The Art of Asian America

by

Dr. Stephanie Han

Identity and Literature

Constructions of identity remain at the forefront of Asian American literature and are integral to every aspect of life in the United States of America, a nation that cherishes individual freedom. One of the most significant exercises an American undertakes is to determine and construct an identity within a personal and group context. For many, the creation of the self and the naming of this self is an ongoing task as identities are added and discarded, the individual and nation marching in both linear and circular fashion towards an unknown end.

Dream State

One means of identity experimentation occurs through the highly individualized act of reading and writing. When we read we often enter a state wherein time suspends and another world unfolds. We try on personalities, live different lives, and imagine ourselves as someone or something else.

To participate in the art of literature requires the ability to imagine and create. Reading offers a distinctively uneven relationship, as the author determines the world the reader enters and provides a map made of words that works with the reader's imagination to create a world. Literature remains a single, if not limited path to beauty, knowledge, and joy, yet it continues to resonate due to the intimate nature of the experience. Good writers deliver their readers to a dream state.

As readers, writers, critics, and storytellers, we build and enter a universe and are prompted to feel. Once we feel, we think, and then: we choose to act or not. Stories affirm our humanity and wonder. The author's vision serves as our blueprint. This immersion into another's mind is the delight and deliverance of reading.

Origins of the term *Asian American*

The term "Asian American" was born of revolution and coined by activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee in the late 1960s to name the pan-Asian

coalition political group that launched a cultural nationalist movement. Asian Americans do not claim one particular Asian country of origin, a specific immigration experience, a religion, language, culture, or any common historical narrative around which a community politically or socially organizes and/or remembers such as slavery or genocide. Present-day factionalism between groups of Asian descent in the United State can be due to the realities of modern American life and the flow of capital, as well as historic differences between countries in Asia. Cohesion of the group is often predicated on positive or negative state action or crisis rooted in discrimination. "Asian American" constantly expands or adjusts; it has always been, and continues to be, a definition in flux.

Reading Asian American Literature

To add to the elasticity and perplexing conundrum of the term "Asian American" and its literature critic Kandice Chuh's *Imagine Otherwise* (2003) states that Asian American literature should be considered theory, and offers that we might consider Asian American studies as a subjectless discourse. It's abstruse, but it boils down to this: You don't have to be of Asian descent to be called an Asian American. It's a very theoretical and intriguing idea: it posits absence and elision, versus presence.

Chuh challenges identities based on essentialist beliefs and the benefits of subjectivity (9), the benefits of being subject to the state (think of royalty and their kingdoms or yes, subjects). (i.e. *I'm a subject of a state—the United States*.

Chuh's reasons: a) Asian Americans can reap the benefits of American institutionalized racism b) multiculturalism ignores true diversity and how the state pits minorities against each other c) Asian American Studies struggles to find a place in the Academy d) Asian Americans have a distinct advantage over those who are not Asian American who are involved with Asian American Studies.

Chuh says that to solve these complicated issues, Asian American literature should be reframed as theory. She states that since Asian American literature communicates theoretical ideas, and leads to knowledge about Asian American life, the literature is not Asian American literature, but Asian American theory.

Chuh's theory does not acknowledge that while a creative writer may wish to convey theory, techniques for theory and literature dramatically differ: literature uses diction, phrasing, and a range of vocabulary that serves as sensory stimulants to engage feeling, theory rarely does.

To say literary theory is equivalent to literary art fails to respectfully differentiate the two. Theory and art both strive to convey to the reader a deep understanding of an event, idea, situation or person, but theory and art are borne of opposing frameworks and methods. Literature is an art that strives to offer an experiential deliverance, frequently likened to the sublime; it derives from a paradoxical and creative impulse that springs from a highly individualistic perception. Literary theory is a response to writing and explains why or how one reads a work of literature. They are not the same: literary theory is forever in servitude to literature, unable to exist without it.

Asian America(n) as Art

Yet, Chuh's words widen the gates of literary criticism if we adjust the lens on how we conceive of art and what it means to be a subject. Chuh declares," 'Asian American' is … a metaphor for resistance and racism … There is, indeed, an aesthetic dimension to it (Asian American)—an inquiry into such matters as beauty and truth. In this regard, 'Asian American' is literary" (27). Chuh gives herself license to enter into an equivocation of literature as theory, and to that end, I posit the following:

> **The term "Asian America(n)" in and of itself, should be considered a term of art. [1]**

The inability of a single binding narrative, immigration period, religion, ethnicity, culture or language to encompass this group, charges the group with factious, changeable, and creative qualities.

When considering all aspects within and around the field of creative expression, "Asian America" itself is a work of art.

Asian America transforms, changes, and gives rise to expressions of beauty. It is invented, an idea under which people gather and dissent. The label serves as an object of debate, criticism, and unity. It provokes reaction and propels a cognitive and sensory examination of individual belonging and purpose. When referring to the creative and material production that the group produces, "Asian American" is a term appropriate for all that surrounds creative expression.

There are multiple reasons that this application holds validity and is exclusive to art as a philosophical approach. To use such a definition for any kind of public policy would be a woeful failure to understand the tacit rules and differences of humanities from other arenas of human interaction

If we examine the evolving definition of Asian America and how it continues to be characterized by movement and flux, if we conceive of this population as forever reinventing, shifting and remaking an identity—dependent on the prevarications of political, economic, and social realities—the group becomes one that controls and shapes its narrative in response to anticipated and inevitable change. These dramatic and unpredictable shifts result in the creation of a body of people perceived by others and themselves to have certain qualities or characteristics that qualify their group formation as provocative, intelligent, material, symbolic, beautiful, transformative, or stimulating: such are qualities we attribute to *works of art.*

What advantages or disadvantages are there to negotiating subjecthood? Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *I Hotel (*2010) deftly portrays Asian American politics and creativity from the 1960s-70s. Part historical truth, and wholly fiction, *I Hotel* urges readers to deeply analyze subjecthood's complications. Yamashita writes into a past knowing that the relegation to, and separation of, an invented Asian American present from its past would disrupt, destroy, and disconnect the present, and in so doing, wreak havoc on an unrealized future.

Chuh's treatise is a philosophical exercise that neglects the real material needs of the disenfranchised.

I cannot say: "Being an Asian American is an illusion" as I exist as a physical being!

We can eschew an interpretation of a definition, but it's more effective to shift the definition. Chuh's call for the elimination of subjecthood is a denial of its importance within the United States.

While my definition of "Asian American" as a signifier of art, art forms, artmaking, and the discourse of artistic endeavor seems to bolster Chuh's thesis of Asian American studies as a subjectless discourse, there remain significant differences: *I advocate Asian America(n) as a physical presence;* Chuh posits it as absence/subjectlessness.

For the purposes of literary criticism, to frame Asian America(n) as a created idea, an imagined concept or art that acknowledges its dramatic, political, colorful, and performative qualities, gives it flexibility that includes an understanding of "global modernity" (Arif Dirlik calls this condition one that questions difference and homogeneity inferred by "globalization").

An imagined community, Asian America has historically drawn from a host of influences beyond the United States. Despite its testament to community,

Asian America remains a highly personalized space and place, bound in the tenet of the American Dream, an idea that governs how individuals imagine themselves participating in a real or imagined national consensus, and acknowledges the private will to completion and revolution.

"Asian American" signifies a construct of art that specifies the locus of Asian America. This anchoring allows for an expansion of the term that builds on historical precedent rooted in the impulse that surrounded the origins. It becomes a personal conception, art as a foundational imperative, a tightly woven idea that carries illusory qualities, knit into the fabric of the individual's idea of nation. This definition releases Asian bodies from a rigid subscription to orthodoxy and permits a myriad of creative incarnations of this term; the idea and term avoid catachresis.

Is identity making an art? Japanese American poet Janice Mirikitani concedes:

> My writing was not me until I learned … that I didn't have to express myself according to the standards of the "dominant" culture, because there was no "dominant" culture. There were just whites trying to suppress or kill whatever contradicted them, including the culture of nonwhites. I had no place in American life until the "ethnic identity" movement. I was just a shadow, an imitation with no soul of my own. (qtd. in Kim, XX)

Literature probes how we become human, noting the insurmountable and terrifying gulf that exists between our external and internal selves. It demands an examination of our world through the nuance of character, the joyful plot, the exuberance of language.

By reframing "Asian American" as a terminology of art, can we recast the literature and consequently our lives? How does Asian American literature, an art (literature) that is founded upon a construct of art (Asian America), stand in a global context?

Asian American: A Global Aesthetic

Asian American literary criticism is wrought with the complications of the term "Asian American" and how it is expected to encompass, embody, represent, and give meaning to a group of disparate and diverse people within the United States. There are two prongs to this issue: firstly, the complications of structural frameworks that posit Asians as perpetual foreigners to the United States. Secondly, the debates surrounding the purpose and merit of creative expression that emanates from Asian Americans.

I posit that recasting "Asian America(n)" as an art form *opens* the discussion of the literature's aesthetic qualities. This is due to the ever-changing definition of the group and the imaginative qualities deployed to accommodate such changes; the ways the collective appears publicly and prompts discussion within the realms of creativity and performance; the intrinsic beauty and rebellion that constitute the idea of this formation; and finally the sensory-inspired possibilities that arise and are evoked as a result of this group's existence and their creative material production. This conceptual framework is a tool for the study of the Asian American novel and applicable to the disciplines of visual art/media, sculpture, music, and architecture.

Asian American literature's meaning exceeds the boundaries of its own community and provides a window to understand struggles with modern globality. American domestic life has always been affected by distant political, social, and economic movements unfamiliar to its people. Asia has and continues to shape the lives of those who have no ethnic affiliation with this region, but who nonetheless, are influenced by the joys, pathos, and turmoil of global modernity.

Asian American literature expresses the disparate realities of its subject, and the political, social, and economic tides that have pushed this group back and forth across real or imagined borders of nation and culture. Given the growing number of mixed race people of Asian descent, the lack of third-generation American characters seen in Asian American writing, the increased presence of flexible citizens, cosmopolitans, and expatriates, and the vast numbers of recent Asian immigrants to the United States there are serious questions about the variegated terrain of this literature. As we move forward in the twenty-first century, it is apparent that the multiple ways that we construct and organize literature based on groups, cultures, nations, and communities are increasingly problematic.

Asian American writing is crucial to the American literary landscape. This is not a polemic, but our history and literature is the literature of all Americans because we live the experience of the American project, and are subject to the will, power and enormity of our Empire. Empire is never a construct premised on inclusivity. Art that speaks to such issues recognizes the terror, the spectacle, the trials, the traumas, and the wonder of globality. As observers and participants we turn to art and reading to understand who we are, who we were, and who we aspire to be.

THE END

Bibliography

Chuh, Kandice, Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique. Duke U P, 2003. Print.

Kim, Elaine H. Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context. Philadelphia: Temple U P, 1982. Print.

[1] Fine artist Rick Lowe received a 2014 Macarthur Foundation prize for his renovation of Houston's Third Ward. The development Project Row Houses featured art as its center and provided housing and educational opportunities for artists and the disenfranchised population. A similar parallel can be drawn with I-Hotel. In Michael Stravato's "In Houston, Art is Where the Home Is" New York Times 17 December 2006 article a Project Row House resident said:

> " 'Well, I had heard Rick was an artist when I got there … but then I thought, what kind of art does he do? Then I realized we were his art. We came into these houses, and they did something to us. This became a place of transformation. That's what art* does. It transforms you.' "(C3, italics mine).

*This prompts the question: *Can people function as art?*

Yamashita, Karen Tei. I Hotel. Coffee House Press, 2010. Print.

Please cite your sources.

Excerpt from my manuscript "The Art of Asian America: Aesthetics and the 21st century Novel" based on my dissertation for City University of Hong Kong, 2014.