

SPECIAL FORUM

Redefining the American in Asian American Studies: Transnationalism, Diaspora, and Representation

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In her seminal work *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993), Sau-ling Wong established the intertextuality of Asian American literature by focusing on “four motifs—food and eating; the Doppelgänger figure; mobility; and play”—illustrating that these motifs transcend “ethnic subgroup, gender, class, generational, and historical boundaries.”¹ In doing so, Wong conveyed the primacy of Asian patterns in Asian American literature, as well as the rich interactions that occur within Asian subcultures, and with American culture at large. As Elaine Kim, author of *Asian American Literature* (1982) has noted, Wong’s analysis of Asian American literature in this work is not only “informed by her intimate knowledge of Asian American culture, minority discourses, feminist thought, and contemporary literary theory . . . [but is also full of] insightful interpretations and careful [sociopolitical] contextualizations.”²

Wong’s crucial vantage point as a woman of both Asian and American heritage has, over the years, rendered her an important figure in critiques of bilingualism and biculturalism (in both print and media sources), and in discourses involving transnationalism, globalization, citizenship, mobility and diasporic identities. She has called for a “denationalization” of Asian and Asian American subjects in order to expose deeper layers of analysis, and has challenged the so-called “benefits” of limiting Asian American Studies to the borders of the United States. She has also proposed a transnational investigation of the Asian diaspora that takes ethnicity as a common factor, while simultaneously prioritizing class—a category of

analysis that, as Wong notes, is often elided in discussions of transnationality. Wong's works have illustrated the irrelevancy of borders in constructing identities and cultures, thus reinforcing the "transnational turn" in Asian American Studies. She has warned, however, against overusing concepts such as "global" or "diaspora," since they too can result in the marginalization (or sometimes the complete exclusion) of local, regional, and national ethnic organization. A more appropriate balance, she maintains, includes a cultural nationalism which considers nation-based identities (such as Asian American), as well as coalition building within/among Asian groups.

While Professor Wong is best known for her pathbreaking book, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* and her provocative essay, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," which was published in *Amerasia* in 1995, she has also been an inspirational mentor to the dozens of Asian Americanist scholars who, for the past three decades, have been fortunate enough to benefit from her wisdom, guidance, and generosity of vision. This special forum of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies (JTAS)* is thus dedicated to Sau-ling Wong as she gains Emeritus status from the University of California, Berkeley, and includes contributions from friends, colleagues, as well as former students.

Given Professor Wong's remarkable impact on the field, we were not surprised when we were inundated with dozens of submissions to this forum. Unfortunately, we were not able to include all of the intriguing manuscripts we received, and selected only those we believe make the most powerful interventions in Asian American Studies. Even though many of the articles featured in this forum are cross-disciplinary and transnational in scope (spanning China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Europe, the Caribbean, the United States, and the spaces in between), we have divided the main body of this forum into three sections for organizational purposes: Visual Media, Popular Culture, and Performance; Literary Criticism, Theory, and Translation; and Historical Contributions. All of these contributions take Wong's writings, and/or the "transnational turn" in Asian American Studies, as their point of departure. They address topics such as the ramifications of the "transnational turn" in Asian American Studies and its potential dangers; the particular place that literary criticism occupies within the reconfiguration of the field that has taken place over the past decade; the role that digital media and the Internet should play in Asian Americanist scholarship; the study of immigrant and diasporic texts not originally written in English; and the thematics of translation which condition the writing and interpretation of Asian American diasporic culture.

As with all major undertakings, this special forum is not the result of one individual's hard work and determination. Rather, it is the result of collaboration between many talented and visionary people. The editors would like to express their thanks to those who helped sculpt this project; in particular, the *JTAS* editorial board, which approached us with the idea and made this special forum a reality. We would also like to thank our respective universities for their continued support of our

academic endeavors, the anonymous peer reviewers who graciously volunteered their time to evaluate the submissions, and all the individuals whose work appears in this special forum. Hailing from different disciplines and transnational locations (including Asia, Europe, North America, and numerous global interstices), these scholars generously shared their theoretical frameworks and empirical research to produce this body of work. Last, but not least, we extend our utmost appreciation to Professor Wong for inspiring the scholarship in this forum.

Notes

¹ Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Last Accessed June 14, 2012: <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/5315.html>.

² Elaine Kim, Endorsement for *Reading Asian American Literature*. Last Accessed April 20, 2011: <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/5315.html>.