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On What Side of Praxis? U.S. Ethnic Studies, The Global Horizon, and The Problem of Theory Through an Asian American Lens

Abstract
This essay historicizes U.S. ethnic studies, especially focusing on the Asian American component of the field. Besides illuminating dynamics that are shared by the whole spectrum of ethnic studies, an Asian American "lens" offers an opportunity for "zooming in" and reflecting on some meaningful, productive "tensions" that, in turn, highlight the broader relevance and potential of an "ethnic" perspective. I shall argue that the oscillation between the local and global dimensions of the Asian American field; the historically pivotal role of literary studies and literary teaching for Asian America; and a long history of entwinement between academic institutionalization, theoretical elaboration, and political, socially transformative energies, constitute recurrences in Asian American studies that, once historicized, can prove their importance for us today beyond strict field compartimentalizations. Specifically, I suggest that this history can offer food for thought for recent Comparative literature approaches that wish to deploy a world perspective; and that it can constitute an interesting case study for reflecting on theory as inextricably linked with praxis as well as on the relationship between academic institutions and their "outsides" – a reflection that we especially need nowadays.

1. *Introduction*

This essay historicizes U.S. ethnic studies, and Asian American studies as a part of it. Because of obvious space limitations, my aim is not to offer a comprehensive history of either. Instead, I highlight some nodal points, and the relevance of this history for us today.

In the next paragraph, I concisely present the origins of U.S. ethnic studies, the historical horizon of their institutionalization, and align myself with an "international" framing of these origins. In the following paragraphs, I

undertake a discussion of Asian American studies, a related field originating within the broader purview of ethnic studies. I stress how Asian American studies have over time been increasingly identified with their cultural and literary component, how they have "gone global", and how both these developments can offer food for thought for those literary studies – like comparative literature – that do not identify "the nation" as their core of interest, and/or aspire at making theoretical and, sometimes, even practical difference.

The history of Asian American studies – mostly consistent, in this respect, with ethnic studies overall – testifies to the burden, and opportunity, of articulating, at different times and according to different priorities, two sets of dialectical poles, which create a field of promising tensions. The first tension is between the local and global dimensions of the historical occurrences that have determined, followed, and accompanied Asian migration to and settlement in the U.S. The second tension is the entwinement of the practical and theoretical dimensions of a discourse that came to exist as a socially transformative project within the institutions of higher education, with the aim not only of transforming those very institutions, but the "outside" world as well. This second tension is also quite revealing of the uneasy position of the university, and especially of the changing role of literary studies – nowadays increasingly perceived as the most endangered component of the overall endangered humanities, threatened by financial cuts under penalty of demonstrating to the world that they have a reason for existing.

The story of the transformations of ethnic studies, including Asian American studies, can be told – has been told – like this: ethnic studies came to exist with a focus on racial minority (i.e. nonwhite) status in the U.S. Over time, and in a massive wave since the 1990s, they were brought to confront broader narratives – diasporic, transnational, global; and they were brought to interact with other disciplinary fields such as Asian studies, Latin American studies, or comparative literature. To a certain extent, my own reconstruction retells a story that has many times been told at perceived moments of crisis, like during the 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, it has been noted, this accepted reconstruction minimizes the internationalism of the political movements that originally sparked the institutionalization of ethnic studies. Moreover, the tendency to see this story of academic institutionalization as de facto problematic – and problematic it *is* – is perhaps too often cast in pejorative terms, as if universities were loci whose political weight can only be negative, stifling and neutralizing truly oppositional energies.

To look for a way out of a recurring impasse that laments the increasing dispersion, loss, or stunning of praxis, it might be useful to reassess the *breadth,* the *scope*, and the *nature* of the historical and political project that – many (including myself) believe – ethnic studies, and Asian American studies, should keep embracing despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that times have changed. Moreover, such reassessment brings into sharp focus the many difficulties of articulating literature and culture as political projects in the sense of making conscious decisions, beyond established canons and methodologies, about what to read, what to teach, and why.

2. *The Institutionalization of Ethnic Studies in the U.S.: Some Long-Term (and Broad-Space) Implications*

The establishment of ethnic studies as a university curriculum and research field in the U.S. in the late 1960s is directly related to the struggle, including a massive student-led strike, organized by the Third World Liberation Front. This was a (mostly) California-based political movement emerging in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the international activism against U.S. imperialism and the wars waged in the name of containing the Red Threat. This was, of course, part of the worldwide student movements that characterized this historical period. In the U.S., this took the form of wrestling control of higher education from the hands of the overwhelmingly white male establishment that had been holding it for decades. In 1968, students at San Francisco State College (later renamed San Francisco State University) and at the University of California, Berkeley, soon followed by students on other campuses, demanded more democratic access to higher education paired with a radical revision of academic curricula. In 1968, San Francisco State College established a College of Ethnic Studies, which comprised four departments: American Indian Studies, Asian American Studies, Black Studies, and La Raza Studies. 1969 saw the founding of the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, that housed four undergraduate programs: African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Native American Studies.[1]

1 For reconstructions of this history see, among many possible sources, Hu-DeHart 1993, Chuh 2003, Chiang 2009. Also see https://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/about/history/ and https://ethnicstudies.sfsu.edu/history. Last visited 15 May 2023. In this paper, I use up-

True to this politicized emergence, ethnic studies have, since their inception, presented themselves as a liberation project, aimed at transforming academia and, consequentially, society. In 1993, Evelyn Hu-DeHart sketched a genealogy that is worth quoting at length:

> What is ethnic studies? First, the field is distinct from global or international studies, particularly those programs known generally as "area studies", with which ethnic studies is often compared and confused. Area studies programs arose out of American imperialism in the Third World and bear names such as African studies, Asian studies, and Latin American studies. These programs were designed to focus on U.S./Third World relations and to train specialists to uphold U.S. hegemony in regions in which the U.S. had heavy economic and political investments. Area studies scholars have become far more critical of U.S./Third World relations since the antiwar movement of the 1960s, and many have adopted Third World perspectives. However, they are still predominantly white male scholars entrenched in established departments, subscribing to and benefiting from traditional patterns of distributing power and rewards in the academy. [...]
> Ethnic studies programs, which grew out of student and community grassroots movements, challenge the prevailing academic power structure and the Eurocentric curricula of our colleges and universities. These insurgent programs had a subversive agenda from the outset; hence they were suspect and regarded as illegitimate even as they were grudgingly allowed into the academy. Definitions of ethnic studies vary from campus to campus and change over time. What the programs have in common is a specific or comparative focus on groups viewed as "minorities" in American society. European immigrants have dominated America and defined the national identity as White and Western. [...]
> In short, the field of ethnic studies provides a "liberating educational process" [...] that challenges Western imperialism and Eurocentrism, along with their claims to objectivity and universalism. (Hu-DeHart 1993, 51-52)

This genealogy emphasizes the mission of ethnic studies as a pedagogy of liberation and as a field whose agenda, de facto or by intention, subverts previ-

per-case initials, like in "Ethnic Studies", when I refer to specific forms of institutionalization such as departments, programs, majors, etc.

This is not, however, the only way to tell the story. Bruce Robbins (2022) retraces the birth of Ethnic Studies to two components that, to my knowledge at least, tend to be left out of many accounts: Native American political movements at the University of Minnesota since 1966, and the emergence of Jewish American literature in the 1950s. David Hollinger (1985, 88, qtd. in Palumbo-Liu 1995, 3) maintains that a key factor that led to the crisis of the literary canon in U.S. universities was the arrival of Jewish immigrant intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s.

ously existing academic paradigms. Hu-DeHart discusses differential points of institutional entrance into the prevailingly white and Eurocentric structure of the academia, and the different scope of praxis that these points provide. Departments, Hu-DeHart notes, control budgets, decide upon hiring faculty members, and can determine their own courses. People in ethnic studies often find themselves mediating the project of breaking new ground with(in) existing academic structures, and this does not always amount, of course, to founding new units with economic say, such as departments. Understandably,

> political expediency and practical financial matters often dictate the less ideal course of action. [...] A program is still the most common model for ethnic studies because it is the easiest and least costly way to accommodate a new discipline.
> [S]eeing an easy way to make a positive statement of their commitment to diversity, administrators are often eager to establish some kind of ethnic studies presence on their campuses. [...] Ethnic studies scholars and supporters, having been stranded on the margins for so long, see any movement toward the inside as acceptable – hence their tendency to settle for less. (Hu DeHart 1993, 53)

There have been, over time, different levels and types of institutionalization: departments, programs (majors and/or minors), centers, or just courses. In the case of UC Berkeley, for instance, after having been part of Ethnic Studies, African American Studies eventually became a Department. Institutionalization is, of course, a double-edged sword, and that is probably one of the reasons why, during the crucial decade of the 1990s, the field looked back at the previous decades and attempted to assess what had happened, was happening, and what might lie ahead. Nowadays, the situation has become even more diversified than it was in the 1990s. Ethnic studies covers a broad range of functions, and its collocation widely varies in different U.S. academic institutions. African American Studies has, overall, a longer history of having formed independent Departments.[2]

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2 The current situation of University of Wisconsin, Madison, is a good example of the historical diversification and possible functions of ethnic studies. African American Studies is organized in a department. Asian American Studies is a program, which offers the possibility of a Certificate to students from any majors who want to concentrate a substantial part of their academic credit in Asian American studies; and this emphasis/Certificate can be now specifically modeled to accommodate an emphasis on Hmoob (Hmong) American Studies. See https://asianamerican.wisc.edu/. Last visited April 27, 2023. Ethnic Studies, or better, Race and Ethnic Studies, is an academic focus (not an academic division) not in

Ethnic studies have been a major force in the overall multicultural rethinking of U.S. higher education since the 1960s. In the midst of this rethinking, but only partial *restructuring* – one only needs to think of the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s – "traditional", long-established disciplinary divisions, such as Departments of Literature, or English, increasingly started to grapple with principles of pluralism and interdisciplinarity, teaching new courses, appointing new faculty working on ethnicity-related subjects, and so on.[3] Thus, to a good extent, "ethnic" resources were streamlined in already existing, "traditional" academic divisions. This happened, it is crucial to notice, in the context of massive cuts to the public funding of education during the 1980s. This is what Colleen Lye notes with regard to the history of the Department of English at UC Berkeley, where she teaches and researches an "ethnic" subject, Asian American studies: "Perhaps the steady defunding of public higher education has since the 1980s always been the dark side of apparently counter-normative aspirations for interdisciplinarity – and in the case of the English Department, a factor in its methodological pluralism and identification with the mission of multicultural education" (Lye 2022).

This dialectical tension between institutionalization and political project, as well as between concentration and expansion/dispersal, has been, albeit dif-

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the Humanities, but instead in Sociology; Ethnic Studies, instead, is a single course among those to be taken as General Education Requirements for students in any academic track. See https://gened.wisc.edu/courses-and-course-information/. Last visited April 27, 2023.

3 A significant factor of this period is, of course, the reception, and to many extent the recreation, in the U.S. academic environment, of what has been called "poststucturalist theory", a crucial phenomenon that François Cusset (2003) has thoroughly analyzed, focusing on the powerful transformation/adaptation of the work of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and other French intellectuals in the course of their "aventure américaine". "Il s'agit, en fin de compte, des vertus de la décontextualisation, ou de ce que Bourdieu appelait la 'dé-nationalisation' des textes. Si elles perdent en quittant leur contexte d'origine une partie de la force politique qui y motiva leur irruption, ces 'théories voyageuses' (selon le mot d'Edward Said) peuvent aussi gagner à l'arrivée une puissance nouvelle. Cette puissance tient aux déblocages qu'autorisent les théories recomposées, à l'énigme de décalages institutionnels féconds entre les champs d'origine et d'accueil, qui sont rarement homologiques: que des philosophes français aient été importés par des littéraires américains, que la question de la révolution y ait été entendue comme celle de la minorité, que des auteurs publiés chez Gallimard et Minuit l'aient été aux États-Unis chez des presses universitaires ou des petites maisons alternatives forment autant de dissymétries créatrices» (Cusset 2005 [2003], 21-22).

ferently played out at different moments, a recurring feature of ethnic studies. This is, to an extent, a paradox: if one thinks of the origins of the field, political action *through* institutionalization *was* among its aims. In *Imagine Otherwise* (2003), Kandice Chuh observes:

> Far from being isolated bastions of abstract knowledge production, universities are sites of investment for corporate capital and military interest; they are shaped and sustained by government investments; and in these and myriad other ways, are precisely Ideological State Apparatuses. And indeed, this understanding undergirds the motivations of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s that sought to intervene in this particular site. In brief and crude terms, democratizing the university is in itself a "real world" project, and refusing the opposition of academic and activist is necessary to keep this in mind. (Chuh 2003, 24)

Nowadays we are very much aware that we live and work in the "real world" at a historical moment when the humanities (not only the U.S.) are targeted with heavy budget cuts, and always in need to justify their own existence. Starting from this awareness, in a more recent study (2019) Chuh points out an already-existing, perhaps in her opinion still under-tapped resource: an "alternative" that conjoins "minoritized discourses"[4] and the broader interests of the humanities. Chuh's, however, is not a defense of the existing humanities, but a provocation to imagine them differently:

> The history of the humanities and the disciplinary structures organizing their emergence is of a piece with the history of the civilizational discourses subtending the legitimation of empire and capital, and bespeaks the onto-epistemologies that have come to secure liberal modernity's common sense. In this light, the crisis confronting the humanities calls less for their defense and instead prompts the crafting of a vision of what a defensible humanities might be and do, and how it differs from its dominant iteration. [...] I try to elaborate the principles and concepts of this other humanities, derived from what I provisionally refer to as "illiberal humanisms." Radically different from liberal humanism and its cognate humanities, these other humanisms, these other humanities, have long existed and percolate institutionally largely within and through minoritized discourses. [...] The illiberal human-

4 The "nature" and "context" of "minority discourse" (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1991) is a complex and much-debated matter that I cannot tackle here. Of course, minority discourse as a theoretical issue would not have arisen without the seminal influence of the Subaltern Studies group of historians of South Asia, starting in 1983; Gayatri Spivak's immensely influential redeployment of the idea of the "subaltern"; and the overall influence of postcolonial theory.

ities are directed toward the protection and flourishing of people and of ways of being and knowing and of inhabiting the planet that liberal humanism, wrought through the defining structures of modernity, tries so hard to extinguish. (Chuh 2019, 1-2)[5]

Locating the potential of "percolated minoritarian discourses" (among which ethnic studies can be ranged) within a discourse of rethinking the humanities also redirects attention to the importance of literature and literary studies, whose problematic centrality has been repeatedly noted with respect to Asian American studies, the "subfield" of ethnic study to which I now direct my attention.

3. *Zooming in, Zooming out: Asian American Studies between Local and Global Dimensions*[6]

Highly attentive to the oppression called "internal colonialism", to both racist hate and what their pioneering intellectuals called "racist love" (Chin 1972),[7]

5 Chuh's book refrains from explicitly articulating the *contents* of this "illiberal humanities" alternative.

6 A comparative discussion of the development of "specific" ethnic studies (sub)fields is beyond the purview of this study, which takes instead the route of "zooming in" on the Asian American component specifically because of the "return" enlargement of perspective that this choice can provide – as I hope will become clear in what follows. It may here be observed, however, that the shift from a more localized approach to a broader, transnational/global one is something that various ethnic studies fields have in common, although each field obviously also works according to its own internal dialectics and debates (see Singh and Schmidt 2000). African American studies, for instance, have recently been tackling the consequences for U.S. culture and society of new migrations from Africa, or "new diasporas". For recent discussion of these issues, see the essays in Bordin and Scacchi 2022. For more on the concept of diaspora see note 9 below.

7 Since the early 1970s, Asian American activists and intellectuals have been acutely aware of what was called "the model minority myth" (see, among many possible references, Wu 2014). According to this much-criticized narrative pattern, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans are lauded not only in reason of the good measure of their economic success, but also because they allegedly do not "blame the system" when they are unsuccessful. Failure, in other words, is narrated as an individual problem, that can eventually be fixed thanks to dedication and hard work, and systemic inequality is not addressed.
Being seen as a "model minority" is grounded, in David Palumbo-Liu's terms, in the creation, and simultaneous crossing, of a racial split. Asian Americans have long been regarded

Asian American studies originated as part of the initial project of ethnic studies, together with African American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American studies. Their institutionalization initially saw a concentration in history and the social sciences, to be steered in a relatively short time towards a prevalence of the study of culture, and especially literature (Chiang 2009, C. Lee 2010). This prevalence has been raised as an issue per se, and it will be mentioned again presently. For now, I shall concentrate on how Asian American studies have always moved between "local" and "global" articulations.[8]

For "Asian America" as a literary and pedagogical project, 1974 is an important year. It sees the legendary publication of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, the first collection of what the editors called "Asian-American literature". Originally written with a hyphen, this brand-new category comprised works of "Filipino-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, American born and raised" (Chin et al. 1974, vii). Since then, the term "Asian American" has been progressively enlarged, to include first-generation immigrants and descendants of immigrants from all over Asia. What Yen Le Espiritu (1992) called "Asian American panethnicity" – i.e. the idea of a coali-

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as aspirants to a status of "honorary whiteness", in relation to the narrative that casts them as a successful ethnic group. Nevertheless, their nonassimilable difference, in the sense of racial difference, intermittently yet regularly resurfaces, especially in the eyes of whites (Palumbo-Liu 1999). For a recent example, one only needs to think of the resurfacing of the otherization of Asian-looking bodies at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemics in 2020.
Being Asian Americans a case of racialization wherein nonwhiteness and whiteness differentially intermingle, critical reflections on Asian America have to an extent anticipated some of the issues later discussed under the purview of critical whiteness studies. Shona Hunter and Christi van der Westhuizen have recently maintained that "[a]t this historical juncture, where whiteness and its violences are being made apparent, the claim to innocence paradoxically requires the visibilisation of whiteness. [...] This hypervisibilisation appears to go against the grain of the earlier-described insights on whiteness, of invisibility, ignorance, and innocence. However, this apparent contradiction between hypervisibilisation in the context of invisibilisation/not knowing serves as a reminder that whiteness works as a differentiated power geometry, with divergencies and convergencies across different contexts" (2023, 9). Hunter and van der Westhuizen's declared "goal is not to 'cleanse' white people and restore innocence to them, but to disestablish whiteness" (2023, 3).

8 As already noted, the increasing diffusion, which shall be discussed in this paragraph, of a "globalized" form of Asian American studies mirrors processes of "globalization" of other branches of ethnic studies, which overall tend to have an increasingly transnational and transcontinental scope.

tion of people of various Asian ancestries *who share a history of having been the target of similar "anti-Oriental" legislation, prejudice, and racism* – still holds as a study label.

In 1974, the Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley proposed a major in Asian American Studies, an educational project the humanities component thereof was just, Christopher Lee remarks, being tentatively defined:

> That Asian students be encouraged to venture into the humanities is obvious; what form self-expression will take in the context of the Asian American experience and Asian American Studies is yet to be seen. It is certain that the student with a concentration in the humanities will be given the freedom to explore Asian American and Third World literature, art and dance, and creative writing". [...] The proposal goes on to clarify the role of the arts in Asian American Studies: "Of particular importance will be the student's responses to the question of the flow and interchange between life and art. This last point is of considerable importance since it will help to give the individual the clarity of vision necessary in delineating between what is truly an Asian American assertion and what is a replica of what exists, clothed in Oriental paraphernalia [...]. (C. Lee 2010, 19-20)

For Lee, it was clear from the start that "it is only by entrenching the humanities within a larger political project that it can acquire the 'clarity of vision' needed to dismantle Orientalist and racist misrepresentation" (2010, 20). What also *seemed to be clear* from the start is that the project was based on an international network of solidarity and scope of application, explicitly linking pedagogy and research (in short, the academia) to the (very broad) world outside it.

In 1995, historicizing the beginnings of Asian American Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, Dana Takagi and Michael Omi observed that "[t]he paradigm of internal colonialism incorporated an important 'transnational' dimension as well, one that drew analogies between the plight of the international Third World and the 'Third World within'. In this context, the anti-imperialist struggles in Southeast Asia and elsewhere provided the Asian American movement with sources of inspiration and political solidarity" (Omi and Takagi 1995, xii). In 1991, Sucheta Mazumdar discussed, with the intention of recuperating them, the "roots" of Asian American Studies in the international student movements of the "long" 1968. Mazumdar stresses the "global nature" of the student movements, which responded to many historical facts, like Cold War-driven U.S. military interventionism in southeast Asia; as well as the post-WWII transformation of productive and economic conditions, which made

possible for previously excluded social strata to access higher education (Mazumdar 1991, 39-40).

Despite these "roots", Asian American studies of the 1970s and 1980s mostly favored an agenda which became known as "claiming America", focusing (not exclusively but prevalently) on the history, literature, and culture of the (in the *Aiiieeeee!* formulation) "American-born and raised" Asians. In the literary field, this entailed a massive recuperation and republishing of texts from various periods of the history of Asian migration to the U.S. A textual field was thus formed (E. Kim 1982). While all this made strategic sense, it de facto obscured many of the previously mentioned international roots/routes. While here I am, admittedly, condensing a phase, with all its inner complexity, in the space of this very short paragraph, I would nonetheless suggest that the apparently paradoxical nature of this phase can, at least in part, be explained with the objective demands of increasing institutionalization. These demands perhaps involved a difficulty in dealing with the kind of (in Russell Leong's terms) "lived theory" directly stemming from the movements of the 1960s, a theory first and foremost at the service of praxis:

> For me, theory usually emerged from practice, and not the other way around. I did not give theory much formal thought.
> [...] [T]he underlying principles and assumptions which drove people to make choices in their daily lives was what I thought of as "lived theory", or theory of living that emerges from work and working with others. [...]
> We saw ourselves, as scholar and labor activist Emma Gee has stated, as "active participants in the making of our history", and we sought to make theories of history and culture – be it from Mao, Malcolm X, Fanon, or Marx – come alive for us. (Leong 1995, v, vii)

The 1990s were a crucial decade, during which Asian American studies underwent a diversification and a "crisis" that has since become almost intrinsic to the field. The early years, with the Clinton administration succeeding the Bush Sr. one, saw a hopeful reinvigoration of ethnic studies and a simultaneous fear that the disinvestment from public funding of education which had dominated the previous decade would resume (Hu-DeHart 1993). Since the 1990s, Asian American studies progressively rethought themselves as a field investigating the various, complex, inescapable connections between "Asian America" and "Asia". Among the reasons for this change is, it has been repeatedly noted, the transformation of the demographics of people of Asian origin in the U.S. after

the reformation of immigration laws in 1965, which resulted into an unprecedented number of first-generation immigrants and a substantial diversification in class and national provenance. In the early 1990s, the idea of "diaspora" started to circulate among scholars in Asian American studies, also thanks to the highly influential work of Lisa Lowe.[9] Her 1991 essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences" (republished in 1996 as a chapter of *Immigrant Acts*) ran counter the up-to-that-moment prevalent strategy of emphasizing Asian American panethnic "commonalities" – in the sense of the community's shared history of racialization. Again somewhat making a long story short, since then many critical works, some of them quite interesting, have projected the semantic pluralization/stretching of the umbrella term "Asian America" on a much broader canvas.[10] Among these, Eleanor Ty discusses writers of Asian ancestry in North America (both Canada and the U.S.) who openly engage the condition of "globality": "concern for the earth and our environment, health and the spread of disease across national borders, the globalization of markets, and the production of goods" (2010, xiii). Jodi Kim's (2010) is the first book-length work to discuss how Asian American literature and culture were substantially informed by the Cold War and its logics. Wen Jin (2012) compares U.S. American and P.R.C. Chinese strategies of multiculturalism during the post-Cold War era. Chih-ming Wang (2013) points out and discusses the category of the "foreign student", and the practice of studying abroad, as key nodes in a transpacific triangulation that conjoins the U.S., mainland China, and Taiwan. From a more decidedly literary perspective, King-Kok Cheung (2016) proposes and idea of "Chinese American literature without borders", reading texts from a continuum that comprises Chinese American culture and Chinese culture with a specific attention to form, genre, and gender. These are only a few examples of a tendency that speaks to the rise of a "global" consciousness in literary and cultural studies more in general.

9 The concept of diaspora has, of course, a long history, implications, and nuances well beyond the purview of Asian American studies. As is well known, the term historically refers to the scattering of the Jewish people and initially acquired currency and authority in Jewish identity discourses. It subsequently spread to African and African American studies, to refer to the global dissemination of Black people, especially after the rise of the Atlantic slave trade.
10 In this respect, Chuh and Shimakawa 2001 is a collection that can be regarded as a link between past and future. This work includes reprints of previously published essays by pioneering scholars as well as new essays.

The progressive transnationalization of Asian American studies, which has now clearly embraced "global" as a catchy keyword, has not been univocal nor devoid of its own problems. Nevertheless, despite compelling articulations of very legitimate perplexities (to which I shall presently return), what I especially welcome in the more recent and now declaredly "globalized" phase of Asian American studies is how, at its best, it dialectically plays out (so-called) "local" and "global" perspectives. This implies, for instance, reading the history of Asian migration to the U.S. and related racialization on the backdrop of a much broader spatial and temporal canvas. For scholars of literature and culture interested in world perspectives, "Asian America" offers a unique opportunity when it is regarded as a field of tensions and a space of encounter between the U.S., with its history of immigration and racialization of immigrants, and the various Asian nations and regions, each with its own cultural and political history, nations and regions that were over time touched by U.S. foreign policies – such as missionary education in China, colonialism in the Philippines, and wars in the Pacific. To me, this is an opportunity to frame, *at different scopes of spatial expansion and different levels of historical profundity*, the cultural and transcultural premises, as well as consequences and legacies, of (to paraphrase Lowe 2015) the "intimacies" of these continents.

This "global" phase has also included "flipping" the perspective and considering, for instance, what happens when a "sub-component" of Asian American literature – like Chinese American literature, or Vietnamese American literature – is read within the frame of the "Asian" literary tradition, i.e. as literature(s) of diaspora or migration *from the Asian perspective*. This can be done in terms of textual coalition-building (Duke 1989, Feng 2011); of institutional/geopolitical positioning (Shan 2000, Wong 2004 and 2010, Wang 2007); of reasoning, from a comparative literature perspective, on how to overcome ingrained forms of Euro(American)centrism as well as older/newer forms of "Asiacentrism" (Shih 2010, Shih 2013, Fusco 2016); and it can intercept the increasing attention for the ways in which capital globally applies its logics of differentiation (Lowe 1996, 2015). Overall, the Asian American space of encounter is, I believe, ripe for exercises in comparison that take into account how cultural identities, and textual coalitions – or, as some will prefer, literary traditions – can be "scaled", enlarged or contracted, be isolated or coalesce, according to the uses to which they are put.

It is here that the intersection with the issue of postcoloniality may be highlighted. The concept of "internal colonialism", which had been circulating in ethnic studies since their foundation, was long used to highlight the racist nature of U.S. political, legal, and cultural institutions (Omi and Takagi 1995, xii). "Postcolonialism", instead, as critical and theoretical horizon, became of interest for ethnic studies overall, Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt maintain, as a consequence of the debate around the so-called "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s (Singh and Schmidt 2000). Singh and Schmidt forge/retrace a fruitful connection between U.S. ethnic studies and postcolonial studies – the latter, by definition, implying a transnational thrust that the former did not, in the prevalent perception, necessarily have yet. Singh and Schmidt cleverly use the idea of "borders", and the cultural capital of border studies, to highlight not separation, but contact. Stressing the potential of the idea of border beyond its frequent identification with the U.S./Mexico border, Singh and Schmidt claim that there exists a tendency in ethnic studies that may be called "borders school":

> [T]hese analyses of borders do not focus solely on the vexed history of the U.S./Mexican border. They aim to *link* analyses of both external and internal borders and to place these accounts in a historical context. [...]
> U.S. border studies and postcolonial scholarship are best engaged together. We believe that this is already happening but predict even richer examples of cross-fertilization in the coming decades. U.S. ethnic studies, in our view, has sometimes been unfairly contrasted with the various fields of postmodern, postcolonial, and British cultural studies [...]. We will argue instead that many of the concepts associated with postcolonial studies that have proven so influential – such as double consciousness; mobility; hybridity and revision; a "third space" that is neither assimilation nor otherness; histories of coalition-building and transnational diasporic connections – have a rich genealogy in U.S. ethnic studies as well [...]. [...] U.S. ethnic studies need not perceive the new influence of postcolonial studies as a threat but as an opportunity for doing even more ambitious comparative and transnational work. [...]
> [W]e argue that "borders" is the best term available to *link the study of cultural differences internal to nation-states like the U.S. to the study of transnational or diasporic connections in the context of globalization*. In contrast to postethnicity scholars, the borders school asks whether class and color hierarchies will simply proliferate in new guises [...].
> Borders. To connect and to divide. (Singh and Schmidt 2000, 6, 4, 7, second emphasis added)[11]

11 Moreover, this perspective wishes to take into account specific situations: for instance, the de facto postcoloniality of Filipino American Literature due to the Philippines' history

Interestingly, in the past couple of decades, and not merely in its relation to ethnic studies, the category of postcoloniality seems to have been increasingly drawn under the umbrella of "globality". While Singh and Schmidt's proposal per se had a limited echo in the subsequent scholarship, their discussion of "borders" effectively highlights, in my view, the possibility of a dialectic between local and global dimensions that accounts for both their mutual framings and their disconnections, sometimes obscured by enthusiastic calls for "globality".

Among Asian Americanists, Sau-ling Wong has probably been the most rigorous and compelling in pointing out the stakes and risks of Asian American studies "going transnational" – or, as she wrote, becoming "denationalized". In a much-quoted 1995 essay – reprinted in Singh and Schmidt's 2000 edited collection – Wong cautions against losing sight of the political and territorial U.S. foundation of Asian America in favor of an unlimited opening of its spaces (beyond the contingent situation of Asians in the U.S.) and its *human referents*:

> I would like to insist on "claiming America", which was the focus of Asian American cultural politics for fifteen or twenty years after the Third World Student Strikes and is now being contested by denationalization. By "claiming America", I refer to establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States national cultural legacy and contemporary cultural production. [...] [I]f claiming America becomes a minor task for Asian American cultural criticism and espousal of denationalization becomes wholesale, certain segments of the Asian American population may be left without a viable discursive space. (Wong 1995, 16)

In marking a border, Wong's lucid perspective, articulated and modulated across several essays, ends up illuminating a truly global dimension, with all its inherent conflicts.[12] A Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, Wong has been a crucial force in the consolidation of Asian American literary studies. Her later critical work is consistent with the project she articulates in *Reading Asian American Literature* (1993). In the introduction to this volume, she famously writes: "Just as the Asian American ethnic group is a political coalition, Asian American literature may be thought of as

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of U.S. colonization; or the inadequacy of the "post-" prefix for the study of de facto (internally) colonized Native Americans.

12 See Wong 1995, 2004, 2010. Wong has crucially asked what happens when Chinese American literature is read as a culturally deterritorialized expression of Chineseness.

an emergent and evolving textual coalition, whose interests it is the business of a professional coalition of Asian American critics to promote" (Wong 1993, 9). Discussing Wong's 1993 study and how it provides, in his view, the outline of a relationship between theory and referentiality, Christopher Lee writes: "While *Reading Asian American Literature* is deeply engaged with social history, its theoretical project is primarily self-referential insofar as it is concerned with Asian American [sic] as a self-conscious formation that organizes the histories and experiences of disparate ethnic groups and subjects into a coherent narrative" (2010, 26). The Asian American textual coalition is presented as a textual corpus under construction. The construction of such corpus entailed (and still entails) the practical, inescapable matter of choosing *what to (re)publish, what to read, what to study*.

At the same time, in Wong's critical discourse, the "referents" of Asian American cultural criticism oscillate between *people* – i.e. real-life Asians in the U.S., immersed in their material conditions of existence – and *texts* – i.e. the texts belonging to *Asian American literature*, the "textual coalition" that emerged from obscurity and whose literary value and scholarly interest Asian Americanists were (and still are) interested in promoting. Wong's work is, in this sense, emblematic of the – productive, *not* disabling – tensions between institutionalization and activism, academia and the world, literature and other disciplines, localization and globalization.

4. *Guilty Theory versus Praxis: Integration as Horizon (and Unfinished Attempt)*

It is impossible to subsume the implications of "theory" in the space of this article. In the broader debate, "theory" means too many things. It can refer to "poststructuralist theory", harking back to its "French" origins; it can refer to a "non-Western" tradition of theory, sometimes overlooking the fact that "poststructuralist theory" itself, in its transition to the Anglophone world, was actively mediated and transformed by "non-Western" intellectuals (Edward Said and Gayatri C. Spivak being only the most famous among them).[13] In this last paragraph, however, I wish to emphasize "theory" as dialectical pole to praxis. The

13 For fundamental reflections on the role of "diasporic" intellectuals in the West, see Chow 1993.

genealogy and history of ethnic studies, Asian American studies included, are evidence of how *theory, in its relation to praxis*, has always been a crucial matter.[14]

Hu-DeHart raises the issue of theory with in mind the priority of defending and buttressing the activism of ethnic studies: what she calls, quoting E. San Juan, Jr, the "'activist impulse' that propelled the creation of ethnic studies in the first place. [San Juan Jr] and other scholars characterize this challenge as the integration of theory (or critique) and praxis" (1993, 54). Writing about ethnic studies, Hu-DeHart refers to "theory" as the intellectual reflection that is necessary for a field of study to be recognized as rigorous and gain academic reputation. Two years later, the debate around "theory" in Asian American studies reached a peak of visibility thanks to the publication of a double issue of *Amerasia Journal*, titled *Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies*. "[T]he field has continually been engaged with 'thinking theory'. That said, is anything distinctive about the current period?" (Omi and Takagi 1995, xiii), the editors asked. They emphasized a current, distinctive "split" between scholars who remarked the socially constructed nature of Asian America and those who, under the influence of so-called "postmodernist", or "poststructuralist" theory, emphasized, in contrast, the *discursively constructed* nature of Asian America. "Postmodernist theory has contributed to a critical interrogation of 'master narratives', problematized issues of authority and 'voice', and reframed the nature and meaning of radical political intervention. […] At stake […] is the very definition of Asian American studies as an oppositional political project" (Omi and Takagi 1995, xi, xv).

In a 1997 essay, which deploys "theory" in a different direction, Donald Goellnicht highlights a reproachable tendency to regard "ethnic" texts not as creative, intellectually compelling elaborations, but instead as unmediat-

14 Black Marxist scholar Adolph Reed makes a similar suggestion about the practical necessity of theory in reconstructing, in a 1984 short article, his coming to politics during the 1960s, and eventually to broader and broadening theoretical vistas: "I feared I had no recourse without sacrificing a radical theoretical commitment. Korsch['s *Marxism and Philosophy*] opened an entirely new vista, the 'hidden dimension' of Western Marxism, and led to Lukács, a serious reading of Marcuse and eventually the critical theoretical tradition. Then, as the Ford Foundation broke up our community organizing efforts and the movement dried up around me, I went off, like so many others in similar condition, to the university to try to make sense of what had happened and what to do next. Like most of the others, I've been lurking around there pretty much ever since" (Reed 1984, 257-258).

ed reflections of biographic experience and hence passive materials on which to exercise a "theory" that is, accordingly, seen as extrinsic and "imperialist". Goellnicht asks (quoting, among others, Rey Chow's influential argument in *Woman and Chinese Modernity*): "How does one employ theory positively, to 'elucidat[e] the significances of ethnicity' rather than 'pathologically, as symptomatic of the mutual implications between modernity and imperialism?' (Chow 1991, xvi). One way, I believe, is to read Asian American texts as theoretically informed and informing rather than as transparently referential human documents over which we place a sophisticated grid of Euro-American theory in order to extract meaning" (Goellnicht 1997, 340). To ground his proposal of reading selected texts of Asian American literature *as theory*, and to redefine theory as a hybrid genre with a strongly creative and autobiographical component, Goellnicht reconnects with French feminist criticism and especially proposes to recuperate the work of African American theorists such as Barbara Christian and Henry Louis Gates Jr (1997, 342).[15]

Goellnicht's observation about the ingrained habit of reading "ethnic" texts as ethnography, and only secondarily (if at all) as artistic/intellectual creations, is one of the issues raised in *The Ethnic Canon* (1995), an essay collection edited by comparative literature and Asian American studies scholar David Palumbo-Liu. The stakes, as Palumbo-Liu's Introduction suggests, revolve around "typical" 1990s theoretical problems, yet problems which, I believe, (still) have implications for us today. On the one hand, this work – rightly, in my view, then as now – takes issue with the "reflectionist" view of "ethnic" literature, pointing it out as biased and reductionist. It does not stop here, however: rather, it takes very seriously both the (back then quite recent) steep rise in

15 This points towards another very complex debate, the one around what may tentatively be defined as a different, non-Eurocentric, non-white tradition of thought, clearly the work of nonwestern intellectuals *within the West*, bordering literary theory, philosophy, and creative writing. The possibility of such an "alternative" may include African American theorists/creative writers such as Christian, Gates, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison; figures usually associated with postcolonial studies, such as, besides Said and Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Rey Chow, Trinh T. Minh-ha; and Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2002) and her *piensamento fronterizo* – a phrase later made famous by Walter D. Mignolo – whose heritage is still discussed today. In a recent (April 2023) lecture at the University of Naples "L'Orientale", José David Saldivar discussed *autohistoria-teoría*, the style theorized and practiced by Anzaldúa, as "a new genre in planetary literature".

the interest for "ethnic literature" and the contemporary rise of multiculturalism in academia, and downplays neither. Palumbo-Liu astutely points out the socio-pedagogical function of this process of "mainstreaming": "Within the specific domain of current uses of multiculturalism within the academy, the reading of ethnic literature may be taken as an occasion for the negotiation of difference, the fusion of horizons, and the 'recovery' of equilibrium that creates social subjectivities now 'educated' as to the proper negotiations of race, ethnicity, gender, and class" (1995, 11). Against this conciliatory backdrop, Palumbo-Liu proposes an alternative:

> A *critical multiculturalism* would focus on the way multiple social positions are generated, stabilized, and displaced, and on how culture must be read as a *complex* sign [...].
> Critical multiculturalists might see their work as taking place within specific institutional locations and as serving various institutional needs that exceed the "humanities" and the "cloister" of the academy. *The Ethnic Canon* is an attempt to resist the gravitational pull toward "mainstreaming" at the price of complex material historical difference and the particular understandings of ethnicity that are erased in the rush to "incorporate" multicultural literatures. (Palumbo-Liu 1995, 18, first emphasis added)

This strategy is, of course, grounded in a critical wager: the possibility to think about "culture" in a historically materialist fashion, and also to regard (as the title of the collection goes) *interventions* in the cultural realm not so much as inherently, but instead as *potentially* political.[16] This strategy also claims a horizon

16 Another edited collection which lays claims on politicizing culture, and very much a product of the interesting tensions at the time of its publication, is *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (1997). The editors, Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, take issue with what they consider Marxism's Eurocentric and (somewhat paradoxically) ultimately nation-based historicism. As an alternative, they propose "to highlight the insufficiency of concepts of political agency that are defined within the modern Western nation-state in terms of specific practices governed by the separation of the spheres of politics, culture, and the economic. [...] While Marxism arises as the critique of capitalist exploitation, it has not critiqued the theory of historical development that underlies liberal philosophies" (1997, 3). Lowe and Lloyd's stance here falls into the broader purview of what has been called "post-Marxism". The debate concerning the relationship between Marxism, theories of race and ethnicity including theories of whiteness, and postcolonialism is huge and I cannot really evoke it here. See Lye and Nealon 2022 for a recent collection that, despite its title, advocates an "after post-Marxism" approach and a closer reassessment of Marxist theory. For an overview of how Marxist theory has directly or indirectly informed Asian American literary studies,

beyond – actually, critical of – identity and representativity. In this sense, it goes well with a line in Asian American studies that comprises, for instance, Lowe (1996), Chuh (2003), and Sohn (2014). Especially Chuh has contributed to loosen Asian American studies from the (putatively) original referents of their own theory. Sparking a good amount of controversy, Chuh famously proposed that Asian Americanist critique become a "subjectless discourse", neither serving the interests of an ethnic community nor being bound by a definite textual selection.

Mark Chiang has suggested that Chuh's *Imagine Otherwise* epitomizes "the particular theoretical device that I call *nonrepresentative representation*" (2009, 11, emphasis in the original). This device "hypostatizes contradiction, as exemplified in theoretical constructions of subjectlessness, difference, catachresis, or what is arguably the ur-trope of these formulations, strategic essentialism" (Chiang 2009, 12). Chiang outlines a constitutive tension, in the Asian American field, between an original "communitarian" vision – with intellectuals being first and foremost responsible to the Asian American people and pledged to promote their welfare in opposition to a situation of systemic racism – and a later vision that, instead, revolves around the academy. The earlier "principle of 'community autonomy' [...] [clashes with] the principle of the research university, which is *faculty* autonomy" (2009, 9, emphasis in the original). For Chiang, during the 1980s and 1990s the political capital of Asian America was progressively reconverted into academic capital. Applying a Bourdieusian model, he argues that "the Asian American political field and the Academic field of Asian American studies [...] are united by a circuit of capital and that Asian American literature is one node of exchange between them" (2009, 16-17). In this respect, the rise to prominence, within Asian America, of cultural and especially literary studies is probably not coincidental.[17] In Chiang's

see Chiang 2020. Chiang mentions the work of Grace Hong, Lisa Lowe, David Roediger, and Alexander Sexton, and he points out a contradiction between two models of reading the entwinement of racism and capitalist oppression: one that maintains that it is capital itself that racially differentiates the labor force, thus undercutting class solidarity through the spread of racism; and another one, mainly ascribable to Roediger, which, suggesting that "whiteness came to be defined primarily in relation to an ideal of 'free white labor'", suggests that "racism cannot be disentangled so easily from the history of working-class resistance to capitalist domination" (2020).

17 The past two decades have also seen a rise of interest in other art forms and media, from the visual arts to comics to pop culture and video games (see J. Lee 2020).

argument, intellectual autonomy, including the autonomy to theorize, only apparently clashes with praxis: both are re-comprised in another, more fundamental structural polarity, between autonomy and (nonrepresentative) representation *in the university*. For Chiang, this polarity generates the specific cultural capital of Asian American studies at the present moment.

A skepticism of representativity in any narrowly identitarian sense informs Bruce Robbins' *Criticism and Politics* (2022). Robbins notes a recent resurgence of accusations that criticism may be "too political", and of a tendency to overlap "politicized" criticism with faultfinding and crude prescriptions – the latter being, of course, a stance incompatible with an attitude authentically attuned to the complexity of culture. Countering these resurging accusations and tendencies, which he finds highly compatible with Right-wing agendas, Robbins defends a critical practice that transposes, for the present, inheritances that include the diverse 1960s movements, Gramsci, and Said. Maintaining that "[t]he formula is *not* solidarity with the suffering of one's own" (2022, 140, emphasis added), Robbins aims at "taking the revised, post-60s notion of the organic intellectual *away from an exclusive or primary identification with identity* and placing it on firmer ground" (2022, 137, emphasis added). With a rallying cry that does not shy away from its own contradictory, conflictual nature, he writes:

> It is more than a story of diversity denied and then recognized. To found a field on diversity as such (now the empty slogan of the corporations) is not to give it a firm foundation. [...] The story must be told, from the opposite end, as the university's embrace and application of a principle that the humanities need not disavow: democracy's own imperative to recognize and understand the experience of collective suffering and injustice, an undertaking in which the university has a special role to play. (Robbins 2022, 151)

Here Robbins, it seems to me, is indirectly offering a way out of the guilt that recurrently grips ethnic studies scholars – Asian American studies scholars included – and perhaps not only them, when they believe that they have abandoned their referents, their communities (or, as Robbins writes, their *constituencies*), their praxis, and the real world for the smugger life of the academia. Maybe it is more of a matter, so to speak, to correctly visualize, and be ready to unravel, beyond guilt, the tendrils that inevitably connect these spheres.

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