

REFUSING SUBJECTS AND (DIS)OWNING AMERICA IN ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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Abstract

Given the myriad historical and cultural trajectories of Asian America as a political coalition, Asian American Studies continually interrogates the terms of its coalitional unity as it foregrounds and theorizes “difference.” The challenge for Asian American Studies is to question identity with nation as the endpoint to anti-racist politics in order to create a space for theoretical inquiries of belonging beyond nation and racial identity to foreground other ways of imagining affinity, communities, and political alliances.

Keywords

citizenship, multiculturalism, racialized sexuality

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Author's Note

I thank Donette Francis for her patient and meticulous readings of drafts of this article, and Anita Mannur for her generous insights, as well as Khachig Tololyan for his tireless editing.

In *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (2003), Kandice Chuh reintroduces the questions about citizenship and belonging in Asian American Studies amid a political climate in which national threat and belonging has been dramatically scrutinized. In a nation where “diversity” and “difference” have become cosmetic catchphrases wielded by the state for disciplinary ends, this increased scrutiny is a legacy of former US president Bush’s “war on terrorism.” Multiculturalism as a form of governmentality suppresses otherness and resolves inequality, on which racialization is founded, by means of the alchemy of abstract citizenship. This national subjectivity, according to Chuh, compels the citizen to identify with the nation to produce sameness through a myth of common origin and common destiny (18). Hence, equality as abstract principle is often mistaken for equivalence. This equivalence then determines what justice

could mean in US American political culture. The challenge to Asian American Studies is to avoid replicating this logical fallacy in its methods and inquiries and to question the ethical basis of US national subjectivity. Given the myriad historical and cultural trajectories of Asian America as a political coalition, Asian American Studies continually interrogates the terms of its coalitional unity as it foregrounds and theorizes “difference.”

More than a decade ago a special double issue of *Amerasia Journal* in 1995 entitled “Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies” asked Asian Americanists to comment upon the role of theoretical paradigms current in the university of the mid-90s as they informed, deformed or reformed Asian American academic work. “Theory” once held an uncomfortable place in Asian American studies; the formulation already implied a divide between “theory” and the field. Lisa Lowe began the volume by tracing the historical development of the field and its emergence in West Coast campuses from 1968 to its contemporary reshaping in response to socio-historical developments (Lowe 42). To rehearse the roots of this field, Asian American Studies emerged out of the radical changes taking place in US American universities and in US society in the 1960s amid the Civil Rights movements. Community-based movements demanded that universities open their doors to more people of color and that they expand curricula to include the histories of these communities as legitimate objects of scholarship. Since then, the field has continued to explore the racialization and history of Asian-descent peoples in the US. Most of the articles in the journal echoed Lowe’s call for recognition of multiple class, geographic, gender, and generational formations of Asian American groups. Sau-Ling Wong meticulously outlined the crossroads at which Asian American Studies found itself in the 90s. She described the moves that she tentatively called “denationalization” that heterogenized notions of Asian America. Most pointedly Wong warned against framing Asian diaspora and domestic subjects in the US not as logical evolutions of each other but as co-existing “modes rather than phases of Asian American subjectivity” (Wong 17). While Lowe and others grounded Asian American Studies in its socio-historical place in US history, some intimated that the dislocation of theory and its migration away from literary criticism posed a threat to the integrity of the field. Implicit in many of the articles was a critical anxiety over “theory” and in particular, what is reductively called poststructural theory.

Later the groundbreaking works of David Eng in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001) and Anne Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2001) brought other theoretical, specifically psychoanalytic, paradigms to bear upon Asian American literary and critical race studies

in the exploration of racial subjection and subjectivity. Critical Race Theory, led by Mari Matsuda and Neil Gotanda, later developed by legal scholars like Robert Chang, Kenji Yoshino and Leti Volpp, have interrogated legal discourse and interpretation as they shape race relations but also offered provocative ways to think through race and the law. Others continue the exploration of Asian America which by 2004 comprised 14 million people or five percent of the US population. The term Asian American encompasses not only Americans and US residents of Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Filipino descended from earlier waves of immigration, but also the post-1965 immigration, which gave rise to a critical mass of South Asians, Southeast Asians, West Asians and Arab Americans. The field's continual layering of the American story through these varied groups' experiences makes possible the heterogeneity and multiplicity of interpretations that characterize this scholarly pursuit. Asian American criticism articulates multiple critiques of its varied objects as well as the terms of that critique. The coalitional and intellectual endeavor recognizes *that the very utterance of critique is made possible only through a theory and politics, not of identity, but of difference.*

R. Radhakrishnan, in an essay that appeared in Chuh's earlier edited volume *Orientations* (2001), signals the homological confusion of Asian-American as a census designation and Asian American as a "political-epistemic category" (Radhakrishnan 253). Taking this distinction seriously, I take this to mean that while Asian-American names a "race," the political and scholarly project which shares the name is a critical inquiry about processes of racialization, its effects, and who legislates interpretive authority over Asian American subjects. Given that critique is also praxis, I locate Asian American subjectivity precisely at this point of intimate and contradictory negotiation over interpretive authority between the state and competing forms of knowledge production. The government and various politically conscious groups use the term Asian American as an organizing and interpellative rubric. In addition, many different communities recognize themselves through the racial, descriptive, and political term. Refusing the claim that "Asian American" has a singular, originary and locatable site, as Kandice Chuh suggests, makes way for the multiple possibilities for Asian American critique. Chuh offers the critical tools of literary studies to bring scholarly inquiry back to the ethico-political question of justice. The demand for full exercise of civil rights remains vitally important as it has enabled wider participation by many Americans in the national public. However, a "place" in liberal representation does not necessarily constitute justice, if "national identity/subjectivity is offered as a substitute for justice" (150). The danger emerges when political representation of racial identities in government overshadows other political goals and

short-circuits other ways of imagining the “political.”

According to Chuh, theory, namely Derridean poststructuralism, and literature regain the ground of complexity to reimagine difference beyond a state-sponsored multiculturalist discourse that has rendered it in service of national sameness. I submit that as literature organizes the world and envisions types of human interaction, it is itself a theory of human relations and raises questions about them. If theory articulates how we think,¹ then imaginative prose is one such articulation. If the possibility of every sign relies on the network of differences, as per Derrida, what if “Asian American” as a sign in Asian American Studies is that play of difference—a play that insists upon ethico-political readings? Asian American literature foregrounds a racialized politics of knowing and explores the complexity of a racialized subject that generates questions rather than serving as “object of study,” or as mere evidence.

Identity politics has proven effective historically in mobilizing Asian American collective action. However, in the oft-cited essay, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity and Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” first published in *Diaspora’s* premier issue in 1991 and later in the groundbreaking work *Immigrant Acts* (1996), Lisa Lowe called for an understanding of the “dynamic fluctuation and heterogeneity of Asian American culture” (Lowe 68). Chuh responds to this exhortation by advancing the critique towards the “*a priori* meaningfulness of ‘Asian American,’ the absence of an identity anterior to naming” (149) in order to uncover the undecidability of American political subjectivity itself. She questions national subjectivity as the endpoint to anti-racist politics in order to create a space for theoretical inquiries of belonging beyond nation and racial identity. The US American subject’s relation to the nation is both “the same as and more than the US nation-state,” Chuh reminds the reader (x). To be sure, as the many subjects of US intervention around the world know only too well, the US nation-state has a life beyond its geopolitical delineation. Citizenship is not only a political subjectivity dictated by law but also a concept and practice that disciplines political subjectivity into specific racial, gender and sexual formations. The excesses of this legal proscription are expressed in terms of race, gender and sexuality as unequal relations. Subsumed under “citizenship,” these categories offer a lens by which one can interrogate ways of belonging to the nation-state that citizenship as equivalence denies. Chuh suggests that alternative epistemologies that refract the putative abstract equivalence have “ethicopolitical implications” (x) that foreground other ways of imagining affinity, communities, and political alliances. What insights do Asian American texts give us about national political subjectivity and its limits to the imagination? Is such a subjectivity desirable and on what terms?

If law is concerned with justice, and literature with imagination, the two come together in the double sense of “representation” – to represent politically and to re-present discursively, as Gayatri Spivak has famously discussed in her essay, “Can the subaltern speak?” Understanding the collaboration, complicity, and conflict between these two meanings of representations enables examination of identity, meaning, and relational productions. Law and literature both inhabit the realm of interpretation, rhetoric, form, ethics, and epistemology; both mediate our relationship to society and shape how we imagine the world and ourselves. Chuh identifies the interpretative undecidability of key legal and literary works to challenge readers to “imagine otherwise” in developing this ethico-political imagination, making her book a heuristic work that charts the theoretical terrains of Asian American cultural criticism. Chuh posits:

The challenge, then is to bring to the surface their insubstantiality or more specifically, what Jacques Derrida has described as their *undecidability*. Derrida explains that “Undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). The possibilities themselves are highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations.” (Chuh 70, emphasis mine)

Quoting Derrida’s “Afterword” to *Limited Inc* (1988), Chuh characterizes Asian American Studies as a subject-less discourse akin to Derridean difference, to demonstrate how “race” or any other category does not have meaning before relations of power and how these social forces determine and define the choices for interpreting objects and events. Therefore, to rethink Lisa Lowe’s title from more than a decade ago, I suggest that one would not so much *mark* Asian American differences; rather, “Asian American” *marks* the non-equivalent play of differences and the ethico-political questions issuing from such a politico-epistemic web. While deconstruction interrogates how truth is produced, Chuh proposes that what “collectivizes Asian American studies is the absence of identity” and “unification under undecidability” (83).

Chuh offers four theoretical paradigms that might guide the orientation of Asian American Studies towards productive imaginings: sexuality, transnationalism, heterotopic imagination, and postcoloniality—each of which she unpacks in the subsequent chapters of her book. The first two chapters complicate Asian American identity and national formation. Chapter 1 interrogates the case of the “Filipino American” to render visible the intersection of race and sexuality in US imperial and national formation. Chapter 2 explores

Japanese American internment as an interpretative act by the US nation-state that sought to consolidate its national boundaries by excluding Americans perceived to be transnational subjects. The next two chapters deal directly with Asian American Studies to suggest different political and epistemic trajectories for the field. Chapter 3 explores the formation of the “Korean American” through successive Japanese and American colonialisms and the Korean nationalist resistance; it does so in order to question the ideological distance between Asian and Asian American Studies and to provide a more expansive cartographic imagination as an alternative to the linear model of immigration and arrival. Finally, Chapter 4 explores the *Blu’s Hanging* controversy within the Association for Asian American Studies in 1998 to highlight the contradictions in wielding mainland paradigms of justice in the state of Hawaii as a colonized space and the insights postcoloniality might offer to the field.

Taken together, these crises and challenges raised in a cross-comparative and pan-Asian American perspective are precisely the questions that the field made possible in its debates and self-critique. The book schematizes the ever expanding and multi-dimensional field to offer complexities to the plural subjects and objects of Asian American Studies. The subjectivities explored in each of the novels and legal cases illuminate affective networks that go beyond citizenship as the desired “home” for the “Asian American.” Chuh links the questions as theories of difference, and gestures towards more thoroughgoing, ethico-political re-readings of the legal cases and canonical literary texts.

In the first chapter, “Against Uniform Subjectivity: Filipino America,” Chuh argues that Filipino American subject formation and history suggest that emasculation is not the definitive Asian American male experience; rather, as indicated by the legal and extra-legal violence Filipino males faced in US, theirs is also a history of sexuality. Furthermore, given the imperial history of the US in the Philippines, forced identity with nation through colonialism questions national inclusion as the singular political goal of Asian Americans (35). To this end, Chuh reads Carlos Bulosan’s autobiography *America is in the Heart* (1946) alongside the California interracial marriage case of *State v Roldan* (1936) to challenge the unitary figuration of Asian American subjectivity through the lens of citizenship and to highlight instead the regulation of sexuality and whiteness.

From 1790 until 1952, naturalization to US citizenship excluded many Asian ethnic groups. The 1790 naturalization act allowed only alien “free, white persons” eligible for citizenship. The act was revised in 1870 to extend citizenship to those of African descent or nativity. In 1906 at the height of US empire, citizenship included those “owing permanent allegiance” to the United States (49). Examining the citizenship petitions of *In re Alverto*

(1912) and *In re Rallos* (1917), Chuh recounts how the plaintiffs in these cases filed for citizenship under an 1894 statute that accelerated citizenship for those who had served in the US navy as members of the category “US national.” The Filipino plaintiffs had served in the US navy. However, the courts denied them citizenship because of the racial prerequisite for citizenship that targeted and excluded Asian-raced peoples. The courts dismissed the idea that dying for one’s country of allegiance qualified one for citizenship. For Chuh, the denial of entry into citizenship via the military not only racializes national belonging but also “denies access to and/or possession of that masculinity,” one based on legitimated state violence (52).

US marriage laws also sought to regulate sexuality and gendered citizenship. Since 1855, alien women had been permitted to become citizens through marriage to US citizen males. By 1907, citizen females could also be stripped of citizenship by marrying alien males. However, by 1922 this applied only to marriage to those aliens ineligible for US citizenship, the code term for Asians immigrants. I would add that although this was repealed by 1925, it sought to codify the racial character of the US as well as encompass and extend American whiteness to Southern and Eastern Europeans.¹ A few decades after the military cases, in 1933 *Roldan v LA County* having found that the Filipino plaintiff Roldan was *not* a “Mongolian,” an ethnic and racial designation explicitly mentioned in anti-miscegenation statutes, allowed the plaintiff, by negation and omission, to marry a white woman. The contradictory decisions that produced the Filipino in the United States show “the contradictions embedded in the construct ‘American national,’ a compromise category, one created to resolve the rupture to American exceptionalism that US occupation of the Philippines represented” (51). Having entered into an imperial relationship with the islands, the democratic republic sought to regulate sexual and gender traffic across its now porous colonial borders.

Chuh reads Bulosan’s autobiography to delve further into the formation of the Filipino American male subject. Sanctioned white lawlessness in the form of lynching and anti-miscegenation laws bounded the lives of Filipinos in America who lived largely in bachelor communities in the early decades of the 20th century. Chuh identifies the non-sexual, almost idealized relations the protagonist Allos has with a series of white women as an alternative to the violent white masculinity that founds US citizenship. The legal and extra-legal prohibitions that are coupled with the threat of violence force Allos to imagine sexuality apart from romantic heterosexuality. Insofar as his desire to make interracial coupling unremarkable is concerned, Bulosan indeed critiques same-race heterosexuality, as Chuh points out. However, while Allos’s masculinity strictly speaking may not follow

normative heterosexuality as set by the law and extra-legal discipline, I would suggest that heteronormative desire in gendered terms nonetheless remains a presence. The imperial relationship, while perhaps expanding the possibilities of sexual pairings, offers another discursive avenue to re-shape a resilient heteronormative desire. While Chuh reads Allos's apotheosis of the series of white women in the text as a sign of his desire to make interracial union unremarkable, the protagonist's imagination and Bulosan's prose seem to posit encounters with the white female figures as *continually* remarkable in the unattainable search for "America" in the heart. Both "white woman" and "America" come to figure unfulfilled desire. Overcoming "the violent version of masculinity to allow for realization of the feminine ideal" (Chuh 39), Allos refuses normative heterosexual relations marked by white male violence and same-race relations within the confines of legal prohibitions. This disruptive masculinity, as Chuh terms this gesture, while offering an alternative to the violent normative heterosexuality which founds US citizenship, also signals, I would hasten to add, gendered heteronormativity refigured within colonial relations.

An exploration of Asian America as a history of sexuality opens inquiries into how nation and empire are sustained through the regulation of racialized sexuality. Both the *Roldan* case and Bulosan's composite autobiography give insight into the contradictory place of the Filipino in the US and reveal a history of disrupted and disruptive masculinities. The Filipino embodies the contradictory fantasies of racial eunuch and racial threat and both fantasies shore up white male sexuality and normative heterosexuality. By showing how whiteness and heteronormativity work together to insure white male dominance, Chuh also indicates how challenges to heteronormativity are linked closely to anti-racist practices.

Neither "race" nor "nation" as analytical category is sufficient to bring out this dimension of the gendered and sexual project of the US empire, which gives meaning to "Filipino" as a socio-political category. Benedict Anderson and Edward Said have pointed to the ways in which nation and empire are socio-political forces that give rise to types of subjectivities. Chuh extends this inquiry beyond the nation-state as a framing unit for subjectivity in order to explore how sexuality refracts these very categories to give us a nuanced understanding of imperial nation, colonized territory and the displacement of colonized peoples into the imperial space (48). She argues that, brought into being "precisely at the juncture of subjectification and subjection, 'Filipinos' may be understood as a category of critique rather than identity" (56). Since Filipinos were in fact part of the US domestic sphere, the category suggests a shift of critical inquiry from the exclusion of "Asian America" to a critical challenge posed to the terms of forced membership. Tracing

how “sexuality instruments the regulation of the racialized identity of the nation” (55), Chuh marks the Filipino American case as a challenge to identity-based paradigms that privilege national political subjectivity as the primary goal of criticism. The ambivalent “inclusion” of the Filipino American into the US polity as an American “national” reveals the contradictions in a political belonging founded on social domination.

In Chapter 2, “Nikkei Internment: Determined Identities/Undecidable Meaning,” Chuh uncovers the operations of Asian American racialization through transnationalism and the forcible exclusion of Japanese Americans from national membership. Recent surveillance of non-citizen residents of Arab, West Asian and South Asian descent urgently calls to mind the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The insistence upon the transnational nature of Asian Americans, as labor and capital, bolsters this racial differentiation based on a phantasmatic geographic and cultural distance between “Asia” and “America” (59). This differentiation as perpetual outsider enabled internment during World War II and continues now to justify surveillance and internment of South Asians, Arab Americans and American Muslims.

The racialization of the Asian American as the “foreigner within” is rooted in a history of recruiting temporary, non-citizen Asian labor in the 19th century and its enduring legacy into the early 21st century. Then, and sometimes even now, Asians were expected to “go home” elsewhere. In his book *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999), David Palumbo-Liu locates the racialization of Asians in America as coinciding with US modernization and industrialization. Borne out of international politics and global industrial developments, Asian American racialization as a modern phenomenon was bound with paranoia surrounding Asiatic transnationals and their “dubious” allegiance to the US nation-state. The disloyal transnational as conceptual frame guided the case of *Hirabayashi v US* (1943) where the Japanese Empire as enemy is transposed onto Japanese American racial difference. Protesting the wartime internment of Japanese Americans, the plaintiff Gordon Hirabayashi equated life with citizenship and argued that the evacuation orders deprived him of both, but the court holding stated that “technical interpretation” of the due process clause in this context would potentially “endanger all of the constitutional rights of the whole citizenry” (67). The ruling made the citizen Hirabayashi the personification of danger that Japan represented to America (66). The case reveals a US national identity built upon a fictive ethnicity and masculinity that refused to recognize the transnational character of its very foundations and its citizenry. The Japanese transnation in this context was made to stand for national difference and danger to reinscribe and reaffirm American boundaries. For Chuh, internment as national policy describes a process of literal

and metaphoric imprisonment that invested determined identities with meaning. Refusing self-definition to Japanese Americans, US government internment camps concretized Japanese American identity as “ineffably inassimilable, enemy Japanese” (69).

In the post-war novel *No-No Boy* (1957) that Chuh examines about a young man who is released from prison after refusing to serve in the US Army during internment, writer John Okada narrates the impossibility of Japanese American male citizenship effectively negated by internment. Having rejected his only chance to reenter a semblance of normalcy, the protagonist Ichiro describes that decisive moment to remain forever in social and moral limbo by refusing to sacrifice life or limb in the US military: “only the meaning got lost when I needed it most badly” (qtd in Chuh 73). *No-No Boy* explores Ichiro’s impossible subjectivity. The double-negative—the no’s to serve in the military and to “swear unqualified allegiance” to the United States—could not be contained in the US political imagination. Chuh’s reading suggests that Asian American as a rubric does not necessarily work denotatively as either an assimilative or oppositional identity as evinced by Ichiro’s complicated and painful relation to a singular identity as Japanese, American, or Japanese American (76). Neither family nor state allowed him a “home.” Given the mutual exclusion of Japan and the US as national and psychic spaces at that historical moment, Ichiro’s father and his mother, one wracked with alcoholism, the other with madness, could not provide proper continuity of filial identity. Ichiro’s ability to signify his political status as protest or affirmation was preempted by an American state in crisis. The state disrupted the lived ordinariness of his citizenship and forced him to embody an impossible and negated subject position.

Chuh’s treatment of Bulosan and Okada focuses on the male protagonists’s struggles against barred entry into citizenship and violent masculinity. With *No-No Boy*, one could perhaps extend Chuh’s reading to bring out the *a priori* meaninglessness of masculinity as a project embedded in the *recovery* of citizenship’s normalcy. The novel plays on endless substitution. Ichiro’s friend Kenji has his leg amputated as a result of a non-combat, war-related injury while serving in the US army. In effect, he trades his leg for recognized citizenship. Ichiro sleeps with Kenji’s girlfriend Emi because Kenji cannot perform sexually. Emi in turn has taken up with Kenji because her estranged husband returned to Japan in protest of the internment. The US government gives Kenji a car, a prosthetic leg, and other material benefits in exchange for his services. At one point Ichiro asks Kenji if he would trade the remaining “11 inches” of his leg for Ichiro’s physical wholeness but psychological agony; Kenji says no. Kenji’s amputated leg and prosthetic stand for the phantom phallus that citizenship implies—a government prosthetic that, in the end, proves empty. This play

of substitutions suggests the foundational instability of the category of masculinity and citizenship whose meanings are concretely decided to the detriment of racialized others in moments of ethical crisis.

Chuh then introduces Hisaye Yamamoto's short story "High Heeled Shoes" in the Japanese American author's well-known collection of short stories, *Seventeen Syllables* (1988), to suggest alternative interpretative modes. The short story offers a series of uneasy scenes representing various forms of female violation that evoke the specter of rape. In the last scene, the protagonist spies a pair of high heeled shoes on "unremarkable" legs; she later realizes that they are worn by a naked man enjoining her to look at him. Chuh argues that the female character's unpreparedness to make sense of the sight of the high-heeled male exhibitionist is a moment of meaning and meaninglessness in the text (79). That is, while high-heeled shoes and male legs might be quite unremarkable separately, together they disrupted the quotidian of the narrator's world and required interpretation to suture the perceived disjuncture.

While the story relates, as Chuh points out, the micro and macro levels of gendered power relations (81), I would suggest that this reading also raises the difficulty of using non-normative sexuality to stand for this point of undecidability. The story indicates that the narrator's previous knowledge of non-normative heterosexuality was as a pathological clinical assessment. However, to read the encounter with the man's exhibitionism as a violation on the same continuum with female violence and violation disconcertingly couples the fear of predatory male sexuality with cross-dressing as sexual practice. The story presents the female character's encounter with the naked man in heels as a "shock" of discovery. Reading the shock solely as yet another effect of male power forecloses other sites of pleasure and interpretation; "shock" may be read as repulsion or even pleasurable repulsion experienced by the female viewer. Reading the mutual but unequal gaze only through male-female power relations decidedly refuses voyeurism (for the female character) and exhibitionism (for the male cross-dresser) as other possible sites of sexual pleasure for either character. Allowing for these possibilities alongside the gender hierarchy would render the encounter as inhabiting multiple vectors of power, including sexuality, knowledge, and gender expressions. Ethico-political choices take place precisely in such moments of undecidability in which non-equivalent social forces and power interweave. My criticism of "sexual harassment as allegory of internment" (81) in Chuh's reading takes seriously Chuh's own exhortation from the following chapter that "recognition of complexity argues for recoding opposition to reflect multiple and heterogeneous forms of oppression" (144).

Whereas the subjection of the “Japanese American” signals the transnationality of the US nation, the “Korean American” emerges from a politics of space in which territoriality and nation are challenged. Chuh innovates the term “non-closure conclusions” as a frame for her exploration of the “Korean American” subject in Chapter 3, “‘One Hundred Percent Korean’: On Space and Subjectivity.” The claim for US national belonging and recognition that early Asian American activists in the 60s and 70s demanded sought to challenge the perceived cultural and psychic distance of the Asian-raced American from the normative white American. This social perception is shaped by the historical and juridical exclusion of Asians from immigration into the US and from naturalization into the American body politic. However, Chuh raises the possibility that the early Asian American movement’s emphasis in distancing itself from cultural Asia to lay claim to an American identity rehearses an Orientalist colonial vision where Asia becomes the binary opposite of “the West” (89), an imperial intellectual and cultural vision that Edward Said explored and critiqued in *Orientalism* (1978). Chuh borrows Foucault’s notion of heterotopia to resignify the geographic distance between Asia and America away from a colonial binary that translates distance all too easily as racial difference.² The distance is not simply a linear migratory relationship from origin to host country, or one that signifies cultural difference. Rather, the Korean migrant’s entry into the term Asian American is shaped historically by Japanese and US imperialism in Korea before entry into the United States.

The novels Chuh reads, Ronyoung Kim’s *Clay Walls* (1987) and Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999), interrogate how Korean Americans narrate a colonial history involving Korea, Japan and the US. In *Clay Walls*, Korea’s colonial history, anti-colonial Korean nationalism, and US racism all converge to give definition to the protagonist’s Korean American identity and politicization. Shaped by a “potentially transgressive transnational cartographic imaginary” (87), Korean American subjectivity is not only formed in relation to Asia and America, but also in relation to “Asian American” as a rubric and political project. Thus Asian American history in this instance links synchronically to Korean, American and Japanese relations. Chuh’s reading demystifies the geographic distance between “Asia” and “America” and pushes analysis towards thinking about an interconnected geopolitics. Therefore, if the two terms Asia and America have always been historically and politically linked, “Asian America” becomes a heterotopic formation, a counter-site, which imagines national belonging not simply in terms of nationally bounded units, but necessarily narrates historical mappings of national and colonial relations that make for uneasy national allegiances.

The relationship between Korean and Korean American, in Chuh's example, denotes not only distance or national difference but a clash of conjoined histories of Japanese colonialism, US intervention in Korea, and Korean nationalism. Locating the difference between the two terms through a "here" and "there" as between Asia and America results in an impoverished reading of the terms. Instead, locating the solidus or slash along historical as well as geographic axes refuses simple closure that discrete nationalism offers as a narrative: Korean or American (106). As Palumbo-Liu suggests in reading the solidus between "Asia" and "America" as a specific historical imagining of each term's cultural distance from the other, the "politics of heterogeneity and difference is neither celebrated nor subjugated, but is instead historicized and particularized" (Palumbo-Liu 91). Asian American cultural politics and criticism must take into account the historically vexed entry of each ethnic group into the political and census category term Asian American to offer neither easy Asian origins nor secure American endpoints.

According to Chuh, the author Lee uses the frustration of a heteronormative romance in *A Gesture Life* (1999) to suggest the futility of a search for certainty of national and genealogical origins (100). "Doc" Hata, an immigrant from Japan living in New England, is a Korean adopted by Japanese parents during the Japanese annexation of Korea. He was also a medic for the Japanese Imperial Army during WWII. In the novel's contemporary setting, Hata has adopted a daughter, Sunny, who becomes estranged from him. Doc Hata's later search for Sunny triggers a memory of his past as a medic posted in war-torn Southeast Asia. The spatial search for his lost family in America becomes a catalyst for a historical search for past romantic possibilities back in Asia. A memory of a Korean comfort woman he encountered while he was a soldier in the Japanese Imperial army becomes symbolic of the victimized status of his lost daughter Sunny and his lost motherland Korea. He falls in love with the comfort woman, "K," who in turn rejects him because he is an agent of the Japanese empire. The heteronormative romance is frustrated by the protagonist's split subjectivity as a Korean Japanese colonial. The novel raises the irresolvability of being culturally Japanese and ethnically Korean. The novel turns upon this well-worn but troublesome trope of woman and colonized nation as victim (108). More interestingly, in the end, the protagonist chooses to leave his daughter and grandson on their own, thus he refuses proper closure to the novel as a national/family romance. In so doing, he reunifies neither with Korea as a lost love nor with his adoptive family.

At every generational turn, genealogical and narrative lines refuse clear origins and destinies, thus failing to give the protagonist a proper home. This refusal of a simple narrative closure is exemplified in the novel's last sentence: "come almost home..." (qtd. in

Chuh 106). Mapped across a heterotopic imagination, the text offers not an utopic notion of identity but one that interrogates the material forces which impede such simple closure and the identification of “Korean American.” Chuhs read this fragment sentence as a “conclusion that is not a closure, the infinity of the circle having replaced the definitude of linear narration” (106). I would add that “almost home” recognizes the desire for a “home” and closure. Though the novel refuses a resolution with a definite home, rather than a cause of lament, I would suggest that the powerful attraction for a home offers infinite “elsewheres” at each narration of this desire for home. That is, frustrated desire locates a focal point, but each re-presentation or revision of “home” or belonging offers multiple *narrative* possibilities.

Chuh asks, what are the terms of national belonging that Asian American critique aspires to? Is this home “place or desire?” (123) In Chapter 4, “(dis)owning America,” in a deconstructive critique of forms of domination as well of the national space, Chuh points to denaturalization and denationalization as a coupled tactic. That is, unhinging “home” from “nation,” or refusing national belonging as the desired political end of the Asian American studies project, denaturalizes the terms of belonging as narrated in legal and literary texts. Chuh argues that the critical path to “achieved justice” in Asian American critique, having inherited the gains of American civil rights struggles that made possible nation-as-home, must continue to tackle the US nation-state as itself an epistemological category to reveal its lived form as founded on internal contradictions.

The fundamental contradiction is not between “America” the ideal and “America” the lived form, but rather is internal to the idea of the modern, sovereign, liberal nation-state itself ... In this regard, America as lived form, with all its contradictions, is its ideal. (129)

Working to achieve this deconstruction of the nation, Chuh weds postcolonial studies with Asian American critique to read the 1998 controversy over Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* (1997) and the legal case of *Rice v Cayetano* (2000). *Rice v Cayetano* questioned the constitutional legality of limiting voting rights for trustees of OHA (Office of Hawaiian Affairs) to native Hawaiians; the Office was established in 1978 to secure the “betterment of conditions of native Hawaiians” (qtd. in Chuh 133). The court sided with the petitioner Harold Rice, a local white resident of Hawaii, finding that the protection of voting rights for all citizens regardless of color overrode the interest of Hawaiian

sovereignty. The Fifteenth Amendment, originally intended to protect Black American voting rights after the Civil War, was construed to protect the interests of a white voter in a state with a different racial and colonial history from the continental US, thus unmooring processes of racialization from historical and geographic context. The decision, Chuh argues, “articulates—indeed codifies—the *national* historico-political framework within which (*post*)colonial conditions are adjudicated” (134 emphasis in original). Racial discourse and colorblindness as a resolution derived from continental history maintains interpretive authority over the meaning of “equality,” thus erasing the unique racialization and political disenfranchisement of Hawaiians under colonialism. Proclaiming the notion of national “shared purpose,” Justice Kennedy’s remarks proclaimed that “The Constitution of the United States, too, has become the heritage of all citizens of Hawaii” (qtd. in Chuh 134.) The decision, and Kennedy’s remarks, effectively ignores the colonial roots of the State of Hawaii and made inaudible the indigenous demand for Hawaiian self-determination by insisting upon the primacy of belonging to an American national body.

For Asian Americanists, the challenge, according to Chuh, is twofold: to foreground comparative racializations and to uncover how the universal abstract on which rights discourse and rule of law is based is “effectively a white, male, property-owning heterosexual individual” (136). In the Hawaiian context, capital interests brought Asian labor to Hawai`i in the 19th and early 20th centuries to work in sugarcane and pineapple fields, effectively sustaining the economic hold of white business interests over the islands. The Asian-descent “local” as settler “consolidates the effects of colonialism” and consequently often has a conflictual relationship with the objectives of Native Hawaiian sovereignty (137). The Asian American movement has moved towards expanding civil rights for Asian-descent peoples, a double-edged political project that, according to some, in the Hawaiian context might in fact be a disservice to the sovereignty of native Pacific peoples (122). The critical challenge to assimilative modes of nationalist narration “cannot be conceived as a desire for place” (139), Chuh concludes. The search for “home,” if equated with “nation” and “belonging,” is implicated in imperial domination. Such a shortsighted politics would result not in justice for Pacific peoples but in enabling the seemingly inevitable march of US national history—one founded on imperial state power.

Such an uneasy relationship raises questions as to how Asian American literary studies has incorporated local Hawai`i literatures under “Asian American Literature”; Asian Americanists must continue to distinguish the colonial racial histories and paradigms of the islands from those of the US continent. Postcolonial theory wielded by Asian American literary critics has radically destabilized the kind of nation-oriented

politics that have historically anchored Asian American studies (114). Like Palumbo-Liu's slash between "Asia" and "America," postcolonial studies takes into account spatial and historical differences as it articulates varying colonial subjectivities. Asian Americanist critique, I propose, as a decolonizing move would also resist the totalizing discourse of subjectivities that issues from state power.

Chuh proceeds to examine *Blu's Hanging* and the controversy it sparked within the Asian American academic community. The 1997 Best Fiction Prize awarded to the novel by a committee of the Association for Asian American Studies drew criticism from some members for Yamanaka's portrayal of Filipinos in this and her other works; such portrayals were alleged or considered to be racist by the critics. The critics of the book took issue with the depiction of Uncle Paolo who molests his young nieces and later the book's title character, Blu. The deviant character of Uncle Paolo replays a well-worn stereotype of the Filipino in Hawai'i as over-sexualized and criminal, according to the critics. Given the history of anti-Filipino racism in Hawai'i and the marginalization of Filipino American history within Asian American Studies, the award seemed to be yet another example of indifference to anti-Filipino racism, this time officially sanctioned by the very organization purportedly entrusted with the mission to enhance understanding and cooperation among the disparate Asian American communities.

Chuh asks, is reading practice simply about "mimetic re-presentations, consolidating an essentialist understanding of racialized identities" (142)? Might literature not raise questions about intra-Asian relationships, between local Filipinos and Japanese in Hawai'i in this case? Might there be another interpretative lens through which one could read the novel? The novel centers on the Ogata children, a poor local Japanese family living in an ethnically diverse neighborhood on Moloka'i. After the loss of their mother at the novel's outset, the children struggle to maintain family bonds in the face of their father's neglect and sexual predators. Chuh provisionally reads the novel as a critique of colonial state agents with their civilizing missions and their effects on poor local Japanese. However, focusing on the Japanese family as victims of colonialism, she finds, still leaves Filipinos as one-dimensional victimizers and erases from its portrait Native Hawaiians, who are very much present in Moloka'i, the novel's setting. Given that liberal political culture reduces political visibility via essentialized racial identities, what, other than race, is Asian American criticism about?

In *Blu's Hanging*, home and family as metaphors for national belonging are reconstituted into a non-heteronormative family. With mother absent and father emotionally unavailable, the functions of parenting are redistributed among the three

children. Ivah, the narrator and oldest of the Ogata children, tries to care for the younger two children as she herself faces the difficulty of school and growing up. Various misfortunes befall the children including the devastating rape of Blu in the hands of the Filipino neighbor, Uncle Paolo. The novel preserves the fragility of the indigent children's position in this marginalized community in Moloka'i within the colonized space of Hawai'i. A local elementary teacher Ms. Ito takes special interest in the Ogatas and encourages Ivah to take a scholarship in a school on another island. As Ivah prepares to leave, the care of the two younger children is entrusted to Ms. Ito who has been living with the children's cousin, Big Sis, as a couple. As the novel ends, the replacement of the heterosexual nuclear family by extended family in a same-sex household secures the Ogata family ties, Ivah's continued growth, and the younger children's well-being. "Home and family, metaphors for national belongingness, are reconstituted in *Blu's Hanging* as processes that occur in negotiation with but in difference from heteronormativity," Chuh argues (144). However, she is quick to point out that non-heteronormativity itself "neither trumps nor excuses these representational problematics" (144) such as the erasure of Native Hawaiians and the vilification of the Filipino character. *Blu's Hanging* names an extra-national frame of belonging in queer formations but also unnames Native Hawaiian sovereignty and anti-Filipino racism. Asian American critique here is not the oppositional or assimilative force that reinstates the binary of nation and its others, but articulates itself along its borders to imagine post-national epistemologies with all the attendant dangers that borders imply.

CONCLUSION

Asian American Studies for Chuh represents multiple sites for the critique of difference in the same way that the rubric "Asian American Literature" as King Kok Cheung in "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies" is an agglomeration of differences that would not register individually because of their small numbers. If one were to see Asian American politics, like Aristotle treated narrative, as a practice in invention and (mis)recognition, I would suggest that the gap that *mis*-recognition brings to light necessitates the historical specificity of the terms by which a group enters into an Asian American coalition. Self-naming is simply a point of departure to participate in political culture. The location and locution of individual subjectivity—her racialization and politicization—within the historical web of this more complex vision of Asian America is the beginning rather than the endpoint of Chuh's critical literary inquiry. In

light of her deconstructive analysis, the mimetic character of literature, I would suggest further, is neither about recognizing the familiar nor about the repetition of proffered knowledge. Rather such a destabilized entry into representation, as Chuh offers, reveals unrecognizable and multi-layered subjects. Such recovery of unrecognized ground enables multiple connections with identificatory formations other than national identity. Thus, one may begin to complicate the notion of “community” from which Asian American Studies emerged, a community that even in its initial moment of self-naming was never so transparent. Chuh’s contribution marks several provocative paths towards more productive misrecognitions to open up narrative and critical possibilities that Asian Americanists perhaps could not “imagine otherwise.”

NOTES

1 I thank my colleague Christina Crosby for this succinct and useful formulation.

2 “There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.” Michel Foucault. *Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias*. “Des Espace Autres,” *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* (October 1984).

3 For an excellent account of US race formation and the expansion of whiteness, see Jacobson, Mathew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Harvard UP, 1998.

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