoretical basis of the Asian American movement. Their moves may or may not lead to a retraining of critical focus beyond U.S. national boundaries, but they all contribute to denationalization in the first sense that I have outlined.

Growing Permeability Between "Asian" and "Asian American"

Denationalization in the second sense entails a relaxation of the distinction between what is Asian American and what is "Asian," and between Asian American studies and Asian studies. To quote Elaine Kim's succinct formulation in a key document in the denationalization debate, her foreword to Shirley Lim and Amy Ling's 1992 critical anthology, *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (framed as a revision of the 1982 Introduction to her *Asian American Literature*), "The lines between Asian and Asian American, so important to identity formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred" (xiii). As a corollary of this blurring, something of a rapprochment between Asian studies and Asian American studies has been taking place.

There are obvious material bases for this second component of denationalizaton, chief among them the ascendancy of Asia as an economic power of global impact, the coalescence of the Pacific Rim as a geoeconomic entity, and the circulation of Asian transnational capital.[9] Thus instead of being mere supplicants at the "golden door," desperate to trade their sense of ethnic identity for a share of America's plenty, many of today's Asian immigrants regard the U.S. as simply one of many possible places to exercise their portable capital and portable skills. In other words, whereas political instability and economic depression used to occur hand in hand, the Asia of "little dragons" has disentangled the two, creating a situation in which phenomenal economic growth coexists with political uncertainty or repression.[10] While the U.S. is still wildly romanticized in many parts of Asia, the concept of the Pacific Rim as an interconnected economic unit underscores the unevenness of this vast region in which migration is but a rational means of trade-off between security and profit. (In fact, the direction of movement can no longer be assumed to be from Asia to America; many Asian Americans in science and technology are relocating to Asia: see Dunn.) Segments of the Asian professional class have developed their own patterns of trans-Pacific commuting, which obviously affect identity formation in unprecedented ways.

Christopher L. Connery has deftly traced the gradual rise of what he terms Pacific Rim Discourse in the mid-1970s, which has diffused into American culture as an Asia-facing orientation (as opposed to an earlier preoccupation with Europe) and a general awareness of the interconnectedness of Asian and U.S. fortunes. Among the contributing factors he lists are the thaw in U.S.-China relations, the end of the Vietnam War, the recognition of Japan's economic power, and the worldwide economic downturn that forced the U.S. to acknowledge its loss of hegemony. Although Connery notes a decline in Pacific Rim Discourse and an American retreat from internationalism in the late 1980s, the discourse's hold on the American population imagination is still to be reckoned with.

When cultural projects involve trans-Pacific collaboration in material terms, delimiting and designating them as either Asian American or "Asian" become much more difficult, maybe ultimately irrelevant. One good example is the work of film director Ang Lee (*Pushing Hands, The Wedding Banquet,* and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*), who grew up in Taiwan, received an American education, draws from both sides of the Pacific for funding, actors and film crew, and deals with characters of varying degrees of biculturality. How exactly should one classify him and his *oeuvre,* not just at credit-claiming time but in a conscientious attempt at valid conceptualization?

Apart from the issue of classification, cultural dissemination, maintenance, and transformation for Asian Americans—a group with a sizable aggregate disposable income—are very different matters today than they were before the advent of cheap jet travel, fax and e-mail, pocket translators, long-distance phone services competing for clients with multilingual support, satellite-typeset Asian-language newspapers, and video and laserdisc rental outlets featuring Asian films. While "trans-Pacific families" (H. Liu) have been a long-standing reality among Asian Americans, today's voluntary immigrants and their descendants, especially middle-class ones, lead a kind of life that tends to blunt the acute binarism between Asian and American with which earlier generations have had to contend strenuously. They need no longer conform to a para-

digm of identity formation developed in the steamboat era, when entry into the U.S. more often than not meant a one-way experiment in adaptation. Instead, the voice of family across the ocean could be just a push-button phone call away, and Asian-language media could be brought into one's living room.[11] To paraphrase the title of a book on Southeast Asian Americans, the Far East has come near (Nguyen-Hong-Nhiem and Halpern).

Indeed, the strict demarcation between Asian and Asian American would break down irreparably if we examined the families of so-called "parachute kids" (in Chinese they are often called *xiao liuxuesheng,* or "little foreign students" [Nina Chen]). In view of Asia's vastly superior economic prospects but continued political uncertainty, many middle-class Asian families are splitting their members, sending the children (sometimes accompanied by a parent, sometimes not) to study in U.S. schools and/or gain permanent residency while the breadwinner stays in Asia. Family ties are maintained by frequent visits in either direction. (Hence the Chinese nicknames for such families: *kongzhong feiren,* "trapeze artist," or *taikongren,* "astronauts.") Quite apart from citizenship status, the "parachute kids'" lived experience of functioning in this country neither as immigrants nor as foreign (F-1 visa-holding) students, but sharing the situations of both, compels us to reexamine the meaning of "Asian American." As I understand it, the dropping of the hyphen from *Asian-American* in the cultural nationalist period was meant to affirm the indivisible integrity of the Asian American experience, that is, to minimize any negative connotation associated with bilaterality. Now as never before, however, bilaterality is a tangible, physical reality for many at both the family and the individual level.

Not to be overlooked as part of post-1965 demographic changes in the Asian American community is the influx of Asian-born academics (among whom I count myself), whose outlook and research activities further make for closer interactions between Asian and Asian American studies. On the one hand already Westernized before immigration to the U.S.—as Rey Chow points out, this complicates, for good reason, the stereotypical belief in a pristine "native" origin (xi–xii)—these academics, unlike many of their American-born counterparts, are bilingual and biliterate, often retaining a keen interest in the transformations in the Asian cultures in a postcolonial context. To them, the continuities between Asian and Asian American are more abundant, the disjunctures less absolute, than to the early cultural nationalists. Especially apparent to the immigrant scholars is the need to denaturalize the U.S. borders as a sort of invisible fence around Asian American cultural criticism.

Their access to and interest in the "Asian" aspects of the Asian American experience are congruent with the attention shift and self-critique among Asian studies scholars: the latter, likewise influenced by the global forces that impinge on the former, have had to rethink their field's area studies roots, Cold War complicities, residual Orientalist assumptions, and racialized stratification of labor in academia. Mazumdar notes: "Drawing boundaries and arbitrarily isolating the immigrants' history and culture of the homeland under the rubric of Asian Studies, and focusing only on [their] existence after arrival in the United States as shaped by the American context, assumes 'America' could be understood independently of 'Asia' or vice versa" (40–41). Neither assumption is conceptually adequate.

Finally, in higher education and academic research settings, Asian and Asian American studies sometimes have to share an institutional location or form a coalition to combat an unsympathetic administration for resources. Whatever the problems with the rhetoric and practice of "multiculturalism" in today's liberal education, it has made Asian-ancestry scholars, regardless of where they are housed, more aware of their common imposed (not always voluntarily adopted) role in the academy and in the racial politics of the larger society. The result is a noticeable rise in collaborative professional activities between Asian Americanists and Asianists, in the form of sessions at each other's conferences, articles in each other's journals, etc.;[12] another form is filling joint appointments, so that the two fields are embodied in one scholar. Certainly it would be a mistake to exaggerate the cordiality between the two fields: Asian American studies is often treated with contempt by sinologist types even now. But considering how long-standing their mutual suspicion, and how much of a *bête noir* the conflation of Asian and Asian American has been to Asian American studies, the current rapprochment is striking.

Shifting From a Domestic to a Diasporic Perspective

The third aspect of denationalization—the shift from a domestic American to a diasporic perspective—follows from the first two but has its own additional set of contributing causes. The increased porosity between Asian and Asian American is but one constituent in a global trend; to paraphrase a character in Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses,* the universe is shrinking (cited in Hagedorn, "Exile" 25). In light of the aforementioned combination of multinational capital, cultural homogenization through commodification, and advanced communications technology, not only the Pacific Rim regions, but all regions of the world can be said to be interpenetrating.[13] Furthermore, as Edward Said remarks, in our century forced uprootings of entire populations have attained proportions that are humanistically and aesthetically incomprehensible. "Our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced persons, mass immigration" ("Reflections" 357). Though Said's observation is not made in reference to denationalization, the mass movements he describes do point to a world in which identity and culture are increasingly decoupled from geopolitics.

Paul Gilroy argues that one of the principal reasons for going beyond a "national and nationalistic perspective" is that "neither political nor economic structures of domination are still co-extensive with the borders of nation-states": postmodernity has eclipsed the importance of the modern nation-state as a political, economic, and cultural unit ("Cultural Studies" 188). While I question Gilroy's verdict on "ethnic absolutism," the need for a transnational analysis of political, economic, and cultural relationships is undeniable. This appears particularly important when one is studying women, whose relationship with the nation-state has always been conflicted.[14] As Chandra Mohanty points out, "contemporary post-industrial societies . . . invite cross-national and cross-cultural analyses for explanation of their own internal features and socioeconomic constitution" (2; see also Grewal and Kaplan). Beginning with Asian

immigrant women garment workers in the U.S. (traditionally the province of Asian American studies), Lisa Lowe has made a compelling case for understanding them in more than a domestic context, linking them to other women of color in the U.S. as well as to transnational capitalism and labor politics worldwide.

(In this connection, let me add that Asian American denationalization is paralleled by changes and debates in other ethnic studies fields. Not only has African-American studies increased its attention to the "Black Atlantic" and scatterings further afield, but Chicano studies has been confronted with the question of including non-Mexican-origin Latino Americans and revising the notion of American culture altogether (e.g., José Davíd Saldivar), and Native American studies must consider professional and political alliances with indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world from a Fourth World perspective.)[15]

As it applies to Asian Americans, a recognition of transnational realities means acknowledging that certain groups classified as Asian Americans by post-1960s practice—Americans of Asian ancestry residing permanently in the United States, regardless of nativity—have concerns not addressed by that categorization. For example, the cultural productions of, say, Marcos-era Filipino-Americans, Vietnamese- or other South East Asian Americans, or post-Tiananmen Chinese-Americans, necessarily take on a nondomestic cast: the finality of their dislocation co-exists with a perpetual turning of one's gaze toward the lost homeland. This may—or it just as well may not—make for a readier inhabitation of the subject positions assigned by the dominant society. The situation is particularly vexed when displacement is a direct consequence of U.S. imperialism.[16]

Thus a notion of Asian American literature and culture based on putting down roots on American soil—*luodi shenggen,* to cite the title of the first international conference on "overseas Chinese" held in San Francisco in 1992—becomes deeply problematized. For some Asian Americans, the impulse to uproot oneself from America at the earliest opportunity may be at least as strong as, if not stronger than, the rooting impulse. (The homeward gaze could last a lifetime.) In such cases, only a diasporic perspective can provide the conceptual room needed to accommodate non-conforming cultural orientations, as well as expose the role of American foreign policy in shaping global patterns of population movement.[17] A diasporic perspective also provides the only way to capture the complexities of multiple migrations and dispersed Asian-origin families, which are not at all uncommon in the population designated as Asian Americans. A Vietnamese American may have gone through Thailand, Hong Kong or France before reaching the US; an Indian American may have lived in Kenya or Britain; a Chinese American family may have branches in Brazil, Singapore, or Germany. In light of such migratory patterns, to take the perimeters of the American nation as the limits of one's cultural interests seems arbitrary and myopic. It is precisely on these grounds that a speaker at the session, "Re-examining Diasporas," at the 1994 Association for Asian American Studies Conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan, protested the narrowness of the term *Asian American*.[18] A presenter at the same session, Evelyn Hu DeHart, argued in her paper "What Is a Diaspora?" that the concept of immigration is too linear and limiting, and that an ethnic studies approach is overburdened by the baggage of the immigration model such as voluntarism or American

triumphalism. (In the same vein, a colleague of mine once told me in a conversation that she resented being pigeonholed as Asian American; instead, she preferred to call herself a world citizen, a term that to her more accurately reflects her past experiences and current mobility.)

Not only scholars but creative writers as well are participating in denationalization in the third sense. Russell Leong's volume of poetry, *The Country of Dreams and Dust,* maps the full sweep of the Chinese diaspora with glances at the Vietnamese diaspora.[19] Jessica Hagedorn describes her own works as being filled with "edgy characters who superficially seem to belong nowhere, but actually belong everywhere"—a phrase that she endows with paradigmatic force and exemplifies in the character Joey Sands in the novel *Dogeaters,* a mixed race homosexual prostitute with the adaptability of a chameleon. Hagedorn stresses the inspiration she gets from the "elegant chaos" of the Philippines' hybrid culture, as well as from the worldwide pop culture perceived as "American." She asserts that "as Asian Americans, as writers and people of color in a world still dominated by Western thinking," we should affirm "a literature that attempts to encompass the world" (Hagedorn, "Exile" 28). For her, Asian American identity formation is not correlated with a sense of belonging to any geographical or political entity. Hagedorn's recent anthology, *Charlie Chan Is Dead,* applies a principle of selection consonant with this belief.

A similar valorization of fluid subjectivity and cultural world citizenship has been voiced by David Mura. In his 1991 memoir *Turning Japanese,* Mura links his "sense of homelessness and defiance of limits" to a ludic aesthetic, citing Yeats, "One day, the poet will wear all masks." Mura's view suggests that denationalizing moves are not peculiar to the foreign-born or those from a heritage as hybrid as the Philippines'. Mura is a Sansei from Minnesota who grew up in a Jewish neighborhood; in his personal life, he has had to grapple with some of the issues with which the Asian American movement contended in the 1960s, and 1970s, as shown by his earlier essay, "Strangers in the Village." Yet Mura, too, appears to have come to regard an Asian American identity as limiting. Poststructuralism is obviously a mediating influence in the case of Barthes-quoting Mura, a product of graduate studies in literature, but one hardly needs it to respond to the alluring possibility of an ever-evolving, never-resolved subjectivity, characterized by instability, endless movement, boundary transgressions, and multiple reference points.

Reservations

The above, then, are some material circumstances and discursive practices that have contributed to the emergence of a larger, more diverse, more cosmopolitan, one might say more intractable (from a theoretical standpoint) Asian American population. This population calls for vocabularies and concepts about subject formation and cultural production adequate to its perceived realities.

While I have been an early proponent of broadening Asian American literary studies to include immigrant works, which presupposes noteworthy continuities between Asian and Asian American historical experiences and cultural expressions, I have found

myself raising questions about the consequences of an uncritical participation in denationalization, as if it represented a more advanced and theoretically more sophisticated (in short, superior, though proponents rarely say so directly) stage in Asian American studies. A developmental or maturational narrative about reconfigurations in Asian American cultural criticism, whether implicitly or explicitly presented, to me poses some serious risks. For convenience in discussion, these risks can be grouped into two categories that are, in fact, inseparable: unwitting subsumption into master narratives (despite a mandate to subvert master narratives built into the ethnic studies approach), and depoliticization occluded by theoretical self-critique.[20] While conceding the intellectual and emotional excitement generated by the sense of identity expansion, the benefits of interdisciplinary commerce, indeed the irreversibility of the material forces fueling Asian diasporas, I contend that at this juncture in the evolution of our field, we need to historicize the push to globalize Asian American cultural criticism. Without such historicizing, one of the most important aspirations of denationalization—to dialogize and trouble American myths of nation—may end up being more subverted than realized.

I will begin by alluding to a point made earlier in this essay, that the contrast between the narrow-minded, essentialist 1960s and 1970s and the more enlightened, deconstructivist and internationalist 1980s is, in many ways, an overdrawn and dehistoricized dichotomy, one based on a "forgetting" of the inherently coalitional spirit of the pan-Asian American movement. I place "forgetting" in quotation marks to indicate that, of course, the forgetting is itself historically determined and not just a mistake or a lapse in attention; certainly I do not mean to imply that a "back to basics" approach would resolve the contestations within the field. However, to me it is not entirely coincidental that this self-critique echoes the trajectory of "growth" prescribed for people of color in this country: that minorities need to liberate themselves from their outmoded, inward-looking preoccupations and participate in the more generous-spirited intellectual inquiries that "everybody else" is engaged in.

Likewise, there are problems with too celebratory a stance toward the loosening of selected societal constraints on Asian Americans, who have come to be valued in some Pacific Rim discourse concerning American competitiveness in the Asian and global marketplace. Again, an underlying developmentalist narrative, tracing a line from American isolationism to transnational cooperation, elides domestic race relations as well as the United States's history of exploitation of Asian labor, whether it be manual or high-tech, at home or abroad. As Aihwa Ong observes, Asian Americans have often been regarded as the shock troops in America's trade war with Asia.[21] This is the material basis for certain phenomena that appear, to a casual glance, to be simply an unalloyed enhancement or enlargement of the cultural life of Asian Americans. Popular rhetoric about the advantages of bicultural literacy, for example, does not merely represent the triumph and vindication of previous Asian American cultural struggles, or a confirmation of the need to denationalize. It is all these, but it is also a justification for using Asian American workers, especially immigrant workers, at various levels to serve the economic interests of multinational corporations. From this perspective, language and cultural maintenance is chiefly a business asset, not a matter of community-building. Sometimes I wonder if the current discourse affirming the Asian

American professional's cultural mobility—which encodes usefulness in controlling immigrant laborers on American assembly lines, or negotiating with Asian businesses overseas—would have been as enthusiastically embraced if he/she had not previously encountered frustrations in a purportedly meritocratic, color-blind economy.

It is in this context that I wish to examine a much cited model of identity formation proposed in Lisa Lowe's influential theoretical essay, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences."[22] Among other things, Lowe calls for a redefinition of Asian American subjectivity by holding up, as a "possible model for the ongoing construction of ethnic identity," the transnationally mobile Chinese American family in Peter Wang's film *A Great Wall*. She valorizes "the migratory process suggested by [Peter] Wang's filmic technique and emplotment": namely, a "shuttling between . . . various cultural spaces," so that "we are left, by the end of the film, with a sense of culture as dynamic and open, the result of a continual process of visiting and revisiting a plurality of cultural sites." "We might conceive of the making and practice of Asian American culture as nomadic, unsettled, taking place in the travel between cultural sites and in the multivocality of heterogeneous and conflicting positions" (39). I do not quote this passage here as a summation of the complex arguments in the essay, which, in deconstructing Asian American identity and revealing its internal contradictions, scrupulously affirms the continued need for a Spivakian "strategic essentialism." Lowe's main point is to interrogate the definition of "Asian American" in the 1990s and open up the possibility of "crucial alliances with other groups—ethnicity-based, class-based, gender-based, and sexuality-based—in the ongoing work of transforming hegemony" (39, 40). In that sense, the *Great Wall* example supports but one argument in that essay.

Nevertheless, in view of how central a theoretical document Lowe's essay is in contemporary Asian American studies, and how frequently the passage on *A Great Wall* has been cited by students, Asian Americanists, and other scholars,[23] I would like to raise several issues suggested by it. One is the danger of decontextualization. When the Chinese American father in *A Great Wall* is extracted from his environment to serve as a model of cultural dynamism, what gets left out of the picture are the character's socioeconomic positioning as well as the historical juncture at which the film was made. In the film, the computer scientist's trip to China is precipitated precisely by the kind of career frustration in a racist corporate structure that I touched on above. (He is passed over for a deserved promotion.) In the pre-Tiananmen honeymoon in U.S.-China relations, this frustration could be made into a comic mechanism to trigger a journey of cultural reconsideration and discovery for the entire family; conflicts, where they surface, could be an occasion for light-hearted cross-cultural comparisons. But the hopeful cast to the journeying is less a function of cultural mobility per se than a function of less somber times.

What is more, I wonder to what extent a class bias is coded into the privileging of travel and transnational mobility in Lowe's model—and this is a questioning I extend to some other articulations of denationalization. I understand fully that Lowe's "cultural sites" need not be geographic; however, it is also not entirely accidental, I believe, that *A Great Wall* is about an affluent Chinese American family of the professional class that can take vacationing for granted and have a comfortable home to return to,

even when the father has quit his job. After all, as Elaine Kim observes, it is middle-class Asian American youth who can "spend the summer in Seoul or Taipei almost the way middle-class American youth of yore went to summer camp" ("Foreword" xiv). In other words, Lowe's model of identity and cultural formation is, at least in part, extrapolated from the wide range of options available to a particular socioeconomic class, yet the class element is typically rendered invisible. It is from a similar premise, if in much harsher terms, that E. San Juan has faulted Jessica Hagedorn's celebration of her global family and her freedom to put together a fluid, transnational, and cosmopolitan identity. The celebration betrays traces of her own upper-class background: consuming of imported goods is now extended to consuming of cultural products and practices ("From Identity Politics" 129–31).

Class can also be erased when an exilic sensibility is promoted as less narrow than an immigrant one.[24] A preference for exile status is sometimes expressed by middle or upper-middle class immigrant intellectuals who do not want to confront their complicity in emigration and settlement. That is, the severity of the circumstances propelling their exit and preventing their return could have been exaggerated in the interest of ennobling one's self-image. I began pondering this issue when, some years ago, I interviewed two well-known Chinese immigrant writers whose works I taught in a course on Chinese immigrant writing. Even though both left Taiwan under less than life-threatening circumstances and had been living as permanent residents in the U.S. for years, both repudiated the category of "immigrant" (to them probably too materialistic in connotation), preferring to be known as exiles, victims of the cataclysms in recent Chinese history who were displaced from their troubled homeland against their will. Without claiming to know how widespread this phenomenon is,[25] I submit that an elastic definition of "forcible removal" encouraged by the favoring of an exilic identity does have a tendency to depoliticize. Of course, a prolonged exilic sensibility could have been accounted for as well by the less than enthusiastic reception that the U.S. has historically offered Asians. This point has been frequently made in defense of Asian American "sojourning"; further, in his recent typology of Chinese American identity ("Roots"), Ling-Chi Wang has demonstrated the complexities of identification even within a single individual's lifetime. Nevertheless, the potential to glamorize a noncommittal political stance in one's land of principal residence is, to me, a real danger, one that Asian American cultural critics need to recognize.

Even risking culpability of too legalistic a definition of "immigrant," or else too stern a denial of the immigrant's psychic pain, I would like to insist on "claiming America," which was the focus of Asian American cultural politics for fifteen or twenty years after the Third World Student Strikes but is now being contested by denationalization. By "claiming America," I refer to establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States' national cultural legacy and contemporary cultural production. Now a diasporic paradigm could conceivably be seen as affording a more flexible and effective purchase on the project of challenging hegemony, whose transnational dimensions are to take precedence over its domestic manifestations. Yet if claiming America becomes a minor task for Asian American cultural criticism and espousal of denationalization becomes wholesale, certain segments of the Asian American population may be left without a viable discursive space. Theresa Tensuan notes that when

Campomanes makes the exile model normative for "Filipino American" writing, the "Flip" writers—American-born descendants of working-class Filipino immigrants—get short shrift.[26] Her observation is worth considering seriously. After all, as John Liu pointed out in a remark at the AAAS conference session referred to above, the term "diasporic" is often deployed as a proxy for "first generation"; in that case, what would be the meaning of preferring a diasporic outlook for the American-born generations? The sentiments and issues ventilated in the cultural nationalist period have not simply become obsolete from shifts in global political, economic, and cultural power. Rather, individual Asian Americans—even first-generation ones, and especially youngsters who have to go through the American educational system—often recapitulate the "old" struggles.[27] These are "old" in the sense of being familiar to Asian Americanists or having been superseded by concerns more amenable to the lexicon of poststructuralism and postmodernity. But they are far from "old" for the subject contending with diverse interpellations, of which the injunction to "Americanize" (often delivered with threats of physical violence) may at times be the most clamorous. Again, what I am challenging is developmentalism, which facilitates reabsorption into master narratives. It would be far more useful to conceive of *modes* rather than *phases* of Asian American subjectivity: an indigenizing mode can coexist and alternate with a diasporic or a transnational mode, but the latter is not to be lauded as a culmination of the former, a stage more advanced or more capacious. In short, there should be no teleology informing our account of the transformations in the world and in the field of Asian American studies.

In an intellectual climate in which "traveling theory" automatically sounds more chic than any "located" theory with a single appellation, we should remember that the concept of *Asian Americans* is one that doesn't travel well, and for good reason: explicitly coalitional, more anti-essentialist than it has beer given credit for, it grew out of a specific history of resistance and advocacy within the United States. Conversely, the term *diaspora* attains a global sweep precisely because it has an essentialist core, Stuart Hall's scrupulous redefinition of diaspora as hybridity notwithstanding ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 104). In saying this, I am far from suggesting that any group has to be studied in only one theoretical framework; neither am I a purist for whom cultural transformation is measured in terms of deviance from a sacred origin. Finally, even with its essentialist conceptual core, diaspora studies need not abandon sensitivity to oppression or participate in ethnocentrism and cultural chauvinism. Inderpal Grewal has argued persuasively that with a "more inclusive move toward the study of Asian diasporas," Asian American studies could continue the "critique of the state or of the U.S. as empire" that has marked the inception of the field." What I am arguing is that the loosely held and fluctuating collectivity called "Asian Americans" will dissolve back into its descent defined constituents as soon as one leaves American national borders behind.[28] Thus one might study the Chinese diaspora, or the Indian diaspora, and so on. A shared origin, even if it has to be traced a long way back, is constitutive in each case: there is an implicit appeal to common interests which motivates the grouping in the first place. (Indeed, the appeal is often to patriotism for the "motherland" or "fatherland.")[29] But the idea of an "Asian diaspora" would be so inclusive as to be politically ungrounded (in fact ungroundable, given the vastly differ-

ent interests and conflicted histories of Asian peoples), while the idea of an "Asian American diaspora" is simply quite meaningless. With this reductio ad absurdum, I hope to demonstrate that there is a fundamental tension between Asian American studies with its history of resistance and advocacy, and diaspora studies of specific groups by origin.

But what of the opportunity to build political coalitions across national boundaries? Doesn't diaspora studies provide that?[30] Admittedly formed without as much deep study as I would have liked, my tentative view on this question is that, while I have seen political alliances formed between Asian Americans of different ethnicities to support struggles elsewhere—for example, in aid of pro-democracy dissidents in China or Korean students fighting for reunification—the more typical transnational political alliances seem to be those based on "blood," as a matter of "helping one's own." And given the history of Asian American studies, in which political coalitions formed with other racial/ethnic *domestic* minorities made the very existence of the field possible, I would argue for a continued primacy for this type of association. Elliott Butler-Evans made the point that Rodney King was beaten as a member of an American minority, not as a member of the black diaspora.[31] I think what he meant was that although the violence against African-Americans could be cast in a diasporic context, it is the more immediate context—the status of African-Americans as a domestic American minority—that provides the more compelling explanation and makes for more effective political intervention (at least in the short run). This understanding should thus take precedence over one framed by the African diaspora; that the latter might provide a more theoretically comprehensive account, or be more intellectually gratifying, is a matter of lesser urgency. In the same spirit, I submit that coalitions of Asian American and other racial/ethnic minorities within the U.S. should take precedence over those formed with Asian peoples in the diaspora.

Furthermore, denationalization seems to me to have different valences in the Asian American and African-American contexts. A shift from an African-American domestic to an African diaspora perspective might be more politicizing for African-Americans, while a corresponding move might be depoliticizing for Asian Americans. For African-Americans, the study of diverse other African-origin groups might help counter the group's sense of beleaguerment and constriction imposed by the United States variant of slavery and racism. Connecting to African origins is a powerful means of undoing the cultural amnesia white society attempted to impose. In contrast, a denationalized Asian American cultural criticism may exacerbate liberal pluralism's already oppressive tendency to "disembody," leaving America's racialized power structure intact.

In tracing her own evolving reaction to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* from the 1980s to the 1990s, Elaine Kim states that this radically destabilizing text demonstrates how "we can 'have it all' by claiming an infinity of layers of self and community" ("Foreword" xvi). While Kim is careful to enumerate the possibilities so claimed, the very fact that a critic like her, known for political commitment and a deep appreciation of historical particularities, should employ a vocabulary of limitlessness testifies to the rhetoric's allure. I believe we can "have it all" only in our consciousness; the infinity of layers of self and community inevitably shrinks when one attempts to translate the claim into material reality. Not only are one's time and energy for action

finite, but whatever claiming one does must be enacted from a political location—one referenced to a political structure, a nation. Theoretically I could ascribe a great deal of power to interstitiality and subjectivity-shuttling, which may be wonderful prompters of denaturalizing insights; in practical political terms, however, I can't see how an interstitial, shuttling exercise of power is done.[32] Nations dispense or withhold citizenship, identity cards, passports and visas, voting rights, educational and economic opportunities. For every vision of a borderless world extrapolated from the European Union or NAFTA, there are countless actual instances of political struggles defined in terms of national borders and within national borders. By definition, a world where most travel requires passports and visas is not ready for "world citizenship," a phrase that to me means as much as, or as little as, "just a human being." As ideals both are unimpeachable in their generosity of spirit, their expressed desire to abolish all divisions, all oppositions; as points of purchase for political action both are severely limited in utility, oftentimes disappointingly irrelevant.

In the same sentence where she affirms an "infinity of layers of self and community" Elaine Kim takes care to highlight a word that has an almost old-fashioned ring in today's world—roots: "our rootedness enables us to take flight" ("Foreword" xvi). To Asian Americans the term "roots" could evoke contradictory meanings: either "origin," where one or one's family hails from in Asia; or else commitment to the place where one resides (L. Ling-Chi Wang, "Roots" 187). The second meaning, on which Asian American studies was founded, is what today's Asian Americanists must not lose sight of amidst the enthusiastic call for denationalization.

A Personal Postscript

On the door of the Asian American Studies Program office at UC Berkeley is a sign: THIS IS NOT ASIAN STUDIES, SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES, OR EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES. Though born out of a practical concern—the frustrated secretary's attempt to minimize misdirected inquiries and interruptions—this sign to me epitomizes the institutional reality within which Asian American studies still operates today. It is a reminder of the precariousness of Asian American studies' discursive space: despite the increasing porosity of boundaries, Asian studies and Asian American studies are still distinct, and collapsing the two will work to the detriment more of Asian Americans as a minority within U.S. borders than of "Asian Asians." For the dropping of the "American" in "Asian American studies" is not only a widespread error—I have yet to hear of someone mistaking Asian American studies for American studies—it is one with potentially serious political consequences. As one of the immigrant academics whose presence has contributed to denationalization, I am mindful of contradictions in my position,[33] and I know that many of the research and teaching interests that come readily to me are not always the ones most needed in the field. Given that, I can no more wish myself out of priority-setting by citing the postmodern condition as my alibi, than I can conjure up an unproblematic multiple subjectivity through an assemblage of poststructuralist terms.

Times are bad, no question about it. Ling-Chi Wang has identified four founding principles of ethnic studies: self-determination, solidarity among American racial minorities, educational relevance, and an interdisciplinary approach (ridiculed as "undisciplined" in the 1960s and 1970s but, like marginality, now fashionable in academia ["Asian American Studies/Ethnic Studies"]). Though these principles might not yield an exhaustive account of Asian American studies, I don't think any of them has been invalidated by changing times. The political imperatives informing Asian American cultural criticism in the early days have not been so firmly achieved that they can be comfortably retired now. In fact, in the age of Newt Gingrich, Rush Limbaugh, Proposition 187, and increasingly vicious attacks on affirmative action and other policies safeguarding the rights of peoples of color, there seems to me to be an even greater need for Asian Americanists to situate themselves historically, to ask where denationalization comes from and where it is headed. To what extent do we want to denationalize our field? To what extent do we want a diasporic perspective to supersede a domestic one? Without subscribing to a narrow, either/or alarmism, I submit these questions for the consideration of my fellow Asian Americanists.

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Notes

1. This essay originally appeared in *Amerasia Journal* 21.1–2 (1995): 1–27. The accompanying introduction was written in 1999 especially for this anthology. We thank Russell Leong, editor of *Amerasia Journal*, for permission to reprint.

Regarding the term "the new Pacific" or "Asia/Pacific," some scholars appear to be moving the "Pacific" increasingly away from consideration of "Asian Americanness" (e.g., Hereniko and Wilson). See also Gima (1998) and Gracewood (1998), which are, however, published under an Asian American rubric.

2. See Hattori (1998) for a related argument on the fictionality of Asian American literature, and by implication Asian American identity.

3. While Japan's economy has been suffering for a number of years, it was the recent collapse of the Thai, Korean, and Indonesian economies, and the weakening of other Asian economies such as Hong Kong's, that most dramatically brought to the attention of Americans the fragility of the Asian economic "miracle."

4. Paradoxically, another cultural consequence may be just the opposite: the rise of various forms of fundamentalism worldwide, with their insistence on purity, absoluteness, and inviolable borders. I am indebted to Abdul JanMohamed for pointing out this phenomenon, which, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

5. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974; 1983). The *Aiiieeeeel* editors can hardly be said to have invented cultural nationalist views, which were shared (as well as challenged) by many Asian Americans; other documents from the 1960s and 1970s reflect similar concerns, e.g., Bruce Iwasaki. However, I do take the *Aiiieeeee!* group's statements as a point of departure for discussing cultural nationalism, based on my assessment of their extensive subsequent influence (even if, for some, it only takes the form of continued provocation).

6. The term is Maxine Hong Kingston's, applied to *China Men,* which did not appear until 1980. However, as further elucidated below, "claiming America" is such an important issue in Asian American studies from the start that I find it useful to apply it retroactively to the early cultural nationalist project.

7. I avoid the term *Americanization* here since it calls up too many unwanted associations of coercion and jingoism.

8. Cf. Gee. Some current examples are: *Asian America: Journal of Culture and the Arts,* published at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration* Policy; and Karin Aguilar-San Juan, ed., *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s.*

9. This phenomenon has generated a great deal of scholarship; see, for example, Deyo; Harris; Shinohara and Lo; and Onis. Parenthetically, the prospect of sharing in Asian prosperity is so attractive that the former British colonies of Australia and New Zealand, previously Europe-oriented and white-identified, are now attempting to redefine themselves as Asian. See, for example, Shi, Zhongxin; Colin James; Bruce Grant. See also Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, "Introduction," for a broader contextualization of this redefinition.

10. A recent *Wall Street journal* article notes that Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea are now considered part of the First World: see Biers.

11. A few images from my own experience illustrate the magnitude of this cultural phenomenon: an encyclopedic Chinese video store in Lion City, a giant suburban Asian shopping mall in San Jose, California; AT&T and MCI vying for Asian customers through language and culture-specific ads designed to tug at the heartstrings of trans-Pacific families; second-generation college students at UC Berkeley telling me that they have managed to keep up with their Cantonese through watching Hong Kong movies at home.

12. For example, the new Asian studies journal, *positions: east asia cultures critique,* is also hospitable to submissions on Asian American topics.

13. Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System,* provides one account of this interpenetration that minimizes the effects of cultural imperialism.

14. Virginia Woolf's famous dictum, "As a woman I have no country," though subject to varying interpretations and put to varying uses in feminist movements, aptly sums up the peculiar relationship of women to the nation-state.

15. See Brotherston, especially 1–4 and 349, for a background history of the concept of the Fourth World.

16. Campomanes in fact argues that the concept of "Filipino American" itself is "inadequate, if oxymoronic," and that Filipino American writers and their works relate to it only ambivalently, the connection "shored up only by its roots in 1960s identity politics" (50, 51).

17. David Palumbo-Liu raises a further question: diaspora is predicated on a relation to home, but the notion of home itself may be unstable and elusive. Personal communication.

18. April 9, 1994, at the University of Michigan. Based on my notes, the speaker in question is of Chinese origin and has lived in Latin America before coming to the U.S.

19. Leong's *The Country of Dreams and Dust* is particularly intriguing given the fact that Leong, the editor of *Amerasia Journal,* has been a significant presence in Asian American studies since the cultural nationalist period.

20. For a particularly incisive critique of the tendency among some Asian American cultural critics to align Asian American literature with a postmodernist aesthetic while bypassing contemporary political history, see David Palumbo-Liu, "The Ethnic as 'Post- .' " Palumbo-Liu's essay "Theory and the Subject of Asian American Studies" raises this pointed question: "does the postmodern present the moment for the ethnic to be conjoined with the universal, as everything is now in a correlate condition of fragmentation and revision, or does this condition erase at that moment the very specificity of ethnicity?"

21. Remark made at the *Luodi shenggen* conference, San Francisco, November 1992, referred to above.

22. Which, interestingly, appeared in the inaugural issue of a journal named *Diaspora.* "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences" has since been reprinted as Chapter Three in Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: Asian American Cultural Poltics.* I cite the *Diaspora* page numbers here.

23. Frederick Buell, 194–196, represents a recent example of a non-Asian Americanist using Lowe's essay.

24. I consider "exilic" and "diasporic" to be overlapping, both being referenced to a point of origin and both entailing dispersal. In this essay I use "exilic" when the forcibleness of the removal and the sense of involuntary expulsion are foregrounded by the subject.

25. Nerissa Balce-Cortes observes that some Filipino Americans have been criticized for adopting an "exile" label while enjoying a relatively privileged and terror-free life abroad during the Marcos era. Remark made at a 1993 meeting of the Filipino Studies Working Group, University of California, Berkeley.

26. Comment made in my graduate seminar on Asian American literature at UC Berkeley, Spring 1993.

27. See, for instance, Peter Kiang, Nguyen Ngoc Lan, and Richard Lee Sheehan, "Don't Ignore It: Documenting Racial Harassment in a Fourth-Grade Vietnamese Bilingual Classroom."

28. I am indebted for this insight to Steve Rumpel, who commented on an earlier version of this essay at a 1993–94 Townsend Center Humanities Fellowship meeting.

29. Richard Walker suggests it is no accident that the diasporic notion of "cultural China"

gathered momentum around the time that China's vast market began to open up for investment by the more affluent Chinese in industrialized East Asia. Remark made at a California Studies Group meeting, University of California, Berkeley, March 30, 1995.

30. I am indebted to Angela Davis for raising the question of political alliances at the "Decentering Identity, Recentering Politics" conference, and to Barbara Christian for comparing notes with me on the political of the diasporic perspective in African-American and Asian studies at the 1994 American Cultures seminar at UC Berkeley.

31. Comment made at the "Decentering Identity, Recentering Politics" conference.

32. Except maybe in a state of revolutionary anarchy?

33. For a relevant analysis of the intellectual's location, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, 73–94 and 159. I am indebted to Colleen Lye for this source.

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