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Review Of "Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique" By K. Chuh

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book reviews

IMAGINE OTHERWISE: ON ASIAN AMERICANIST CRITIQUE. By Kandice Chuh. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 215 pp. softcover, \$19.95).

Kandice Chuh's critique of the discipline and politics of Asian American Studies, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, is an incisive intervention in the debates that currently occupy the field. Arguing for a "subjectless" Asian American Studies as a point of departure for her analysis of the category "Asian American," Chuh deconstructs some of the central assumptions of the discipline: specifically, the necessity of "representing" Asian American populations, as well as the assumed correlation between Asian American Studies (as an academic field) and Asian American communities (as a political group). Weaving between literary texts and legal case studies, Chuh plots the cartography of new dimensions of Asian American theory and practice.

Building upon her co-edited volume with Karen Shimakawa, *Orientations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), *Imagine Otherwise* explores the globalization of Asian American Studies in relation to its ambivalent identification with both "Asia" and "America." Through close readings of five literary texts—Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, Ronyoung Kim's *Clay Walls*, Lois Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*—and the short stories "Immigration Blues" by Bienvenido Santos and "The High-Heeled Shoes" by Hisaye Yamamoto, Chuh delineates a new reading practice that makes visible the transnational relationships of labour, capital, commodities, and ideas between Asia and America. By mapping the historical interface between the United States and Asia, Chuh also emphasizes the postcolonial subjectivity of Asians, specifically Filipino Americans and Korean Americans, in the U.S. empire. Alongside her analysis of literary texts, Chuh reads a variety of legal cases that legislate the racialization of Asians as American citizens, while paradoxically continuing to mark the distance

between "Asia" and U.S. nation-state. In her reading of *Blu's Hanging*, for instance, Chuh discusses *Rice v. Cayetano*, recounting the colonization of Hawai'i by the United States and the erasure of a history of U.S. colonialism as Hawaiians are incorporated as racial minorities within U.S. nationalist ideology. In the same chapter Chuh documents the ways in which Asian "minority" populations in Hawai'i invoke the politics of being "local" at the expense of native Hawaiian sovereignty movements, thereby marking the complicity of Asian American cultural nationalisms with the imperialist framework of the United States. Likewise, in her discussion of *No-No Boy*, Chuh considers the case of *Hirabayashi v. United States* as a means to trace the historically transnational parameters of racial categorization. By situating the long and contradictory history of legislature that racialized Asians as U.S. (non-) citizens against the undecidable identity of Okada's protagonist, Chuh makes a central argument for "the transnational within the national," thus locating transnational Asian American imaginaries as emergent within and alongside the nation(alist) framework of the U.S. state (69).

Chuh asks the reader to reconsider the geographical and ideological relationship between "Asia" and "America." Unlike early cultural nationalism, Chuh's formation of Asian America rescripts the relationship between Asians in Asia and Asians in the United States. Thus, in her reading of the novels by Chang-Rae Lee and Ronyoung Kim, Chuh establishes a synchronous relationship between at least three spatially distinct historical chronologies: first, Japanese modernization and imperialism in the late nineteenth century; second, Korean modernization and anti-colonial nationalism in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries; and third, U.S. immigration legislation in the early twentieth century, which both established American dependence on Asian labour and denied Asian workers U.S. citizenship. Mapping the confluence among these three chronologies enables Chuh to interrogate the distance and distinction between Asian Americans (as racialized American subjects) and Asians in Asia (fixed at a geographical and ideological remove from the centrality of the United States). Chuh argues that this distance not only solidifies cultural nationalist representations of Asian Americans, but also makes the progressive political movement of Asian American Studies dangerously complicit in the politics of U.S. nationalism. Chuh's readings, therefore, make visible her argument that "Asian America" is "a heterotopic formation, one that enfigures the mul-

tiple and dissimilar spaces and places of discourse and history that collectively produce what seems at first glance, terminologically, to refer to a distinctly bounded site, ‘America’” (111).

While Chuh’s analysis focuses on nationalism as a racial ideology and political narrative, what remains to be interrogated is the relationship between the nation and the *state*. At crucial moments in the text, Chuh steps back from examining the disjunctures between the nation (Asian/American), and the state (specific modes of governance in both *Asia and America*). Given Chuh’s emphasis on the imaginative cartographies of Asian American Studies, it may be productive to ask: what are the ways in which transnationalism implicates not only the nationalist paradigm of the U.S. state, but also the nation-building projects of specific Asian states? How would Chuh’s project extend to look both ways on the Asian/American divide? What implications might this have for new histories of Asian American social formations?

Chuh’s advocacy of theory as a point of departure for a critique of Asian American Studies enables a complex analysis of the difficult relationship between Asian American Studies and Asian American community politics. Her reading of literary and legal texts underscores the centrality of postcolonial criticism and transnational studies as two theoretical frameworks that shape the futures of Asian American Studies. By recasting “Asian American” as a term that functions “not as a positivist identity but as a term of criticism” (84), *Imagine Otherwise* reminds us of the necessity for projects of social justice, while charting new horizons of possibility for critical theories of multiculturalism.

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