

On a Stage Built by Others Creating an Intellectual History of Asian Americans¹

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During my dissertation research, I had the great pleasure of interviewing Beulah Ong Kwoh. During graduate school in the 1940s, Mrs. Kwoh had been a roommate at the University of Chicago of one of the most important Chinese American intellectuals of the time, social scientist Dr. Rose Hum Lee. Kwoh herself had studied sociology and written an important study on the career success of Chinese American college graduates. Since then, she and her family had become prominent in the Chinese American community of Los Angeles.

On this pleasant afternoon at their home in Silver Lake, we chatted about her years in graduate school nearly half a century ago, about what it was like to be one of the few Asian Americans in the social sciences, about the difficulties of raising a family and having an academic career, and finally how she had become a movie and television actress later on in her life. She had originally been brought in contact with the industry because actress Jennifer Jones had needed a dialogue coach to help her speak with a Chinese accent for the movie *Love Is A Many Splendored Thing* (1955). Unfortunately, since Kwoh had been raised in Stockton, California, she herself did not have an accent and had not been considered useful for the job. Kwoh did eventually find steady work in the small parts that Asian American actors were allowed, appearing, for instance, in an Elvis Presley movie and with Gregory Peck in *MacArthur* (1979), ending her career with a long run on the soap opera *General Hospital* as a street-wise housekeeper. She told me how difficult it had been finding roles

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in such a discriminatory industry, and I grew to admire and respect all of Kwoh's accomplishments greatly. I left her company buoyed that I had been given the chance to meet such a wonderful person.

Several months later, I was watching *Chinatown* (1974), the Academy-Award-winning movie starring Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, and John Huston. Kwoh had a minor part in the movie as Dunaway's maid, with only one spoken line. Near the climax of the movie, as Nicholson is frantically searching for Dunaway's character, he asks Kwoh for her employer. Kwoh, born and raised in California, an English literature major at Berkeley with a Master's degree in sociology from Chicago, answered in heavily accented English—"She no here."

This, for me, captured the difficult position of Asian Americans in American society, and illustrated the essential problem to be addressed in my research. How can we understand the intellectual and cultural life of Asian Americans in a nation that has long understood them first and foremost as "Orientals," representatives of an exotic, and by definition, non-American culture? My book, *Thinking "Orientals": A History of Knowledge Created About and by Asian Americans*, focuses on a group of Asian American sociologists (of whom Beulah Ong Kwoh was a member) who were recruited to study Chinese American and Japanese American communities in the U.S.² The possibilities and constraints that they encountered in conducting their research were indicative of how Asian Americans both have been known and have known themselves in the U.S.

Originally, my manuscript had been entitled "Thinking About Orientals," which suggested a focus on how Asian Americans have been made an object of curiosity, study, and ultimately desire for others. Following the advice of Russell Leong, the editor of *Amerasia Journal*, I changed the title to "Thinking Orientals." This seemed a good idea to me because it still captured the sense of how Asian Americans have been exoticized by other Americans. However, it increased the emphasis upon what I saw as the more important question—how have "Orientals" been forced by their subordinate position to understand themselves for much of U.S. history through the eyes of others. (Note: The term "Oriental" appears in this essay and in my book not because I condone its use as a label, but because it reflects a specific historic usage and conceptual category of earlier periods. Relatedly, I use the term "white" for that changing constellation of people who benefited

from inclusion into the category of “whiteness” by being defined as different from Americans of “color.”³

“Orientals” or Asians have been understood within American social thought in two major ways—as a racial “problem” and as a racial “solution.” From the time Chinese arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, migrants from Asia were considered a threat to white labor and American society. Categorized as “Oriental,” these immigrants were demonized as exotic and non-American. From violent lynchings through the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII, Asian Americans were treated as a “problem.” Since the 1960s, Asian Americans have seemingly become the opposite, sanctified as the “model minority” solution to racial and economic ills.

This new notion about Asians, however, still depends upon an exoticization of them as somehow not American, and it traces a theoretical lineage to early sociological studies of the “Oriental problem.” In the early twentieth century, a number of American Protestant missionaries, along with scholars at the University of Chicago’s sociology department, became interested in “Orientals” in America. Their interest led to Americans born of Chinese and Japanese ancestry being interested in the same questions, and the result was a series of scholarly texts produced by whites and Asian Americans about the “Oriental problem” in America. The history of this process of intellectual production was the subject of my dissertation research.

Intellectual history as a field has had a difficult reputation for many years. Intellectual history’s traditional focus on elite, white, male thinkers has marginalized it on the whole from the political revolution that accompanied the rise in social history techniques. Because intellectual production and the structures of evaluation which validate ideas have been so racialized and gendered in U.S. history, the default standard existed that only a few white male thinkers who had been validated in their own time were serious intellectuals. Asian American studies on the whole has attacked this system of evaluation, yet in many ways left unchallenged the continuing production of scholarship by U.S. intellectual historians.

So much scholarship about race in the U.S. continues to ignore everything except the dichotomy between Black and White. Asians, Hispanics, and basically everybody else in the complex mix of U.S. society are evaluated as unimportant or uninteresting. I hoped that my study would show how crucial thinking about “Orientals” has been to the formulations of the most prominent

theorists of race and culture in modern American intellectual life, and how a number of Asian American intellectuals were essential for producing those ideas.

What is it, in the end, to be an intellectual? Is it to be a person who thinks about things? If so, there might be no limit to who counts as an intellectual. Is it a person whose ideas about things are somehow important, coherent, provocative? That would cut down on the people who might fit the label, but begs the question of who might decide what are important or interesting ideas. In the end, the question of how one gets to be considered an intellectual is as interesting as who is one, for the two are connected with a larger story of institutional power.

In considering the history of "Orientals" as an intellectual "problem" in the U.S., and the number of Asian American intellectuals who became involved in researching this "problem," I wanted to trace how the success of these scholars was determined. How well did they do in academia? How were they evaluated in their careers? The question of who is an intellectual in America has come to be defined by academic institutions, and so part of the history of "Orientals" as a "problem" is a story of how a number of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans entered a world where a "real" intellectual lies within the university system. Scholarly acceptance was equated with success as an intellectual.

Research into the "Oriental problem" validated certain kinds of knowledge as scholarship, taking information which Asian immigrants themselves might consider mundane or even trivial, and evaluating it as interesting and valuable. The scarcity of information about "Orientals" that made such knowledge so rare to the sociologists must be considered in light of the fact that much of this information was not scarce to the bulk of Chinese and Japanese in the United States. This evaluation of exotic information serves to highlight how academic interest in the "Oriental problem," by validating certain kinds of knowledge, structured for Asian Americans the very definition of what it meant to be an intellectual in America.

How did I come to study the intellectual history of Asian Americans? It is an interesting reflection of the historical constraints upon "Oriental" scholars that I came, like many historians of Asian America, to Asian American history from another academic field. Until recently (and still to a great degree), Asian American history has not been considered a serious subject for study by an academia dominated by the perspectives of whites. It was virtually impossible to enter into a Ph.D. program in history if the stated purpose

was to study Asian Americans. Either the subject was considered unimportant, or too narrow, or the program would decide that there were no professors with whom the student could work. And so the lack of professors who studied Asian Americans was perpetuated, since the only way such potential mentors could exist was if Ph.D.'s were trained in the first place.

Many of the first generation of academic Asian American historians in the 1960s and 1970s, therefore, were admitted to graduate school and trained in more "acceptable" fields such as East Asian history.⁴ To these scholars, conducting research on Asian Americans was also a choice to try and build a difficult scholarly life on the margins of academic institutions. Research funding was hard to come by, and the peer evaluation of other scholars often missed the point. Having struggled to create research on Asian Americans in such a world, the survivors of that generation became the founders of Asian American studies.

As survivors, they have also vowed to make scholarly production easier for a younger generation. There was little scholarly and institutional support for them when they had embarked on studying Asian Americans, but they have changed the world for younger scholars. When I decided to research Asian American history after entering graduate school to study European intellectual thought, I benefited from the support of an earlier generation of Asian Americanists. In the form of letters and pats on the back from scholars who had been struggling for years to establish Asian American history, such encouragement has made an essential difference in my intellectual life.⁵

While delivering a lunch time speech to the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) in Honolulu in 1998 (and at various other times), I used the image of dwarves or children standing on the shoulders of giants to describe the current state of Asian American studies. I believed the image was apt because it described the gargantuan nature of the scholarly and institutional work that earlier generations of Asian Americanists had done. It was their efforts, and the protests of students who were inspired by them and who agitated for more scholars and teachers like them, who opened the opportunities for younger scholars like me. If Asian Americans have seemed to be belligerent in the fight for more representation in the academy (and metaphorically been carrying a chip on their shoulders when responding to attacks on the credibility of their scholarship), then we entering into the field now are literally the chips off the blocks of their strong shoulders.

The image of standing on the shoulders of those before us also illustrated for me the recent success of so many recently minted Ph.D.'s. Academic institutions are hiring Asian Americanists, and it would be easy to attribute such a demand purely to the "intrinsic" worth of new scholarship. Exciting and path-breaking scholarship is being created, and the acquisition of prominent jobs at famous research universities has swelled the academic reputation of younger scholars such as myself. But it surely shows how late in the day it is that children can cast such large shadows. Much difficult work has been done toiling in the harsh heat of the midday sun, when shadows are dwarfed. Those that came before have received scant institutional recognition for the scholarly foundation they have built, and younger scholars have reaped the harvest of such ground breaking. We should remember, however, that we have come at the end of a long day's labor.

Before the giants of the pioneering generation of Asian Americanists appeared, the work of American historians generally focused upon the meaning of Asians to non-Asians in the United States. Gunther Barth, for instance, in his study *Bitter Strength*, argued that white Americans excluded Chinese Americans in the nineteenth century because they considered them impossible to "assimilate." Based almost wholly upon English-language newspapers and other forms of evidence that were produced by non-Asians, Barth argued that Chinese Americans had helped perpetuate this idea by remaining aloof and separate. Barth came under tremendous attack by numerous Asian American scholars in the 1970s, who argued that he had "blamed the victim," and the flaws of his study became the challenge for Asian American studies.⁶

Even when a work of U.S. history was sympathetic to the plight of Asian Americans, for instance, *The Indispensable Enemy*, Alexander Saxton's excellent study of anti-Chinese agitation, it still focused almost exclusively on how non-Asian Americans thought of Asian Americans. Saxton's book detailed how labor unions used racial categories to define and organize those they considered "white workers," excluding those they considered non-white. Still a classic in the field, Saxton's work showed how anti-Asian exclusion arose, but the story of the Asian Americans whose lives were affected still awaited telling.⁷

In the decades since, the professional discipline of U.S. historians has been pulled from both within and without by ethnic studies scholars, prodded to move away from analyses of race

that only emphasize white ideas about people of color. Asian American studies expanded beyond documentary sources that only recorded dominant white perspectives.⁸ Along with other ethnic studies movements, Asian Americanists led the struggle to open U.S. history to multiple voices.

Asian American historians tried to recover a “buried past,” in the words of historian Yuji Ichioka, giving voice to the immigrants and native-born Asian Americans who had been silenced or ignored by mainstream scholarship. Historical research such as Sucheng Chan’s *This Bittersweet Soil* painstakingly recovered the forgotten lives of Chinese American laborers and farmers, and the egalitarian legacy of earlier works such as Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is In The Heart*, written in the 1930s, inspired the focus of Asian American studies on the lives of common people. The emphasis shifted away from what was inspiring white supremacists in their racism, and towards the hopes and dreams and struggles of Asian Americans in the United States.

In an ironic way, an emphasis on studying the ideas and desires that structured white supremacy has returned to Asian American studies. Through cultural and literary studies in particular, in particular following Edward Said’s influential book *Orientalism*, Asian American scholars have been producing a spate of studies showing how white Americans defined the lives of Asian Americans. Said’s study showed how scholars in Europe and the U.S. created and reinforced a system in which knowledge about peoples demonized as exotic and inferior “Orientals” was integral to a system which subjugated them. These mostly literary studies had their greatest impact in comparative literature, for instance, in Lisa Lowe’s work, but historians of popular culture have also been examining the ways in which “not being Oriental” defined what it meant to be white.

Such work has explained the centrality of “Oriental” depictions for defining whiteness, both for Europeans and Americans. Robert Lee’s *Orientalists* and the media studies of scholars such as Darrell Hamamoto and James Moy have made powerful arguments about how the power to define and create images has historically been a tool abetting social control and exclusion.⁹ In creating oppositions that demonize some people as different, “Orientalist” cultural productions have done a great deal of political work in U.S. history.

At the heart of “Orientalism” has been the process of objectification. In one of my classes at UCLA, I asked the students if

there was a difference between an “Oriental” and an Asian American. One of the students answered by stating that an “Oriental” was an object, like a rug or a vase or a plate of food, while an Asian American was a person. Such an answer has been a common way of understanding the difference between the terms because “Orientalism,” a process in which people are treated as objects, has been so common. It points to the psychological importance of a term such as “Asian American” in countering the racism and prejudice that dehumanizes people of Asian descent. But it also points to exactly how “Orientalism” as a process works—people and objects are defined in relation to a white desire for the exotic. The dominant meaning that an “Oriental” bears is in relation to the fantasies of someone else.

When I began my study of how a group of Asian American intellectuals in the period between 1924-1965 thought of themselves, I realized that this was impossible to separate from how non-Asians had thought about them. Many of the best works written by historians of U.S. and Asian American history have tended to focus on either one of two concerns: 1) how whites have understood, portrayed and treated Asian Americans, or 2) how Asian Americans have understood their own difficult lives in the United States. I tried to unite both emphases in my research in order to show how the two are so inextricably linked that they cannot be understood apart.

I began my book with an explanation of the Orientalism of elite white thinkers during the 1920s. At the time, politically progressive thinkers such as Horace Kallen argued for an acceptance of the plural nature of American society. Differences in culture, they argued, could never be totally erased. In fact, pockets of difference within the country might actually be desirable. Such theories later became the foundation of liberal policies of multiculturalism. At the heart of such ideas was an elite appreciation of the exotic. Instead of trying to drive those who seemed different out of the country, cosmopolitan thinkers wanted to learn about the exotic. The acceptance of those who seemed different was politically progressive at that time and seemed by definition to be anti-racist, in particular in opposition to what the elite whites saw as the ignorance and often violent prejudice of working-class and uneducated whites.

However, in my study I tried to show how such a cosmopolitan taste was itself highly racialized. At the heart of this process lay the entwined practices of how to evaluate exotic knowledge

and of how to be an elite white. Unlike the value of whiteness described by historian David Roediger, as a metaphorical “wage” from which certain workers benefited by their inclusion into the category of white, the extolling of whiteness in the institutional practices of American Orientalism lay hidden at the center.¹⁰ Professional academics, in defining an interest in the exotic, and at the same time producing knowledge about the unknown, also produced themselves as the expert knowers. Seeing themselves as enlightened and cosmopolitan at the same time, they defined working-class racists as ignorant and provincial; progressive and liberal elites crafted themselves as the knowing subject through which others became important.

For much of the twentieth century, analyses of racism have centered upon the working classes. It was economic competition, combined with unenlightened ignorance, that was at the root of all racial conflict and prejudice. Elite ideas of race and culture were understood to be in opposition to working-class racism. As such, they were assumed to be anti-racist. That story has always benefited educated elites in the United States, since their own economic status allowed them the privilege of dabbling in knowledge of the exotic. Part of my project was to see elite definitions of racial and cultural difference from another perspective.

Cosmopolitan appreciation put Asian Americans in the position of being an object of intellectual interest and curiosity. I especially wanted to examine how a fascination with “things Oriental” affected the Chinese American and Japanese American intellectuals who were recruited to study and explain “Orientals” to white American social scientists. How did they survive and sometimes thrive by using these definitions of the “Oriental” to understand themselves and their communities?

American social thinkers defined the “Oriental problem” as they saw it, and in doing so they created what I label an intellectual and institutional construction. By an intellectual construction I meant a framework of theories which defined who “Orientals” were, as well as their place in America. By an institutional construction I meant a network of scholars who produced these ideas, and who were connected to each other through their research on the “Oriental problem” and through academic institutions such as the University of Chicago.

One of the lingering legacies of American Orientalism has been the ways in which Asian Americans continue to define

themselves. Protestant missionaries began the connection of the "Oriental" to China and Japan, and American social scientists reinforced it by creating a set of research problems that focussed exclusively on Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. Within my study I tried to outline how Chinese American and Japanese American intellectuals were drawn into the academic structures of American Orientalism, and therefore, how other Asian Americans, in particular those from the Philippines, were at the same time left out. Those exclusions have continued to plague Asian American history.

Research into the "Oriental problem" came to structure almost all academic thinking about Asian immigrants in America during the first half of the twentieth century. An institutional demand was created for Chinese American and Japanese American informants and researchers. These Asian American scholars, along with their non-Asian colleagues, produced a coherent body of knowledge about "Orientals" in the United States. Distributed by the social networks of Chicago sociology into universities and teaching colleges all across the nation, this knowledge of "Orientals" came to dominate how Asian Americans were defined by others and how they eventually understood themselves.

I split my story into two parts. In the first, a series of white social scientists and reformers come to the West Coast of the U.S. to try to understand what they perceive as the "Oriental problem" in America. In the second part, a series of students with Chinese and Japanese backgrounds come to Chicago in order to study and research various aspects of this "Oriental problem." The two movements were generally distinct in time, with one following the other, but they were also existentially different, involving very different positions in the institutional structure of American academia.

I deliberately chose to focus in the first part on how the stage was initially set by the white Americans who came to learn about "Orientals" on the West Coast. There was a point to telling my story with Asian Americans coming to a stage already set. I wanted to emphasize the constraints that limited the possibilities for Asian American intellectuals in the twentieth century. Asian Americans, like African Americans and other intellectuals of color in the United States, did not (and in many ways still do not) have the freedom of possibilities that white scholars enjoyed. I could have opened with two simultaneous movements, with Asians coming to America, meeting with white Midwesterners

coming to the Pacific Ocean. Such a setting for my story, however, would have implied that the meeting was between two groups with an equal say in the ways in which the meeting would be defined and understood. The Asian American intellectuals who came to study the "Oriental problem" were given a chance to conduct scholarly research, and they took advantage of the rare opportunity to enter careers in academia. Their understandings of themselves were often profoundly affected by their contact with the theories of the "Oriental problem." However, Asian American intellectuals did not have as much voice in academia as their white colleagues.

This is not to suggest that Asian American scholars did not have as much to say, just that their possibilities for being heard and validated were much more restricted. By giving voice first to the white men who came to understand "Orientals" in the early twentieth century, I hoped to convey the fact that white intellectuals did have first say in defining the meaning of "Orientals" in America. The Chinese American and Japanese American men and women who came to sociology in the twentieth century said and did a great number of things, but they performed upon a stage which was mostly not of their own making.

As an aside on the use of a stage analogy in my discussion of research into the "Oriental problem," I found it fascinating that American social thinkers often explicitly used theatrical metaphors to explain race in the United States. Such a language of performance and costumes and masks has continued to structure many analyses of race in the U.S., and resonates in a curious way with the story about Beulah Ong Kwoh which opened this essay. The reasons for this are many, but first and foremost has been the overwhelming perspective of a white audience in determining cultural and intellectual production, whether for movies, novels, or academic studies.

The rise of Asian American studies as a field has created a new audience for Asian American scholars. One of the healthiest signs of this continuing growth has been the ways in which recent researchers have found the freedom to operate in multiple contexts. Raised with the help of a supportive network of previous scholars, these new intellectuals have also found an institutional home in more traditional disciplines. More importantly, they have been able to begin a process which hopefully will transform not only Asian American studies, but the very ways in which scholarly history is produced.

New Directions in Research into Asian American History

Historians must continue to retrieve the silenced stories of Asian Americans. This has been one of the primary goals of Asian American studies since its founding, and it will continue to be the core of its scholarly program. At the same time, understanding the structures of white supremacy that have so thoroughly dominated Asian American history remains an integral part of any such project.

As a wonderful example of how recent work has combined Asian American perspectives with the effects of racism, 1998 Columbia Ph.D. Mae Ngai's work on immigration law has managed to listen to the stories of Chinese Americans while at the same time explaining the history of anti-Asian legislation. Ngai's dissertation, "Illegal Aliens and Alien Citizens," combined a political history which explained in nuanced ways what lawmakers thought they were doing, with a social history of Chinese Americans who were affected by the laws. An essay which came out of her research won the coveted Peltzer Prize for the best graduate student essay submitted to the *Journal of American History*, and her hiring at the University of Chicago symbolizes the inroads into the institutional practice of U.S. history that recent Ph.D.'s are making.¹¹

In a similar manner, Erika Lee's 1998 Berkeley dissertation on how the implementation of Chinese exclusion played a central role in the formation of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) also combined the everyday lives of Asian Americans with an examination of what anti-Asian discrimination meant to non-Asians. Her work will contribute to a history of how Asian Americans informed the institutional practices of white supremacy. Her hiring at the University of Minnesota, a department that is particularly strong in immigration history and in American studies, also shows the vitality that Asian American studies is bringing to other forms of scholarship.¹²

At a panel in Honolulu, Hawaii, on teaching Asian American history, Scott Wong of Williams College remarked that we cannot make sense of Asian American history if we just start at the moment bodies from Asia arrive. This has been a difficult intellectual leap for many students of Asian American studies, but scholars such as Wong have been at the forefront of this revolutionary expansion of the subject matter of Asian American history. If the field is to achieve a firm intellectual foundation, it is

essential to question an unreflective focus on human bodies “Orientalized” by whites.

Asian American history must take into account what happened long before the first migrants from Asia set foot in the U.S., and a number of Asian American scholars are doing just that. This process promises to do more than put our overall scholarly project on a good founding. Asian Americanists have been fighting for decades to insert Asian American history as a legitimate concern of U.S. history in general. The next step is to transform the study of history in general, not only American history and those others chauvinistically defined by nationality, but to use the traditional strengths of Asian American studies to create a transnational perspective.

John K.W. Tchen’s groundbreaking new work, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture*, is an important step in this process.¹³ Like Robert Lee’s cultural history of American Orientalism, Tchen’s careful and nuanced history of American desire for Chinese goods and “Oriental objects” focuses on the central importance of the idea of exotic “Orientals” to the cultural meanings that defined white America. Taking as his period 1776-1882, Tchen expands the subject matter of Asian American history beyond a focus on Asian American bodies, and by explaining the importance of the China trade to early American culture and society, Tchen’s study transforms the way we understand both Asian American and U.S. history.

Kariann Yokota’s dissertation work on the early United States as a post-colonial nation builds on Tchen’s work. Outlining the importance of post-colonial insecurity in the formation of nationalist definitions for a myriad of early Americans, Yokota traces how Anglo-American cultural insecurity in a trans-Atlantic world of trade and exchange was an important element in their demonization of people of color. Like Tchen, Yokota traces the importance of “Oriental goods” in the attempts of white ex-colonials to prove themselves “civilized.” Tying the origins of white supremacy in the early U.S. republic to transnational factors, Yokota details the central role of people of color in the shaping of American society. Also like Tchen, she grounds U.S. history in a wider world of transnational migration, exchange and trade.

Yokota shows how a training and background in Asian American studies can transform the ways in which all U.S. historians understand history. Her Master’s thesis at UCLA was al-

ready groundbreaking in its focus beyond Asian Americans, tracing the relations between African Americans and Japanese Americans in Los Angeles before, during and after World War II.¹⁴ Bringing unique insights that came from her training in Asian American studies, her work in early America promises to expand not only Asian American history, but to rework fields of research that have long ignored the insights of Asian American scholars.

The potential effects of transnational perspectives on history cannot be underestimated. Asian Americans, because they have been defined as both part of the American social body and also in essential ways alien to it, have grounded Asian American studies in the perspectives of the marginalized. But Asian American history at many points has also been best understood as a transnational history, a product of migration flows and the changes in consciousness and culture brought about by physical movement.

As a transnational perspective on history, Asian American studies has already explored many of the problems and issues that other fields of history are tentatively entering in their own scholarship. During a semester at the University of California's Humanities Research Institute, I was among a number of scholars who tried to map out the potential of what we called a "post-national American studies." For us, new scholarship that focuses on transnational perspectives has been uneven, with much of it making fundamental errors of conception. These mistakes are unfortunate and unnecessary, since they result from the idea that transnational scholarship needs to start from scratch. A number of fields, including Asian American Studies and Border Studies, have long been exploring transnational perspectives, and one of the goals of our semester together was to draw upon this history of transnational scholarship.¹⁵

The importance of seeing history from a transnational view has always marked the work of the best Asian American historians.¹⁶ International politics has often been central to many of these analyses, but there have also been many other exciting possibilities. Madeline Hsu's forthcoming book, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home*, based upon her 1996 Yale dissertation examining Taishanese families between the years 1904-1939, will be formative in this regard. In getting away from normalizing notions of family that make the overseas families of Cantonese migrants a pathology, Hsu shows that, though difficult in practice, such

transnational families became the norm. Families began to operate in ways that were founded upon long migration, aided by new methods in communication, transportation, and the transference of capital.

Similar to Hsu's work, Augusto Espiritu's and Arleen deVera's forthcoming UCLA dissertations both take seriously the transnational nature of social and political organizations that have shaped Filipino American history.¹⁷ Such transnational perspectives potentially have the greatest impact in studying the history of recent migration from Asia, and from South and Southeast Asia in particular. Changes in transportation and communication technologies have made the exchange across national borders of physical bodies and intellectual and cultural products more rapid and more common. In response, the rise of transnational perspectives in scholarship are not just an academic fashion, they are the explanatory device of both the past and the future.

There is a danger, however, in thinking about transnational connections in ways that reify racial identity. Conceptions of a "Chinese diaspora," for instance, often trade a political marking of human bodies for a highly racialized notion of nationality. Diasporic writings have sometimes been careful to avoid too physical a notion of diaspora—for instance Jonathan Okamura's recent book on the Philippine diaspora emphasized the forms of consciousness that Filipino migrants developed in different places—but in some ways a physical foundation for diasporic studies is almost unavoidable.¹⁸ After all, the metaphor of diaspora, of seeds being spread widely, is essentially organic and emphasizes the human bodies that make up something labeled a "Japanese" or a "Korean" diaspora. Whether such a focus is somehow justified by appeals to a shared culture or consciousness, it rests ultimately on a categorization of physical bodies that remains to be thoroughly conceived.

It might be tempting, for instance, to think of Asian immigration to the United States in mythic terms, of migrants from the Far East coming to the West Coast of the United States and crossing the continent eastwards, passing fleeing Indians and westernizing white settlers. Figuring Asian immigrants as a sort of anti-frontier myth would be appealing, a powerful way (along with the story of Hispanics who were in California, Texas and New Mexico long before it was the American West) of subverting Frederick Jackson Turner's conception of the "Western frontier."

Turner's 1892 thesis placed white European Americans at the center of history, situated at a frontier moving steadily westward, occupying the boundary between civilization and savagery.

Telling a story about Asians from a different shore, crossing the Pacific instead of the Atlantic and creating their own eastern frontier, might seem a welcome corrective to Eurocentric American history.¹⁹ But the notion of an Asian diaspora spreading outward from China and Japan or Southeast Asia, into Australia, Hawaii, South America, and finally Canada and the United States, would only place Asians instead of Europeans at the center of history. Though laudable in the attempt to renarrate U.S. history, it cannot be the ultimate story.

It would be more interesting to talk about locations, about points between which people move. Getting away from the metaphors of homeland and destination that make America the end of long journeys, I told a story in my book about various sites. These places were the central nodes for the production and distribution of knowledge, the founts for creating the forms of consciousness that result from contact. Theories about racial and ethnic identity were defined during the early twentieth century, a subset of a larger phenomenon labeled "cultural consciousness." My study placed ideas about "Orientals" in this context of the rise of cultural identity. I tried not to assume that something called "Oriental" or "American" existed outside the definitions and social practices that arose to deal with the movements of human bodies.

The concept of culture was a way of getting away from biological theories of race that had served a similar function of categorizing similarities and differences between humans. For theoreticians of the "Oriental problem," cultural theory was a knowledge system arising from the categorization of differences—between American and Chinese, between American and Japanese, between Japanese and Chinese, between "Negro" and "Oriental," between "white" and "colored." At the same time, it created a sense of similarity among people who purportedly shared the same culture.

These systematic comparisons were made at certain locations. And thus Honolulu, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago were sites for the production of knowledge. The knowledge that was created was linked to other theories about the geographic origin of cultural differences: Where did differ-

ence arise? Who brought it from where? Questions were asked and knowledge was constructed. The locations were meeting points, sites from which and to which people moved. Migrating intellectuals carried ideas between places—they also transformed ideas, moving from one way of seeing the world to another.

Diasporic studies, no matter how carefully they define their subject matter, have a hard time dealing with the difficulties of presuming the existence of that for which they are searching. By trying to define some phenomenon that somehow unites different people at disparate locations, an assumption of some essential cultural consciousness becomes a binding agent that is often little more than a shorthand for racial theory. Such difficulties do not reflect some lack of thinking on the part of the scholars, but arise from the pervasive nature of racial formations based upon continuing social and political practices. It is the history of those historical practices upon which we must focus, not on some ephemeral object called “culture.”

As a concluding note to this essay, much of the intellectual fervor I have described has also reflected the rise of new institutions in producing Asian Americanists. The first strongholds in the study of Asian American history tended to be on the West Coast, where most Asian Americans lived. With the rising numbers of Asian Americans who live elsewhere around the U.S., and more importantly, the increasing enrollments of Asian American students in every single college and university in the nation, interest in Asian American history has spread. Consequently, the training of scholars has also widened beyond schools such as Berkeley, UCLA, and San Francisco State. New concentrations of faculty in places such as UC San Diego, Washington State, and Stanford have increased the opportunities for the training of graduate students in the west.

The East Coast and Midwest have also been slowly transformed from institutions where scholars often worked alone, far away from others with like interests. Gary Okihiro, for a long time teaching Asian American history at Cornell, was the founder and one of the primary patrons of East of California, a network of disparate Asian American scholars in the east that echoes of early immigrant mutual benefit associations. Okihiro has now taken on the task of building Asian American studies at Columbia University. He joins Jack Tchen, who has been working in the New York area for years. Tchen was recently tenured

at NYU and is the founding director of a new Asian Pacific American research center there, after years at Queens College and before that the New York City Chinatown Project (now the Museum of the Chinese in the Americas). Robert Lee, as an associate professor at Brown University, has provided an important institutional voice in the east that has affected not only Asian American historians, but scholars of American studies in general.²⁰ Each of them, along with scholars such as Peter Kwong at Hunter College and Scott Wong at Williams, have provided a supportive network for the study of Asian American history outside the West Coast.

Asian American history has been an essential part of U.S. history, and the number of scholars studying that history will continue to grow. The challenge ahead is to use our potential strength to change the overall practice of academic history. U.S. history can be transformed by the insights of Asian American studies, and one of the exciting possibilities is a transnational perspective that escapes the limited boundaries and perspectives of nationalist histories. Already, women's studies has so changed the practice of history that gendered analysis is an integral part of any decent historical study. Hopefully, analyses of racialization and nationalization will someday be recognized in a similar manner as an inextricable element in the historical process.

Because one of the concerns in my own research has been how institutions produce knowledge, I am fascinated by the future consequences of the spread of Asian American studies. East Coast institutions have played a large role in recent intellectual production, producing Ph.D.'s and also providing a spate of new jobs for recent Ph.D.'s. There are great rewards for the increasing stature of Asian American studies in the traditional powerhouses of American academic life; however, there are also potential dangers with the "Ivy-fication" of the study of Asian American history.

One danger is a return to an earlier structure of evaluation in which knowledge about Asian Americans is mainly for the perspective of an academic, and therefore overwhelmingly white, audience. Because the structure of East Coast institutions still make Asian American scholars lone or isolated entities, they are constrained in the need to produce knowledge interesting and important to a general audience. It is a credit to those scholars who have been educated in such institutions, and to those who

are currently teaching there, that they have survived and often thrived in such settings.

It would be a shame, however, if in coming so far, we are also returned somehow to a world in which the most interesting qualities we have are defined by the points of view of whiteness. Scholars of Asian American history have much to research and they have much to say, not only about Asian Americans but about history in general. If an academic structure continues to marginalize Asian Americans, however, the clarity of our accents will be defined not by the content of our histories, but by the desires and pleasures of an "Orientalist" audience.

Notes

1. The themes of this talk were first aired as part of the plenary session on "Post-Colonial Histories" at the 1998 Association for Asian American Studies conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. Many thanks to the organizers of that conference and of the plenary session panels in particular.
2. Henry Yu, *Thinking "Orientals": A History of Knowledge Created About and By Asian Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
3. Another current term for people who can trace their ancestors back to Asia or the Pacific Ocean is "Asian Pacific Islanders." "Asian American" still works as a useful label for many of the people who were formerly known as "Orientals," yet its emphasis upon "Asian" is seen to marginalize Pacific Islanders who are not from the continent of Asia. For race in American society, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986). On "whiteness" as a social, legal, and economic category, see George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1998); Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (London: Verso, 1990); Virginia Dominguez, *White by Definition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1986).
4. For instance, Yuji Ichioka studied Chinese and East Asian history at Columbia; Franklin Odo also began as an East Asianist, and Gary Okihiro originally studied African history; Ronald Takaki was an Americanist, but his dissertation was on antebellum pro-slavery arguments.
5. For instance, Sucheng Chan, Art Hansen, Shirley Hune, Yuji Ichioka, Peter Kwong, Frank Ng, Frank Odo, Gary Okihiro,

- Michael Omi, Ronald Takaki, Jack Tchen, Ling-chi Wang, Scott Wong, and Judy Yung. Community historians Philip Choy and Him Mark Lai were also crucial in their help and encouragement.
6. Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964). Barth's book on the whole was sympathetic to the plight of Chinese immigrants, although it reflected the cosmopolitan appreciation of ethnicity of white racial liberals of the late 1950s and early 1960s. As a student of Oscar Handlin, the great historian of immigration at Harvard, Barth's book was one of a slew of Handlin-influenced works that detailed immigrant groups that had come to the U.S. In a strange way, the period of the Great Migrations of the nineteenth century was understood to be aberrational by scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, writing and living in a time when immigration exclusion was federal policy. Now that mass migration has again become a fact of life in U.S. society, many historians are just beginning to realize that it was the Exclusion Period of 1924-1965 which was the aberration.
 7. A recent book that details the political origins of Chinese exclusion, Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), disagrees with Saxton's argument that labor was behind Chinese exclusion.
 8. Community-based historians outside of academic institutions were crucial in this process. For instance, Him Mark Lai, who founded the Chinese Historical Society in San Francisco, compiled large volumes of Chinese language newspapers and other materials virtually unused by earlier scholars.
 9. Robert Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Darrell Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993).
 10. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*.
 11. Mae Ngai, "Illegal Aliens and Alien Citizens: United States Immigration Policy and Racial Formation, 1924-1945," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998.
 12. Erika Lee, "At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998.
 13. John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
 14. Yokota worked at UCLA with Valerie Matsumoto, Don Nakanishi, and Yuji Ichioka on her MA research.
 15. See the forthcoming essay collection from the UCHRI research

- group on *A Post-National American Studies*, edited by John C. Rowe and published by the University of California Press, and my essay for the volume, "How Tiger Woods Lost His Stripes."
16. For instance, in the work of earlier historians such as Yuji Ichioka and Sucheng Chan, and in more recent work such as that of Steffi San Buenaventura, Renqiu Yu, Gordon Chang, and Scott Wong.
 17. Espiritu and deVera work with Michael Salman and Valerie Matsumoto at UCLA. Under the guidance of professors such as Salman at UCLA, a number of graduate students studying Philippine-American history from a transnational perspective are in the institutional pipeline, and promise to address a long-standing marginalization of Filipino American history in the discipline of history.
 18. Jonathan Okamura, *Imagining the Filipino American Diaspora: Transnational Relations, Identities, and Communities* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).
 19. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From A Different Shore* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).
 20. Matthew Jacobson, of Yale University's Department of American Studies, credits Lee as an important influence in his recent book *Whiteness of a Different Color*, an important study on how ethnic immigrants became "white" through a process that made them distinct from blacks and other "people of color."