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Representations

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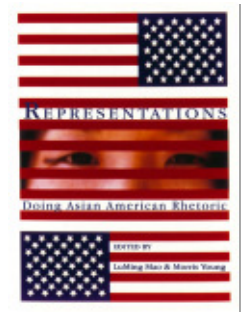
Published by Utah State University Press

Mao, LuMing & Young, Morris.

Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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FOREWORD

Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner

We applaud this project for its effort to address two related questions: how to best study Asian American rhetoric, and why. Using as cases in point a whole range of symbolic practices by Asian Americans across time, social sites, and purposes, the contributors make a convincing case for the viability of defining Asian American rhetoric as a knowledge-making process and for the need, when analyzing the rhetorical strategies of individual discursive acts, to pay attention to the history of specific symbolic systems and individual symbols being deployed, the material conditions—different relations of asymmetry—informing the specific rhetorical situation (and their formal features such as purpose, audience, contexts), and the material and symbolic consequences of these.

We especially appreciate the various ways in which the editors and contributors foreground the processes of translation and transformation involved in any rhetorical acts that resist official dis-positioning of the purposes and logics of peoples other than, othered by, the dominant, and in particular, our need to treat the Others of transcultural communication as agents of knowledge making rather than the objects of “study” and domination. The emphasis on transformation depicts transcultural communication as a dialectical rather than a unilateral, top-down movement. And the emphasis on translation calls attention to the ethical responsibility of both the listener-reader and the speaker-writer to their role in processes of geopolitical, social, economic, and cultural mediation. To perform Asian American rhetoric “into” the American imaginary is also always to rebuild the official, the dominant. In that sense, we might argue that to stay alive, American rhetoric as well as the American imaginary depend as much on the rhetorical work of Asian Americans as the other way around.

In the process of analyzing the rhetorical strategies of various Asian Americans working in response to diverse and specific social, political, cultural conditions and with symbolic resources as varied as verbal, visual, or bodily discourses, the fourteen chapters also posit a rich array

of alternative reading methods for transcultural communications—rhetorical strategies for making sense of and characterizing discursive practices delegitimized by official notions of “correct,” “good” uses of both the western rhetorical tradition and the English language. From that perspective, we see this volume as potentially making two extra contributions to English studies, including courses in literature, creative writing, or rhetoric and composition that do not specifically focus on the study of Asian American rhetoric.

To begin with, teachers and students might explore the ways in which these chapters enact ways of reading that can be used to problematize not only the dichotomy of the “true” vs. the “other,” “hyphenated” Americans but also the dichotomy of “authorized” vs. “student” writers along with the dichotomy of “standard” vs. “nonstandard” users of English, given the historical interlocking of issues of ethnic discrimination with issues of class injustice and educational elitism. For instance, the methods used by the contributors to make sense of and evaluate the works of Asian American (published) writers and public figures such as Kingston or Cho point to a manner of “listening” (Royster 1996) to the words of student writers, including the work of students whose prose might make them appear as if they do not know how to think or speak proper English. This might in turn help teachers in English studies develop pedagogical strategies aimed at helping students to respond “responsively and respectfully” to the rhetorical moves of not only “minority” writers but also their peers. The pedagogical moves we have in mind are those that highlight the need (1) to be reflexive and to problematize habits of reading—“systems of hearing” (Royster 1996)—we’ve been “educated” to impose on the words and deeds of Othered persons and peoples; (2) to be responsive to and respectful of the logic of the historically silenced and to the specific ways in which these writers bend the rules of standardized English—style, grammar, syntax, vocabulary—to make it carry the weight of conditions and relations that are vital to their day-to-day existence but systematically delegitimized by standardized uses; (3) to be attentive to one’s own needs and rights to tinker with English and academic discourse in the process of using them to make sense of and write about relations and experiences central to one’s past, present, and future life but consistently undervalued in college classrooms.

Second, teachers and students of English might explore ways of using the methods of reading enacted by the contributors in this volume to combat not only the dichotomy of the West vs. the rest but also that of

the “native” vs. “second-language” or “foreign” users of English. Given the global spread of a “free” market economy, peoples the world over are living under the pressure to abide by English-only rulings—the rules of a version of English that represents the geopolitical, economic, and cultural interests of the dominant groups of (technologically over-) developed countries such as the United States. How to make sense of the living-English work of users across the world is becoming an increasingly urgent task for those of us granted by the academy the status of fluency in “native”-sounding English, Standard Written English, or Edited American English. This is in part because our disposition toward “idiomatic” English often (inadvertently) functions to sponsor English-only rulings, effectively silencing the work and efforts of users across the world interested in making English carry the weight of experiences—relations and conditions of life—that so-called native-sounding English has been geared to dismiss: for example, uses of English such as China English that sound jarring to the hearing system to which years of education have habituated us. As the editors quote Frank Chin’s argument in the introduction, “The universality of the belief that correct English is the only language of American truth has made language an instrument of cultural imperialism” (Chin et al. 1991, 23). In this first decade of the twenty-first century, the “American truth”—the Truth of the (technologically) Developed World—is being used by international organizations such as the World Bank to constrain life in “developing” and “underdeveloped” worlds. For those of us teachers and students endowed with fluency in “native”-sounding English who are interested in a better world for all, learning to use the methods of “listening” this volume puts forward in its study of Asian American rhetoric can help us resist our official designation as sponsors of Edited American English-only rulings.

More specifically, it can help us shift our energy from the English-only Q&A to a living-English perspective. English-only Q&A asks, “What can Edited American English do *for* nonnative users?” and answers, “It can help them gain access to educational and job opportunities—economic, cultural, symbolic capital.” But a living-English perspective asks, “What can Edited American English *not* do for nonnative users?” and it answers, “It cannot help them limn experiences—relations and conditions of life—delegitimized by the ‘development’ scheme.” A living-English perspective asks, “How have others tinkered with dominant uses of English to keep English and themselves alive?” and, “Given the realities of my

life and the lives of those near and dear to me, how might I learn from such living-English work in my own discursive practices?"

The rhetorical movements of the Asian Americans whose works are featured in this volume and of the contributors in their analyses of this body of work can help teachers and students endowed with fluency in "native"-sounding English to listen to and learn from the logic of non-idiomatic uses of English by users across the world. More specifically, it can help them explore the question of how U.S. composition teachers and students might best go about (1) examining the political-economic-cultural specificity of our so-called native, idiomatic, and correct English usages; (2) developing vigilance toward our often inadvertent sponsoring of English-only rulings; and (3) actively participating in what Lu has called Living-English work (2006).

Let us begin with a disclaimer. In suggesting that we dive into these lines of inquiry, we are not dismissing the need for U.S. composition teachers to be responsive to students' need and desire to use English in ways that will help them succeed in their career pursuits. What we are suggesting, however, is that we acknowledge both the variety of other reasons and occasions for which they might also want to use English and that we treat those reasons and occasions as critical resources for, rather than impediments to, their effective use of English (see Lu 2004). That is, we need to present a different image of the relations between English and its individual learners and users from the image perpetuated by English-only projections.

We might use three quotations to picture the scene of living-English work. The first quotation is from the African writer Chinua Achebe, who argues, "The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use" (2000, 432). We read Achebe as maintaining that for English to stay alive as a world English, the language would need to adjust its formation to suit the multiple reasons peoples across the world have for using it and the multiple contexts shaping their language practices. Our second quotation comes from an article in a 2003 issue of *English Today* by a Chinese scholar, Jiang Yajun, who observes that "[China] English is no doubt becoming an important component of world Englishes as China gets more and more involved in the process of economic and cultural globalization" (7). In a 2005 issue of *English Today*, another Chinese scholar, Hu Xiaoqiong, uses data collected from questionnaires completed by 589 teachers of English working in five universities in the province of Hubei

to illustrate the recognition among teachers of English in China that learners should “no longer be tied to [learning] one alien variety of the language,” such as Edited American English. Instead, they should be taught to also work on a variety of English characterized by Chinese language and culture (32).

The emergence of a variety of English termed China English, distinct from Chinese English or Chinglish, illustrates Chinese English users’ sense of their need and right to make English “carry the burden” of “China-specific things”—language, culture, lived experience, and viewpoints often rendered “peculiar” by so-called idiomatic uses of English (see Achebe 2000, Baldwin 1993; Chuangui Ge in Jiang 2003, 6). China English is, we believe, one kind of the “many different” uses to which Achebe argues English “must be prepared to” submit if it hopes to become a “world language.” To put it another way, real living-English work is being done on the ground, by learners and users of English in China as in other nations across the world. The question then arises: For those of us who are uneasy about our designation as sponsors of English-only rules, what can we do in our day-to-day work in the United States to participate in living-English work?

We see the work in this volume posing three possible directions for developing a pedagogy of living-English work. First, it provides methods of reading that might help us to peculiarize the standardized usages of Edited American English. For instance, instead of presenting rules such as using an “s” to indicate plural and third-person singular as the “native” and logical way and thus, *the way*, it can invoke the voices we often encounter in writing centers from speakers of other languages such as Chinese, such as “Isn’t it redundant to put an ‘s’ after ‘apple’ when the word is preceded by ‘three’?” Or “an ‘s’ after ‘speak’ when it is preceded by ‘Mary’ or ‘John’?”

Second, it provides methods of reading that might help us to listen to the logic of seemingly “alien” usages of English. Media reports and Web site discussions are full of examples of “incorrect” English translations that “native”-English-speaking tourists and expatriates have found irritating, amusing, or charming and that local government officials and educators deem signs of “national disgrace” and vow to eradicate (“Beijing”). One often-cited instance is the literal English translation of a Chinese sign to warn park visitors to keep off the lawn: “Little Grass Has Life.” Listening to the logic leading a Chinese user of English to choose “Little Grass Has Life” over “idiomatic” expressions such as

“Keep Off the Grass” or “No Trespassing” might involve discussions of different notions of why people shouldn’t tread on the grass lawn: out of respect for property laws—public or private—or also out of respect for all living things—big or small, human or nonhuman. It would involve approaching that difference in terms of the different legal, economic, political, cultural, historical trajectories and relations across them in countries such as the United States and China.

A third possible direction this volume might help us to probe is to call attention to the material costs shouldered by peoples the world over as a result of the global push of U.S. linguistic and “lifestyle” standards. For instance, in light of the “privilege” to “host” the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, all road or shop signs in the city had to include an English translation. Lack of access often compels small business owners to rely on translation software to meet these government mandates, hence the repeatedly cited English store sign for a fast-food restaurant owned by the Wangs that read “No Translation or Server Error.” On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a hilarious example of the owners’ “ignorance” of the English language. On the other hand, this instance can be used to talk about the intricate work of transcultural communication. To begin with, it can be used to jump-start critiques of software’s false promise that Americans can now enjoy global access without having to sweat over the learning of another language. Furthermore, it can be used to consider the material cost to peoples the world over to survive and thrive in a globalizing neoliberal free market. What material burden do small business owners bear to come up with money to produce a “correct” translation of the restaurant’s name and a sign bearing the “correct” translation?

Competition to host the Olympics also led the government to take other measures so that Beijing would meet first-world standards. These included efforts to “green” the city according to the standards of the developed world. What might be the material effect that such “development” brought on city residents, such as people being uprooted from neighborhoods? In a country where vast regions of northern China have had to yield their water access to the city of Beijing even during severe drought, how has the thriving of green landscaping in Beijing to meet western standards come into competition with the survival of billions of people in surrounding provinces? These are questions that a volume such as this one prompts teachers and students of English to probe in response to media representations of new trends in “developing” and

“undeveloped” worlds. The link between English-only language policies and the geopolitical-economic ambitions of neoliberal market fundamentalism is something U.S. teachers and students must examine if we are to consider the ethical implications of the internationalization of U.S. education and Standard Written English.

In highlighting the rhetorical work Asian Americans have done to keep English alive, this volume can serve as both a critical resource and a timely impetus for investigating the questions of the kinds of retooling U.S. teachers, scholars, and administrators need to do if we are interested in disrupting our commission to sponsor English-only rulings intra- and internationally, and if we are also interested in joining English users across the world to sponsor living-English work.

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