

Introduction: cross wire: Asian American literary criticism; Critical Essay, Lim, Shirley Geok-lin; Valentino, Gina; Sohn, Stephen Hong; Gamber, John Blair

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She believes that out there, somewhere, in the machine rooms of the universe, there exists a small cross wire.... Everything is connected, weirdly connected.

--Gish Jen (Mona in the Promised Land 108)

Assuming that neural cross wiring does lie at the root of synesthesia ... perhaps a mutation causes connections between brain areas that are usually segregated. Or maybe the mutation leads to defective pruning of preexisting connections between areas that are normally connected only sparsely.... So we now speak in terms of cross activation. For instance, neighboring brain regions often inhibit one another's activity, which serves to minimize cross talk. A chemical imbalance of some kind that reduces such inhibition--for example, by blocking the action of an inhibitory neurotransmitter or failing to produce an inhibitor--would also cause activity in one area to elicit activity in a neighbor. Such cross activation could, in theory, also occur between widely separated areas.

--Ramachandran and Hubbard ("Hearing Colors, Tasting Shapes" 55)

Why the trope of cross wiring for a special issue on Asian American literary productions of Studies in the Literary Imagination? Neuroscientists Vilayanur Ramachandran and Edward M. Hubbard's theory of a set of neural phenomena resulting in "cross activation," a reduction of inhibitions leading to connections that are usually segregated, is provocative in its analogous relation to the cross-cultural activations that are currently enlivening what is usually marked as Asian American textual production. As a number of critics have noted, Asian American literary studies may be in a moment of crisis because of the very values of multiplicity and heterogeneity that had placed ethnic-identity literatures in sight in the United States. Asian American imagination, unlike that in African American writing, has no single unifying grand narrative to organize the vast materials on which Asian American writers call. It possesses no single linguistic Other, as in Latina/o writing, on which to hinge a counter-tradition of stylistics. Instead, what Asian American works of imagination manifest in full is a plethora of seemingly separate threads--threads leading back to distinctively different national origins, first languages

indecipherable to other Asian Americans, and cultural signs and codes of signification unintelligible to those identified as the same in census reports and academic discourses.

While the novels, plays, poems, and memoirs that compose Asian American literature do not always mark these cultural cognitive dissonances self-reflexively, it is also accurate to note that Asian American literary critics often ignore those textual sites in which such dissonances are acutely recorded. Examples might include the role of Chinese gambling houses for the Filipino American characters in Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1943) or the troubling silence of the Japanese American narrator in Hisaye Yamamoto's short story "Wilshire Bus" (1950), who says nothing while the Chinese American couple on their way to the Veterans Hospital are verbally abused by a white man drunk on spirits and triumphal anti-Asian racism. These evident imagined moments of "Asian American" crossings may be represented as failed, sordid, and painful. However, as Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1997) notes, there are other ways to represent these cross wires, not only in-between the ethnicities that are conflated as Asian American but also those that activate relations between and among other communities of identity--Jewish, Anglo-Saxon, Black and Latina/o.

"Cross wiring" suggests the dense and dynamic complexity of an evolving body of texts that, as much as it is insistently categorized as Asian American, is simultaneously interrogated and catalogued as Other: Filipino, Vietnamese, South Asian, Hmong, Korean, Southeast Asian, and so forth. When the first Asian American literature anthologies appeared in the 1970s, the editors had no compunctions about dividing the map of the field into Chinese and Japanese American writing, with Filipino American as a hardly visible minority, occupied by two authors, Carlos Bulosan and Jose Garcia Villa. Today, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, no editor of an Asian American anthology could possibly omit Korean American writing, with its rich range of talents like Theresa Hak Kyung Cba, Chang-me Lee, Myung Mi Kim, and more recent authors such as Suki Kim and Susan Choi. Among South Asian American authors, Bharati Mukherjee is now accompanied by writers such as Meena Alexander, Chitra Banerjee Divyakuni, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Agha Shahid Ali; and Filipino American writing, besides the novels of Jessica Hagedorn and Han Ong, displays an energetic diversity of its own in anthologies such as *Brown River, White Ocean: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Philippine Literature in English* (1993), *Returning a Borrowed Tongue: Poems by Filipino and Filipino-American Writers* (1995), and *Flippin': Filipinos on America* (1996). The publication of Southeast Asian American anthologies like *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (2002) and *Tilting the Continent: Southeast Asian American Writing* (2000), and a number of South Asian American collections, such as *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993), *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers* (1995), and *Bolo! Bolo!: A Collection of Writing by Second Generation South Asians Living in North America* (2000), testifies to the desire to make visible those particular threads in the formation of an Asian American canon that for much of the twentieth century was in danger of

being reduced to a Chinese+Japanese anthological construction of the Asian American imagination.

Some anthologies enact other kinds of cross writing that this special issue is proposing--for example, the transnationality that has become more and more commonplace as globalization expands to encompass once territorially separated discourses into a hubbub of exchanges. *Babaylan: An Anthology of Filipina and Filipina American Writers* (2001) places literature by national authors of the Philippines together with writing that comes specifically out of a United States location. A special issue of *Manoa, Two Rivers* (Summer 2002), explicitly includes "New Vietnamese Writing From America and Viet Nam" and points to a strong emergence of Vietnamese American writing currently with the authors Monique Truong, Le Thi Diem Thuy, Kien Nguyen, and Alex W. Pham. What Gore Vidal had famously termed the "United States of Amnesia" is clearly not what is imagined in these cross-wiring collections, which maintain diasporic frames, bi-national perspectives, and shifting, provisional, and processual dialogics. Such cross-wired expressions were, of course, present from as early as Edith Eaton's reinvention of herself as Sui Sin Far in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912). These inherently multiple sensibilities--and Eaton's complicated, still resonant and subtly psychological exposition of her identity as a Eurasian--prefigure what is now more popularly termed "Hapa" identity.

Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose (2000) is only one such production of the texts that foreground these particular intersections. New anthologies of queer Asian American writing suggest that the intersections of sexuality and ethnic identity must be represented, celebrated, and critiqued. The publications of *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (1998) and *Take Out: Writing From Asian Pacific America* (2001) are part of a growing trend to explore these thematics of queerness and sexuality. The first call for submissions to this special issue asked broadly for essays focusing on Asian American literary productions from 1890 to 2001 and that examined textuality, stylistics, literariness, semiotics, poetics, narrativity, critical language theories, and so forth as inflected by ethnic, gender, class, national, diasporic, and/or linguistic identities. The editors (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Gina Valentino, Stephen Hong Sohn, John Blair Gamber, and Jeremy Douglass) (1) received an impressive number of abstracts and papers, chiefly from younger scholars, that showed exciting new work coming out of U.S. and international universities and that addressed both earlier and contemporary Asian American works of imagination. This special issue aims to place Asian American literary studies in a late twentieth-and early twenty-first century context, taking into account the archival and interdisciplinary work that has produced fresh texts and interpretations since the earliest anthologies appeared in the 1970s. Theoretical intersectionalities largely invisible prior to 1990 are now crucial modes of operation in considering the discursive powers of these ethnically identified texts. Our organizing trope of cross wire suggests that intersections of the imagination be contextualized in specific historical--locations viewed simultaneously as local and global, national and transnational. Such intersections generate vibrant complex activations of forms,

stylistics, temporality, thematic representations, and even radical undecidabilities of language and identity. As well, Asian American texts are open to fresh productions and include, besides literary works, visual representations, documentaries, videos, films, and performances. The conventional focus on prose narratives has been enlarged to include concerns with the strategic tactics of postmodernist and experimentalist works.

Clearly, there is a need to examine transformations in the aesthetics and reception of Asian American cultural productions. After all, much has changed about the terrain of this field of study, not simply in the numbers of successful authors and types of texts that win recognition but also in the historical horizon of their reception. For one thing, Asian American writing is increasingly viewed as both U.S. bounded and situated in global, transnational, and diasporic matrices. In an increasingly globalized world, students of Asian American texts must be conscious of other borders that shape ethnicity and cultural identities. In addition, while these writers are publishing in the United States, many of them are first-generation immigrant rather than American-born authors (e.g. Li-Young Lee, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chay Yew, and others), and their works require postcolonial and postmodern conceptualizations as well as the normalizing, historicizing embedding of texts in U.S. political and social science contexts.

We have organized this special issue through the structure of paired essays. Our introduction and Stephen Hong Sohn and John Blair Gamber's essay introduce some of the major theoretical debates that traverse this issue and the field of Asian American literary criticism as a whole. We then move to essays that examine some canonical and/or foundational texts: the prose narratives of Maxine Hong Kingston, Winnifred Eaton, Carlos Bulosan, and Hisaye Yamamoto. Subsequent essays treat novelistic innovations in the works of critically significant younger Asian American authors such as Chang-rae Lee and Lan Cao. The issue also examines emergent poetic talents, ranging from a reading of Li-Young Lee's poetry within a Euro-American literary tradition to one that focuses on the Korean linguistic context of Myung Mi Kim's poems. The issue concludes with paired essays that destabilize conventional notions of Asian American literary studies in their explorations of the work of Chiang Yee, a diasporic Chinese artist, and that of Chay Yew, a dramatist who sets his play in London. These essays expand the arena of Asian American literary criticism, moving it into studies of the visual, to include arguably "Asian American" figurative diasporic and "homeless" figures.

The essay by Sohn and Gamber maps the trajectory and reconfigurations in the field of Asian American literary criticism. Sohn and Gamber work to provide a comprehensive review of Asian American literary studies as it evolved in the 1990s. "Currents of Study" proposes three temporal phases to understand critical strategies that remain dominant forces in the reception of Asian American literature. While earlier modes aimed to define Asian American identity through literature, critical discourse soon expanded to examine the politicized histories of exclusion and racism that these narratives critiqued. In the current phase of study, at least five particular thematic areas have strongly emerged.

They include, but are not limited to, critiques on Asian American identity; the effects of the dynamics of transnationalism, globalization, and nationalism on Asian American works; gender and sexuality studies; the analyses of genre and form; and meta-critical texts. The authors discuss the gaps still extant in the field, and they cite a paucity of critical work on South Asian American, Southeast Asian American, and Asian Pacific Islander literature, as well as on queer literary studies, genre-specific studies, and aesthetic investigations.

In her essay "The Poetics of Liminality and Misidentification: Winnifred Eaton's *Me* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," Katherine Hyunmi Lee addresses identity politics as it relates to marginalized female autobiographies. Lee examines how Eaton's text anticipates narrative strategies later used in *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and traces a lineage between Eaton's and Kingston's works. Lee re-evaluates Kingston's memoir in light of *Me* (1915) while inscribing Eaton's text within a broader American canon. Using both genre criticism and feminist autobiographical scholarship, Lee unpacks the different, often fragmented, formal techniques that Asian American women autobiographers deploy to represent their lives. Incorporating the reading strategies that characterize Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) and Sheri Benstock's "Authorizing the Autobiographical," Lee argues that Chinese American women's autobiographies challenge and subvert masculinist preconceptions of the genre. In arguing for the inadequacy of both Western and Asian narratives to resolve the problem inherent in Asian American women's liminal identity, Lee's study is part of a larger move to explore complexities of feminism in Asian American writing.

In "Re-signed Subjects: Women, Work, and World in the Fiction of Carlos Bulosan and Hisaye Yamamoto," Cheryl Higashida explores marginal women figures in Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1946) and Yamamoto's short story "Yoneko's Earthquake" (1951). Higashida is particularly interested in the representation of seemingly silent women whose peripheral positions figure histories of oppression under patriarchal domination. The essay argues for an alternative understanding of agricultural and domestic labor in which women, even while apparently overshadowed by the homosocial bonding of working-class Asian American, Mexican, Mexican-American, and Caucasian men, are seen to have an integral role. Higashida situates Bulosan's and Yamamoto's narratives firmly in a history of Popular Front politics and a political framework of resistance. She deploys Roland Barthes's notion of readerly and writerly texts to contextualize Bulosan's social realism and Yamamoto's heretofore overlooked experimentalism. Working within the framework of King-Kok Cheung's *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993) and Gary Okihiro's *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (1994), Higashida's work is also concurrent with the newest wave of gender studies in Asian American studies, which includes works by Phillipa Kafka, Rachel Lee, Wendy Ho, Patricia Chu, Leslie Bow, Patti Duncan, Helena Grice, and Laura Hyun Yi Kang.

In his essay, "'Just another ethnic pol': Literary Citizenship in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," Liam Corley explores the ramifications of language to examine how the Asian American native speaker of English can still be marked as foreign. The primacy of the visual overshadows the Asian American subject's ability to stake his or her claim on English as a native language and on America as a home nation. As a contested site, language must be disconnected from identification with specific ethnicities and be recognized for its different modalities for those individuals who claim specific languages as native. Corley moves his analysis paratextually, illuminating Chang-rae Lee's positionality as an author who inscribes Asian American experience into the very fabric of nationhood. The novel, according to Corley, claims nationhood on an acknowledgment of the heterogeneity of U.S. citizens. His extensive analyses of Lee's publication history and the novel's market positioning alludes to Patricia Chu's argument in *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (2000). While Chu emphasizes the different narrative strategies that Asian American authors deploy to counteract stereotypical gender presentations, Corley's essay asserts that Lee's publisher's marketing the novel as an Asian American work elided the different nuances and essentialist categorizations of identity that the textual narrative simultaneously supports and subverts.

In "Bridging the Gaps: Inescapable History in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*," Claire Stocks examines the causal relationship between the violent destruction of an ancestral land and a mother's refusal to tell her daughter of this past. The Vietnamese mother's attempt to repress the memory of war demonstrates the deleterious effects that silence can render within bodies and across generations. Stocks undertakes a psychoanalytic reading of Cao's 1997 novel through the theories of mourning provided in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994). In analyzing the different modes of accommodation that mother and daughter take toward the past, Stocks argues that the daughter attempts to bridge the differences between Vietnamese and United States cultural codes through assimilationist development, while the mother is tied inexorably to her past.

Jeffrey F. L. Partridge's "The Politics of Ethnic Authorship: Li-Young Lee, Emerson, and Whitman at the Banquet Table" analyzes Lee's reconfiguration of the "big-eating" hero of Chinese legend in Lee's poem "The Cleaving." In an innovative move, Partridge expands Lee's achievement beyond the borders of Asian American literature to contextualize his poems in a mainstream American poetic and literary canon. Influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), Partridge challenges the division of racialized authors from mainstream United States literature in order to allow for a broader application of Lee's poetic oeuvre as well as a larger call to critique ethnic literatures in a more expansive manner. In exploring the relationship between Emerson, Whitman, and Li-Young Lee, Partridge asserts that Lee as an artist is nourished by the stylistics of Emerson's and Whitman's transcendentalism. Partridge problematizes the communion between Lee and Emerson by examining Lee's predicament as an Asian American poet who is inspired by Emerson's

philosophy yet who needs to counter through his poetry the racist politics in Emerson's writings. He also emphasizes representations of consumption that become a sanctified act between a racialized self and a racist other. Partridge's essay pairs with Katherine Hyunmi Lee's article, as both provide ways to examine Asian American literary traditions within the larger American literary canon.

For Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, Myung Mi Kim's poetry locates the problem of the Asian American literary imagination in the "physical operations of speaking." In "Speaking in Tongues: Myung Mi Kim Stylized Mouths," Jeon uses interlingual close readings of vocalization in Kim's poetry, an approach that emphasizes both the Asian and American aspects of Kim's poetic style. His readings explore connections between the mouth of the speaking subject, the mouth shapes of Hangul (the Korean written language), and the acts of imagination made possible in the process of English language acquisition and the Romanization of Hangul. Jeon discusses the poetic mode of the "language primer" to establish both parallels and sharp contrasts with representations of language acquisition in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*. While *Native Speaker* testifies to the difficulty of consonant formation for the individual, and *Dictee*'s language episodes draw attention to the cultural imperialism inherent in language education, Jeon demonstrates how Kim's stake in transliteration rather than translation focuses her interest on "how the languages themselves learn to speak each other." That is, whereas many critics cite *Dictee* as pairing the failure of translation with trauma, Jeon argues that Kim offers sound as a unifying or bridging agent. Jeon reads Kim's theme as politically charged and focuses on her poetic interventions in debates over Hangul Romanization, framing these debates neatly in terms of current globalization pressures arising before the 1998 Olympic Games in Seoul and the 2002 soccer World Cup.

Heath A. Diehrs article, "Beyond The Silk Road: Staging a Queer Asian America in Chay Yews Porcelain," investigates the difficulty of pairing queerness with Asian identity through the action of drama. Chay Yew's play, in Diehl's formulation, becomes a larger allegory for the ways in which Asian American literary criticism has been relatively slow to address the complications of queerness and to incorporate queer theory into examinations of literature.

As the queer subject in *Porcelain* cannot openly acknowledge his sexual desires in the space of the home and in front of the family, how can the queer Asian American subject find a stable sense of identity capable of unifying both sexual desire and ethnic heritage? Diehl's inquiries suggest that queer Asians and Asian Americans must remain in the space of a psychic and even, at times, literal exile until their sexuality can be recognized and included as a legitimate feature of Asian and Asian American identity. Diehl's critical strategy is part of a larger movement in Asian American cultural studies and literary criticism to examine queer sexualities, a movement that includes the work of David L. Eng, DanaTakagi, Richard Fung, and Russell Leong. Diehl's assertion that queerness conflicts with and practically precludes connection with Asian American identity and family structures troubles David Eng's desire to radicalize Asian American studies

by aligning it firmly within queerness. Eng writes in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001) that "queerness comes to describe, affect, and encompass a much larger Asian American constituency--whatever their sexual identities or practices--whose historically disavowed status as U.S. citizen-subject under punitive immigration and exclusion laws renders them 'queer' as such" (217). However, as Diehl argues, Yew's play does not offer a means to construct an Asian American queer identity. Instead, the play continues to problematize the need to discover methods that would integrate queerness organically into both Asian American studies and in Asian American communities. Diehl's focus on the chamber play and the drama genre continues the work of genre studies that critics such as Josephine Lee and Rocio Davis had initiated with their texts on drama and the short story cycle.

Da Zheng's article "The Traveling of Art and the Art of Traveling: Chiang Yee's Painting and Chinese Cultural Tradition" examines the art of author, poet, and painter Chiang Yee. Zheng's piece provides an extended close reading of Chiang's painting, "The Budai Monk" (which is composed of both visual images and text), to argue for its significance in understanding the genesis of modernism in Asian American cultural production. He further argues that Chiang's (2) biography is particularly relevant in regard to this piece, as the painting proves to be a form of self-representation for the artist. Zheng also illustrates that the separation of artist and art, which is so common within European and Euro-American traditions, falls outside the Chinese artistic tradition in which Chiang writes and paints. This essay works to move Asian American literature toward a greater recognition of the Asian portion of the term and to emphasize diasporic and transnational aspects of identity, an approach that aligns itself closely with Sheng-Mei Ma's literary critical text, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998). What can be forgotten and overshadowed in studies of Asian American literature, according to both Ma and Zheng, are the diasporic conditions of many writers and literatures. Zheng's study demonstrates a larger determination to push textual analysis toward visual media, a move that has been taken up by cultural critics like Elaine H. Kim, Lisa Lowe, David Palumbo-Liu, and Elena Tajima Creef.

To sum up, two central assumptions underlie this special issue: Asian American literature can no longer be viewed as merely a minor ethnic province of a domestic American canon, and decentering aesthetics closer to postmodernist values are at work in many of these texts. The works of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chay Yew, and Ha Jin, for example, compel critics to regard Asian American ethnicity as also a global identity formation. This re-reading implicitly carries over into the materialist histories in which these texts are to be considered. Hence the title and trope of "cross wire" suggests the multiplicitous, seemingly random, associative, bricoleur constructions of "Asian American" literary traditions sliding into our viewfinder.

NOTES

(1) The five contributing editors are all members of the English department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. When *Studies in the Literary Imagination* approached Professor Shirley Geok-lin Lim to serve as contributing editor for a special issue on Asian American literary criticism, she was then teaching a seminar on Asian American literature at UCSB. Gina Valentino, Stephen Hong Sohn, John Blair Gamber, and Jeremy Douglass, who were among the graduate students taking the seminar, volunteered to assist in the project. While Douglass had to curtail his participation in the second part of the project due to other demands on his time, Valentino, Sohn, and Camber have worked closely as equals with Lim through the entire process: correspondence with scholars and reviewers, evaluation, selection, and editing and shaping of the issue. We have all learned a great deal from this experience--about teamwork, collegiality, professionalism, mentoring, editorial tasks, and above all about Asian American literature and critical theory. We thank SLI for the opportunity to produce an issue devoted to this rapidly expanding, exciting field of literary inquiry.

(2) It is the custom for Asian surnames to appear first and the given name last. Asian American surnames usually follow the English manner, with the given name first and the surname last. When they do not, it will be noted in the works cited.

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