

Review: Toward a "Subjectless" Discourse: Engaging Transnationalist and Postcolonial Approaches in Asian American Studies

Author(s): Nhi Lieu

Review by: Nhi Lieu

Source: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Jun., 2008), pp. 491-496

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068550>

Accessed: 09-06-2015 15:18 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## Toward a "Subjectless" Discourse: Engaging Transnationalist and Postcolonial Approaches in Asian American Studies

*Nhi Lieu*

*Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique.* By Kandice Chuh. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003. 215 pages. \$59.95 (cloth). \$19.95 (paper).

Inspired by Avery Gordon's evocative envisioning of a transformative social existence, Kandice Chuh's *Imagine Otherwise* analytically employs Asian American literature to unravel and reflect upon the complex dimensions of the category "Asian America."<sup>1</sup> This productive enterprise questions the underpinnings of Asian American studies itself. As a field undergoing theoretical self-reflection, contemporary Asian American studies has often been characterized by the controversy over its representational politics. Since the field's inception in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Asian American studies scholars have been struggling with the epistemological question of its object of knowledge. Chuh "advanc(es) a critical approach to the study of Asian American literatures that conceives of that work as theoretical devices that help us apprehend and unravel the narrative dimensions of naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities" (x). In so doing, Chuh questions the relationships between power, subjectivity, racial structures, historicity, and legal categories.

*Imagine Otherwise* begins by recounting the controversy that erupted at the 1998 Association for Asian American Studies annual conference when the organization awarded Lois Ann Yamanaka's novel *Blu's Hanging* (1997) the prize for best fiction. Set in Hawai'i, *Blu's Hanging* directly defies preconceived notions about the islands as a perfect paradise by grappling with dark themes such as poverty, despair, violence, and the loss of innocence. Yamanaka's stark portrayal of physical abuse sets three young Japanese American children against a Filipino American sexual predator. Some members of the Asian

©2008 The American Studies Association

American Studies Association charged this representation with being racist against Filipinos and perpetuating negative stereotypes about Filipino men as sexual deviants. While *Blu's Hanging* confronted many difficult and delicate issues within the Asian American community, the intra-ethnic conflict that would ensue at the association's meeting nonetheless surprised many. Chuh observes that "this controversy functioned as a crucible for testing the politics and practices of the association and its membership, dramatically highlighting marginalization and exclusionary knowledge politics within Asian American studies" (2). Using this test case as a starting point, Chuh brilliantly takes apart assumptions about "Asian America" in order to further a "subjectless analysis" that challenges Asian American representation as uniform, stable, monolithic, and essentialist.

Chuh unravels the limits of an identity-based paradigm as the foundational basis for Asian American studies and suggests that "critique" replace the subject as the object of inquiry. Using literary and legal texts, Chuh displaces cultural nationalism as a political objective in identity-based categories and provides a productive analysis of race and sexuality in order to dispel the idea of a uniform subjectivity. Through critical readings of Carlos Bulosan's novel *America Is in the Heart* and Bienvenido Santos's short story "Immigration Blues," Chuh argues for a need to rethink the U.S. colonization of the Philippines as a racialized and sexualized historical project that contributes to Filipino/Filipino American subject formation (38). As she asserts, the domination of the Philippines by the United States not only demonstrated the virility of white masculinity, but also created conditions that contradicted American principles of liberty and justice. In particular, U.S. law prohibited colonized subjects of the nation-state from being incorporated as citizen-subjects. Chuh carefully examines literary productions and legal cases filed by Filipino Americans who sought citizenship through military service. Despite their legal status as U.S. nationals, Filipino immigrants remained ineligible for citizenship because of their racial status and perceived threatening masculinity. Chuh argues that these incoherent legal and cultural positionings of Filipino Americans refuse categorization within the framework of a singular nationalist discourse and thus function as "a critique rather than identity" (56).

Chuh uncovers the problem of privileging race as the primary analytical category and urges readers to think about other possibilities for organizing Asian American studies. The construct of "Filipino America" is promising precisely "because of its categorical flux" (57, her emphasis). Asian American studies may thus emerge "as a discourse critical of identity, of uniform subjectivity and its promises of equality, whether those constructs be found in hegemonic

U.S. nationalism or in academic critical practices" (57). In deconstructing the "Filipino American" category, Chuh displaces the identity-based model that dominates Asian American studies and also moves Asian American critique beyond the framework of the nation.

Chuh employs transnationalism as a concept to advance and complicate Asian American studies. For example, she challenges readers to rethink the discourses of race and patriotism deployed during World War II to rationalize the internment of Japanese Americans. Insisting that the production and logics of race must be understood as a "technology of U.S. national identity," Chuh reflects upon what legal scholar Neil Gotanda calls "Asiatic racialization" as it is linked to internment and transnationality. As she defines it, "Asiatic racialization" was a process that identified and enhanced Asian foreignness and racial difference. In so doing, it solidified U.S. citizenship as a condition that excluded Asian-raced people in the United States. Moreover, because "U.S. nationalism has repeatedly denied or 'nullified' political citizenship by creating 'Asians' as different from 'Americans,'" Asian American studies has adopted transnationalism as a paradigm with some trepidation, because it potentially reproduces the idea that Asian subjects exist outside of the American nation (59). Yet circumscribing Asian-raced populations within the U.S. nation not only posed limitations, but also inadequately dealt with the pressures of globalization that Asian Americans confronted in the past and continue to face in the present.

It becomes important for Chuh to revisit the internment of Japanese Americans in order to challenge the nation-based paradigms that have shaped the discourse surrounding that watershed event in U.S. history. The author once again employs literary and legal texts to unravel the "transnationality of internment" through what she calls the "technologies of race and U.S. national identity formation" (61–62). Accordingly, Chuh argues that the internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans, or collectively the Nikkei, "exemplif[ed] the suturing of the unity of the U.S. by means of differentiating between those who do and do not belong through the deployment of race, a category that in this context signifies national origins" (61). The clearest example of formal, systematic, and institutionalized anti-Asian racism, internment discourse as it circulated through state ideology supported constructions of an imagined enemy whose foreignness was legitimated by transnationality. Chuh explains that her use of transnationalism functions in two ways. The first involves actual "border crossings" and the transnational "flows of people, capital, and cultures in the production and evaluation of knowledge." The second requires an imagined field of border crossings that is a "cognitive analytic that traces the

incapacity of the nation-state to contain and represent fully the subjectivities and ways of life that circulate within the nation-space” (62, her emphasis). In essence, the author refers to the conceptual border crossings that involve not literal movement but rather heterogeneous imaginings that enable cultural practice and international politics to play out.

Chuh utilizes literature written by Japanese Americans as significant evidence for engaging the transnational as well as the racialization of the Nikkei. In particular, John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy* and Hisaye Yamamoto’s short story “High-Heeled Shoes” critique the geographical boundaries of the nation and articulate a transnational epistemology. Chuh investigates the multiple dimensions of Japaneseness, Americanness, loyalty, and patriotism in the worlds created by Okada and Yamamoto, both of whom challenge the singularity of identity. According to Chuh, these Japanese American writers remind us that identity rests on an “undecidability” that opens up the possibilities for collectivity and unity (83). Since literature about the internment experience represents a critical moment in which the state and popular discourse defined the Nikkei as racially foreign, its relevance in Asian American studies is undeniable, especially in addressing the transnational framework. Chuh writes:

What I am suggesting is that the imperative for Asian Americanists to think in terms of transnationalism arises not from globalization but also from recognizing *the transnational within the national*, from understanding that Asiatic racialization traces and materializes the transnational dimensions of U.S. national identity. (69–70; emphasis in original)

She confronts one of the most central problems of the field by insisting upon a paradigm that moves beyond the limits of the nation. By suggesting that the principles of transnationalism directly challenge Asiatic racialization and create flexible affiliations, Chuh outlines a dynamic conceptual framework to interpret the complexities of the Asian American experience.

*Imagine Otherwise* engages with and responds to the oft-conflated categories of “Asian” and “Asian American,” as well as the boundaries between Asian studies and Asian American studies, by opening up discussions about the geographies of identity and embodiment. Maintaining her critique of the nation as a paradigm in Asian American studies, Chuh’s close analysis of two vastly different “Korean American” literary narratives, Ronyoung Kim’s *Clay Walls* (1987) and Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999), demonstrates “the critical power of defying a nation-based territorial imagination” (87). Both novels conceptualize the transnational dimensions of Korean/Korean American subject formation by contending with the geopolitical power relations triangulated in the national space of “Korea” by the colonial rule of Japan and

the United States. The literary works reveal the limitations that arise when "Asia" and "America" are considered as geographically distant spaces separated by cultural and racial ideologies. Moreover, the writings by Kim and Lee serve as an allegory for how a transnational approach can be applied to theorizing immigration narratives in Asian American studies. In particular, the title *Clay Walls* suggests a solid yet malleable and erosive structure, making it an "apt metaphor to reflect upon the discursive boundaries that delineate the parameters of Asian American studies" (98). These boundaries directly relate to the practice of Asian American studies that often creates alternative narratives to distance itself from Asian studies. Chuh argues that to sustain "the difference between 'Asians in Asia' and 'Asians in America' supports [a] Eurocentric, 'othering' way of knowing" (90). Challenging these boundaries of difference allows for the resistance of colonial and Orientalist configurations of "Asia" and "America" as well as "Asians" and "Americans." Chuh's deconstruction of the two novels explores the cross-border flows of knowledge, culture, and politics to advance a transnational imaginary that incorporates space and Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Her theoretical application of heterotopia is helpful for deterritorializing social categories that have been naturalized by geographical boundaries and national affiliations. By applying a heterotopic formation of real and imagined spaces that challenge racial essentialism associated with territoriality, it becomes possible to envision a postcolonial Asian American studies as both transnational and critical.

For Chuh, the most important political project of Asian American studies remains the work of combating injustice in a postcolonial and increasing globalized world. She is committed to promoting a vision of Asian American studies as "advancing and engaging in practices of liberation and freedom" because it "facilitates critical acknowledgment of the vast diversity of the relations and blockages of power that underwrite the construction and legibility of political and social subjectivities, and that regulate social relations" (115–16). By suggesting that Asian Americanists "conceptually disown 'America,'" Chuh urges them to disarticulate "home" and "nation" to conceive of an imagined sense of home beyond geographic locality (124). Contending that Asian Americanist discourse must move beyond celebratory representations, Chuh convincingly argues that the field must confront and grapple with the contradictory politics at play in complex depictions of race.

Perhaps the most insightful aspect of *Imagine Otherwise* is its call for rethinking identity politics. As the author argues, "what is needed is not identity but a commitment to combating states of domination, to unifying for the sake not of the self but in the endless pursuit of justice" (148). With her many theoretic-

cal and historiographic contributions to Asian American studies and literary criticism, Chuh argues for a critical investigation of naturalized categories. She concludes by asserting: “What, finally, I think subjectlessness can help us to do is to articulate Asian American studies as an unbounded field, one that while in the structure of the academic institution is not structured *by it*” (151; emphasis in original). As a response to the call, by Lisa Lowe and others, for a rethinking of identity and difference, Chuh urges us to reconceptualize Asian American studies as subjectless so as to critique subjectification and the desire for subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> To “imagine otherwise” is thus to defer the privileging of race in order to further antiracist politics. Confronting the discourses that surround academic practice by exploring the controversial and contradictory paradigmatic structures of the field, *Imagine Otherwise* demonstrates that applying transnational and postcolonial approaches to literary and legal discourse enables us to shift the ways in which we think about Asian American studies and other interdisciplinary fields, including American studies.

Kandice Chuh’s thought-provoking work has already inspired a new generation of cultural studies scholars to employ the term “Asian American” as a mode of analysis and a form of critique.<sup>3</sup> This useful text can stimulate discussion for those interested in race, cultural studies, transnationalism, poststructural theory, and ethnic studies. Engaging with Chuh’s enthusiastic challenge for scholars to apply a politics of subjectlessness would certainly be an intellectual enterprise that could lead to a full articulation of the potential of her activist field of vision.

#### Notes

1. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
2. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), and “The International within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique,” *Cultural Critique* 40 (Fall 1998): 29–47.
3. See Lisa Nakamura, “Alloolksame? Mediating Asian American Visual Cultures of Race on the Web,” in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005). Also, Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, introduction to *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Nguyen and Tu (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).