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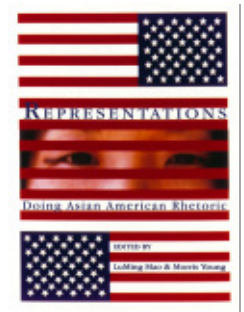
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1

TRANSNATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN RHETORIC AS A DIASPORIC PRACTICE

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Too often, the dilemma for resident Asians in the United States, Pacific Islanders, and multigenerational Asian Americans centers on explaining away their disparate (dis)placements or (dis)positions in the national American narrative. Transnationalism has fast become one rhetorical commonplace that attempts to resolve these discontinuities that have been historically engendered by geopolitical and economic border crossings, the impact of global trade, and a growing global economy. Some of the earliest discussions around transnationalism and Asia Pacific focused on the economic reforms occurring in newly industrialized countries like China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand (Cummings 1998). The emphasis was on the consistency and like-mindedness of so-called miracle Asian economies and their citizen workforce, which adopted western values of trade, commerce, and consumption. However, alternative scholarship on the Asian diaspora (Chow 1993; Dirlik 1998; HuDehart 1999; Ang 2001; Grewal 2005) has begun to articulate a transnationalism that takes stock of disparate and uneven Asian transcontinental and transoceanic crossings in order to illumine the contradictions and inconsistencies in im/migrant Asian lives and identities.

One of the difficulties in articulating a rhetoric particular to the Asian diaspora in the United States has to do with its multivalency and the long history of an Asian *habitus* in the West.¹ An Asian habitus is produced from overlapping and embedded quotidian relations involving the sociohistorical, political, and economic structures that thread the material interlacing of daily life and human agency. This also accounts for the complicity of Asian diasporic subjects, whose various articulations of material life are sutured to quotidian systems and structures of

1. I draw from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. For more, see all of chapter 2 in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1989) but specifically pp. 78–85.

classification such as language, immigration legislation, and economic policies as well as to racial formations, sociopolitical arrangements, and distributions of power. An Asian habitus, therefore, involves the everyday practices, discourses, and cultural lore invented in conjunction with the material conditions of multigenerational and transnational Asian Americans whose lives, as Lisa Lowe points out, are “juridically legislated, territorially situated, and culturally embodied” (1996, 2). Lowe particularly refers to the ways in which the architecture of U.S. citizenship, the systemic exclusion and alienation of Asians in the United States, and the militarization and colonization of the Pacific have contributed to the national imagination of Asia, and Asians, in an American empire (4–5). Such a habitus is replete with diasporic identities and cultural practices that are in tense and uneven relation to a western hegemony that is delineated around U.S. conceptualizations of national affiliation, territory, and economic and military dominance across Asia and the Pacific. An Asian habitus accordingly produces a hybridized and heterogeneous transnational and transcultural way of life to negotiate the moral and ethical valuations that encode Asians in the West. A rhetoric that is in tandem with an Asian habitus would, therefore, have to contend with the multiple and incongruous Asian communities—those long-standing, those newly arrived, as well as mobile transnational communities—now inhabiting the geographical, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural axes in the States, in its territories, and perhaps across the Americas.

The heterogeneous identities and practices that an Asian habitus generates have resulted in some differing opinions regarding how to fully comprehend Asian American daily lives, let alone what might constitute their rhetorics. While some scholars have pointed to the maintenance of ethnic, kinship, and national ties, others point to the practice of family and political organizations to bring about community solidarity. Many, however, continue to look to the expansion of economic, transportation, and communication networks and to the growth of entrepreneurial elites in a global economy as factors that preserve an Asian cultural continuity (Anderson and Lee 2005, 8–10). In spite of these popular trends, a critical Asian diaspora scholarship has been developing that interrogates the nationalist and essentialist agendas that underlie the fact that “for Asian populations across the Americas, ethnic and diasporic identities and practices exist not simply in uneasy tension with each other, but are caught between nation-states and their national agendas”

(10). The complex material conditions and the transnational intersections that compile an Asian habitus and the production of diasporic lives and cultural practices are in many ways complicit with the national projects of western colonizing nation-states. Robbie Goh reminds us that such an understanding of cultural practice “is not only true of the formerly colonized nation, but also of migrants, immigrant societies, and global diasporic contexts . . . which can be found beyond the nation, among the ethnically diverse, transnationally oriented citizens of contemporary global zones” (2004, 6). Coming to terms with the historico-material conditions of an Asian habitus recasts the Asian diaspora amid the ongoing debates around nationalism, citizenship, white supremacy, immigration, globalization, and the war on terror in the United States. A rhetoric and rhetorical practice specific to that of an Asian diaspora in the United States must, therefore, account for the dialectical relationship of its habitus with western structures of domination.

ASIAN AMERICAN “AUTODOCUMENTARY” AS A TRANSNATIONAL RHETORIC

With the uneven movement of Asian communities across Asian and Pacific continents and oceans as part of a U.S. economic and cultural hegemony in circulation, transnational Asian American rhetorical practices have already begun to materialize. These have taken the form of cultural projects across a variety of disciplines and everyday cultural practices that engage in the reinvention, rearticulation, and rememory of transmigrations, particularly as they expose the Asian diaspora in relation to western expansion rather than mere cultural travel or sharing across national borders (see Chen 1998; Abbas and Erni 2005; Lim et al. 2006). Some of these undertakings might be considered rhetorical projects which, by their very telling, are closer to life narratives or testimonio. Testimonio, as Caren Kaplan writes, “is a form of ‘resistance literature’; it expresses transitional material relations in neo- and postcolonial societies and disrupts mainstream literary conventions. . . . testimonio may refer to colonial values of nostalgia and exoticization, values that operate via a discourse of truth and authenticity” (1992, 122–123). The exposure of, and interruption in, cultural nostalgia and exoticization can both be understood as a product of the transnational work of life narratives as they cross the genres of ethnography and autobiography with colonial subjugation, something that Mary Louise Pratt (1991) has referred to as autoethnography.

Autoethnography, as Pratt theorizes, is a hybrid text that formerly colonized subjects created by merging metropolitan discourses with indigenous idioms. These hybrid discourses invent self-representations that challenge dominant metropolitan forms of understanding by providing an alternative framework for discursive practices to draw from colonial contexts and conditions that interrupt the colonial episteme. In order to do this, Pratt depends on the preserved indigeneity of a colonial subject's idioms to alter the subordination by, and thus the privilege of, the colonizers. By virtue of the remnant indigeneity of their idioms, Pratt's autoethnographers challenge their colonial imbrication. Their indigenous idiomatic infiltration into the hegemony creates a discord within the colonial process, and thus intervenes in the production of colonial discourses and power relations.

To the contrary, Asian American subjects wrestle with the concomitant production of their subjectivity and rhetorical practice (their idioms) in relation to colonial productions of discourse and power relations. Their very hybridity, produced by their multigenerational and transnational identities, complicates any notion of an indigenous cultural or idiomatic prerogative. In fact, Asian American subjectivity is in relation to the territorial expansion, the overwhelming military and economic power, and the legislative hegemony of an expanding American empire, all of which underwrites the rhetoric of an Asian diaspora in the United States. An Asian American diaspora and its discourses are entangled with the cultural flows across the Pacific, which have been fetishized as cultural commodities, conscripted as labor, or have served as proxies of western values through either a military or a global capitalist economy.

In the last decade, several projects have emerged in the form of life-narrative documentaries depicting an Asian American diaspora within these encumbered conditions. *Bontoc Eulogy* by Marlon Fuentes (1995), *Xich-lo* by M. Trinh Nguyen (1996), and *First Person Plural* by Deann Borshay Liem (2000) are examples of such projects. Though uneven, inconsistent, and certainly not incontrovertible, these life narratives parse out a critical practice that is produced from their representation of competing and contradictory subjects living within the bureaucratic apparatus of a colonial or imperial nation-state. They disclose the construction of Asian American subjects, their everyday lives and discourses, *in the midst* of a colonial and imperial scheme, and articulate discordant discourses that reflect the tension-filled spaces (the disorientation) of *transAsian*, *transPacific*, and *transAmerican* identities. Moreover, rather

than frame these life-narrative documentaries as autoethnographies that look to indigenous idioms as a means of resistance and critique, we might think of them as *Asian American autodocumentaries*—critical and self-reflexive visual representations that illustrate an Asian habitus through *diasporic idioms*. Unlike indigenous idioms, diasporic idioms are commonplaces constitutive of a U.S. colonial and imperial hegemony that cloak the scattered communities of Asians in America. Through their use of diasporic idioms, Asian American autodocumentaries reimagine and revalue commonplace markers with the tensions and contradictions of transnational border-crossing subjects, and in this way give shape to the counterhegemonic narrative of a diasporic rhetorical practice.² For example, they (1) reimagine and revalue the commonplace of *nation* by identifying it with western colonial and imperial involvement across the Asia Pacific region and with the scattering of Asian and Pacific communities; (2) reimagine and revalue the commonplace of *community* as constitutive, yet critically self-reflexive, of western colonial culture; and (3) reimagine and revalue the commonplace of *family* through the very tensions and contradictions that their heterogeneous Asian American location engenders.

First, Asian American autodocumentaries reimagine and revalue their relation to the commonplace of *nation*. They characterize the extent to which western colonization and empire building in the Asia Pacific region has played a significant role in the deployment of an Asian diaspora and Asians' transnational life stories. We can see this in Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy*, for example, as he imagines his Filipino grandfather as Markod, the legendary Bontoc warrior who disappeared after he came to the United States in the early 1900s (see Feng 2002, 25–33). Because very little is known about his grandfather outside of a fragmented family narrative, Fuentes combines old archival footage with contemporary reenactments to visualize what might have been his ancestor's narrative in the United States. As he pieces this story together, Fuentes wonders if Markod was among those Filipinos who were brought to the United States as part of the Philippine exhibit for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. He reminds us that the Philippines had

2. See Antonio Gramsci's use of hegemony in *Prison Notebooks*, especially as he notes: "Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political 'hegemonies' and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one's own conception of reality" (1971, 333).

been colonized by Spain, becoming a U.S. territory only a year after the Spanish-American War, once the United States had silenced the remains of the Philippine revolution (see Bonus 2000). After its conquest by the United States, the Philippines became highly valued as a geopolitical spoil of war, but it also became valued as a new dependent nation of the “white man’s burden”³ and a spectacle of subjugation for the fair’s attendants. While the Philippine exhibit provided the pretense of cultural difference and respect for “our brown brothers from across the Pacific” (Fuentes 1995), in reality it exoticized and commodified Fuentes’s imagined patriarch and all those brought in from across the Philippine Galapagos. It is through the reimagining of his grandfather as Markod that we envision the imprint of colonial hegemony, which led to the dissociation and displacement of the Philippines as a nation as well as to the cultural fragmentation and configuration of a Filipino diaspora in the national space of the United States.

Similarly, M. Trinh Nguyen associates her national displacement and diasporic imagination with the French and U.S. occupation of Vietnam. In *Xich-lo* she records her return visit to relatives in Hanoi many years after relocating to the United States with her family. Like Fuentes, Nguyen recounts this mobile history by combining old film footage with more contemporary footage she shoots during her return. She emphasizes her transient consciousness by being filmed on the move, either on a *xich-lo* (bicycle taxi) or on a moving train, while she narrates. As she moves about the city and countryside, Nguyen recounts her family’s national status when they were in Vietnam and reveals that they were of the educated and cultural elite. We learn, for example, that prior to coming to the United States, she and her siblings were schooled by French missionaries, and that her father worked as a military consultant for U.S. forces and was well paid for his services. She also remembers that her family was visited by high-ranking U.S. military officers, who brought expensive gifts for the children. Nguyen tries to remember something about her background that is not laced with a colonial presence, whether French or American. She finds, however, that her most prevalent memories of national belonging are in relation to her French education and Catholic religion, which are compounded by the violence in the landscape around her, and none more so than her father’s involvement with U.S. military operations in Vietnam.

3. There is a nice historical overview with rhetorical implications in Foster, Magdoff, and McChesney 2004.

Deann Borshay Liem's autobiography *First Person Plural* also reimagines the commonplace of nation as she links her own adoption to the flow of adopted Korean children into the United States after the Korean War. A small portion of her narrative describes the adoption of orphaned and/or abandoned Korean children as part of a postwar relief effort that the United States provided through charitable adoption agencies and the institutionalization of orphanages in Korea. More specifically, as Tobias Hübinette explains, transnational adoptions in Korea were a combination of "American empire building and international relations, and Korean military authoritarianism and patriarchal modernity" (2006, 140). This complements the views of historians who argue that the Korean War had little to do with the Korean people themselves, but rather with the Pacific region and its potential ties to communist regimes. Their focus is on how the stalemate of the Korean War precipitated numerous discussions of nuclear first-strike strategies that became such a prevalent part of cold war discourse (Whitfield 1996, 6). Still other scholars extend the stigma of nuclear arms and communism around Asia Pacific to the conflation of its inhabitants as they became synonymous with a cold war rhetoric that not only militarized but helped to racially manage the region (Johnson 2004). In either case, the colonial relationship was clear: Korea became a client, or dependent, nation in need of a colonial (read: U.S.) bureaucracy. By tracing her transnational adoption back to postwar U.S. charity and the institutionalization of orphanages in South Korea, Borshay Liem demonstrates how the maintenance of orphanages was part of a lifeline that helped to establish a continued U.S. presence in Korea. The transnational adoption of orphaned or abandoned Korean children became a way for the United States, and the South Korean government, to continue to rebuild the nation by increasing the flow of currency needed to manage and modernize (read: westernize) the country socially, politically, and economically. The material conditions that led to Borshay Liem's national displacement from Korea also gave impetus for her national placement in the United States.

In addition to amending the commonplace of *nation*, these autobiographies also reimagine and revalue the commonplace marker of *community*. They do so by connecting their respective community narratives to the transnational cultural flows that are also engendered by colonial and imperial forces in the Asia Pacific region. Marlon Fuentes imagines, for example, that Markod and other villagers from the Philippines were

brought to America by organizers of the 1904 World's Fair. Because the Philippine exhibit brought tribal communities from all over the Galapagos, Fuentes surmises that many of them probably had never seen each other before and in some cases might not have known of each other's existence. Reimagining the scale of this turn-of-the-century Filipino transpacific crossing, Fuentes underscores the ways in which the American colony conflated the archipelago of the Philippines into a mass of one tribe, one community. Reducing the heterogeneous inhabitants of the Philippines into America's little *brown brothers*, and making them new colonial subjects, resonates with Fuentes as he rethinks his own immigration to the United States and confesses that for more than two decades he has never desired to return. He uses this lament to eulogize the forced passage of his Filipino ancestors, and to explain the imbrication of his own narrative with the incongruity of his community's collective narrative.

Trinh Nguyen's autocumentary takes a slightly different approach to *community* as she recognizes how the accumulation and weight of her memories compel her to simultaneously reject both Vietnamese and American communities. She proclaims, "I have no true family, no social gang; I do not quite fit into mainstream America, nor do I quite fit into Vietnamese America, and I don't remember fitting into mainstream Vietnam" (1996). Nguyen tells us she is on a quest for some insight into her community lineage, and in so doing she tries to imagine an alternate location for her identity. She contrasts this current search in Vietnam with past visits to her father's family when they have told her she is too American and that she has lost her roots. "But the only example of Vietnameseness they offer," she muses, "is the measurement of one's worth by how much material wealth one owns." Although Nguyen is critical of her paternal family's classism masquerading as ancestral lineage, she also recognizes her own familiarity with, and imbrication in, western capitalism as she considers paying a street vendor with her credit card. The incongruity of her ancestral line gets even murkier.

First Person Plural is no less murky, and is itself a primary example of the ways in which the displacement and dissociation of *community* exposes the highly politicized arrangements that supplement cultural agency and subjectivity. Borshay Liem's Pacific crossing, her transnational adoption as a consequence of U.S. military action, is an example of the colonial discourse that overdetermines the ideological interests and practices in the Pacific region and in its inhabitants.

Her autodocumentary unmasks the master narrative hovering over the Korean diasporic community as she comes to understand that transnational adoptions were caught up in the postwar fragmentation of Korean families and the many orphaned or abandoned Korean children, who represented the new national currency in exchange for rebuilding Korea as a nation in the image of its new colonial masters. And as a way of preventing further communist influence in the region, Korean children became one of the United States's and Korea's greatest political, economic, and moral commodities on the road to modernization. The transnational adoption of Korean children operated, in this way, as a two-pronged nationalist project that established a community of transplanted colonial subjects while also amending Korea's social and political relation to the United States.

A third revisionary tactic that these autodocumentaries deploy further aggravates the colonial dilemma by reimagining and revaluing the commonplace of *family*. Therefore, as Fuentes considers the dislocation and displacement that may have befallen his imagined family patriarch, he also wonders whether the role he and several generations of his community play is any less fragmented. To highlight this transgenerational diaspora, Fuentes juxtaposes contemporary footage he films of an actor's reenactment of Markod recording his voice on a gramophone with footage of Fuentes's own image listening to this recording on a gramophone. Combined with another striking image of his U.S.-born children taking photos of each other mimicking their father's behavior with the camera, what Fuentes leaves us with is a Filipino American identity as simulacra upon simulacra. The representation and reenactment of the family patriarch on film, and of recorded Filipino voices being listened to by a Filipino, or of Filipinos photographing other Filipinos, feign the anthropological objectivity of the family as it also mocks it.⁴

Nguyen's autodocumentary, on the other hand, supplements her notion of *family* with a reconfigured memory of her maternal relatives who remained in Vietnam. After the war, her mother's relatives decided to continue living near the Mekong Delta rather than flee to America as did her father and his kin. Nguyen reminisces about the stories told of her maternal grandmother having an old ancestral knowledge, a wisdom not respected by either capitalists or communists. Her grandmother, as the story is told, took in a biracial child left homeless after the

4. For a discussion of the style and structure of the film and its "mockumentary" status, see Petrova and Aufderheide.

war at a time when neither side was attending to the human lives left in the aftermath. Nguyen readily admits that this recollection comes by way of only a few stray photos and concedes it is made up of “mostly flashes of memory disjointed and after nearly two decades maybe imagined” (1996). The narrative opposition that she creates (in this case between paternal and maternal narratives) is common among transnational subjects who seek an alternative site for revaluing cultural memory. What is most interesting is the conscious selection to reclaim her reimagined maternal family memory (as fragmented as it is) over her lived experience with her paternal family. She embraces this as a reinvented and reconfigured history of maternal ancestral wisdom and places it in tension with patriarchal, militaristic, and capitalist western logic. In this way, Nguyen reconfigures the lore of her own history by complicating the boundaries of family and nation with the contradictions of empire and war, and alternatively embraces gender and hybridity as a way to supplement her family memory in the midst of fragmentation and loss.

Borshay Liem’s autodocumentary echoes the narratives of Trinh Nguyen and Marlon Fuentes as she seeks to revise her family history from fragments of information and documentation. As in the earlier films, Borshay Liem also uses a variety of footage to piece together her entry into the United States. Borshay, both a transnational and transracial adoptee, documents the rediscovery of her biological family in Korea. She explains that in 1966, Arnold and Alveen Borshay adopted a Korean girl named Cha Jung Hee through the Foster Parents Plan, an American adoption program developed in response to the numbers of Korean children left orphaned by the Korean War. After looking through her adoption documents and contacting the orphanage in Korea, what Deann (a.k.a. Cha Jung Hee) eventually found was that her real name was Ok Jin Kang. It was Cha Jung Hee, another child in the same orphanage, who was in the process of being adopted by Arnold and Alveen Borshay. At the last minute, however, Cha Jung Hee’s father decided that he wanted his daughter back and retrieved her from the orphanage. Since the adoption process was well under way with the Borshays, the officials at the orphanage simply replaced Cha Jung Hee with a different child (Ok Jin Kang) and gave her the identity of Cha Jung Hee to keep the adoption active (2000). Once reconnected with her biological family, Borshay dedicates a large portion of the film to the difficult and painful process of reunification. While Borshay Liem’s Korean family, the Kangs, are very happy to be reunited with Ok Jin,

now a woman in her forties, they realize that Deann/Cha Jung/Ok Jin is more American than Korean by culture, language, and national identity. Borshay Liem, and the audience, have to come to terms with the reality that her biological family is no longer her family—rather, her adoptive American family has become her family. Her familial identity is not based in nature or biology at all, but rather comprised of a web of historical, social, and political constructs.

Each of these autodocumentaries imitates a recovery project that assumes an a priori essentialism around the commonplaces of nation, community, and family. However, the contradictions they encounter proclaim the fissures in nationalist discourses and expose the ideological sutures around western interests in the Asia Pacific region and its inhabitants. They expose, in other words, the overdetermined subjectivities and the cultural paradoxes operating in the lives of transnational Asian Americans. The rather fascinating and complex outcome is that the dissonant resolve of each autodocumentary competes with our commonsense assumptions that look to the nostalgic recovery and harmony of identities. Instead, these Asian American autodocumentaries reimagine *nation*, *community*, and *family* as diasporic idioms that are revalued into critical and hybrid discursive supplements that are deployed in a transnational rhetoric.

THEORIZING A TRANSNATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN RHETORIC

The entanglements with western colonialism and imperialism represented in these autodocumentaries reveal the difficulties for essentialist articulations of a universal “Asianness,” or the difficulty in employing culturally indigenous Asian idioms, and make problematic nationalist notions of static cultural and geopolitical Asian identities, especially in the United States. In fact, the dilemma for transnational Asian Americans is their compound sociohistoric and cultural representation as contradictory subjects of an American empire who are antithetical to, yet at the same time a necessary part of, the flow of culture and capital across the Pacific. This configuration of Asia Pacific challenges the idea of unmitigated national and cultural spaces that, as Arif Dirlik points out, have seen crossings exponentially multiply since 1965. We’ve witnessed, not the development of an alternative transnational or transcultural identity signifying a new site of global critical agency, but rather the rearticulation of the discourse of a dominant cultural hegemony. Diaspora may inspire the possibilities of a postcolonial

transnational community as an alternative to western hegemony, but we cannot seriously consider an alternative paradigm if we disregard existing structures of power and their relentless (re)production within diasporic spaces (1998, 42–43).

Asian American autodocumentaries give us a glimpse of how alternative articulations of Asian American rhetorical practices might account for the contradictory characteristics of diasporic cultures and identities that develop in tension with the conditions of power and privilege that riddle competing interests in the Pacific Rim. Rather than romanticize national or culturally based identity projects, or imagine an ahistoric transnational Asian community that contiguously spans the Pacific, Asian American autodocumentaries acknowledge a history of western militarization, colonization, and empire building as part of the common articulation of Asia Pacific, its diasporas, and its disparate discursive practices. It is this kind of colonial consciousness and reflexivity that may provide the possibility for an alternative imagination to reinvent common discursive markers into diasporic idioms that expose the variant and competing meanings that revolve around Asian im/migrations. *A transnational Asian American rhetoric as a diasporic practice*, then, unveils competing and contradictory discursive power relations within the Asian diaspora as they have become articulated in relation to an American empire. The spectrum of various loci and counterloci⁵ that accompany the representation of Asia Pacific in the West is understood as inscribed with sociohistorical, political, and economic tension in relation to the swell of western imperialism across the Pacific. As a discursive practice, a transnational Asian American rhetoric rearticulates (i.e., it reimagines and gives diasporic value to) the colonial discourse that implicates an Asian diaspora within the United States.

A transnational Asian American rhetoric would in fact function in much the same way as Gayatri Spivak's notion of postcolonial *transnational literacy*. Transnational literacy, as Spivak explains it, stands in dialectical relation to "the mobilizing potential of unexamined culturalism," and builds a community consciousness from national and political organizations but not, she emphasizes, "with that other feeling of community whose structural model is the family." A transnational literacy exchanges natural or essentialist affiliations (like kith, kin, culture, and

5. E.g., exotic and sensual vs. spiritual; barbarous and morally corrupt vs. culturally rich; yellow peril, coolie, brown monkey, foreign, inassimilable vs. model minority; enemy-alien, spy, terrorist vs. citizen.

family) with a materialist episteme that details ideologically driven circuits of the nation-state (i.e., citizen, immigrant, il/legal or resident alien, border crosser, overseas contract worker, sweatshop laborer). This exchange is not politically neutral, nor would such an exchange arise miraculously from the quotidian spaces of the transnational agents themselves (e.g., indigenous idioms), because everyday spaces and their discourses are also politicized and replete with colonial rubrics of power and bureaucracy. Rather, Spivak emphasizes that the full transformation of a class (i.e., postcolonial, transnational im/migrants) “is not an ideological transformation of consciousness on the ground level, a desiring identity of the agents and their interest. . . . It is a contestatory replacement as well as an appropriation (a supplementation) of something that is ‘artificial’ to begin with.” A transnational Asian American rhetoric as a practice of the Asian diaspora would, as exemplified in the above autodocumentaries, strategically engage in the epistemic upheaval of commonplaces such as “culture and nation” or “kith and kin” as *natural* sites of meaning production, and supplement them with “use value” by unmasking the already existing ideological lexicon of the American empire that envelopes its imagination of Asia (Spivak 1999, 261).

However, in order to begin the process of (re)inventing the trope(s) of Asia Pacific to that of “use value,” we must advance the notion that transnational Asian American identities and practices are indeed already caught up in an ideological pretense associated with the material and discursive encumbrances fostered by western expansion. This shifts the axes of rhetorical production and meaning to the complexities of everyday life *within a western epistemology and discourse*. As we recognize that rhetorical production within the Asian diaspora is linked to material conditions and power dynamics transpiring around western influence, we can then begin to articulate the relationship between the material and the rhetorical. This is an important critical—as well as ideological—turn. Contemporary rhetorical theorists and cultural critics have long been examining the relationship between the production of meaning within the intersection of the material and the discursive (see Mckerrow 1989; Aune 1994; Wander 1999). Stuart Hall, for example, has recognized the burden of material conditions over our lived experience. He specifically acknowledges the significant role discursive practices play in the production of meaning surrounding material conditions. He explains that “events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but . . . it is only within

the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, [that] . . . they have or can . . . be constructed with meaning” and that discourse, therefore, plays a formative and structural role in the shaping of material events (not merely an after-the-fact description) (1996, 443). Hall’s premise revitalizes the ways in which we can begin to comprehend the production of Asian diasporic meaning as having use value stemming from transnational lived conditions constitutive *in the West*, rather than from an essential or innate value *outside or beyond the West*, or as merely the afterlife of domination as well. The Asian diaspora in the United States is comprised, therefore, of material and discursive sites fraught with sociohistoric value (military, economic, legislative, etc.) that give shape to the everyday lives and practices around the subjectivity, identity, and culture of Asian im/migrants *in the West*.

In spite of Hall’s observations, there persists a common presumption that national identities remain homogeneous and autonomous. But as Partha Chatterjee explains, the continued desire for a national homogeneity can be traced to discourse production during industrialization (1986, 5). “Nationalism,” he writes elsewhere, “sets out to assert its freedom from European domination. But in the very conception of its project, it remains a prisoner of the prevalent European intellectual fashions.” The key, as Chatterjee describes it, is to understand how nationalist discourse is shaped around universal values and their enforcement by strictures of colonial power. Nationalist discourse stems from “a much more general problem, namely, the problem of the bourgeois-rationalist conception of knowledge, established in the post-epistemic foundation for a supposedly universal framework of thought which perpetuates, in a real and not merely a metaphorical sense, a colonial domination” (1996, 10). Thus, any postcolonial attempt at reimagining culture beyond colonization as “free” or “independent” must reckon with a dialectic of power that is concurrently framed within this same universal episteme, or postepisteme, developed around colonial power. Chatterjee’s recognition that colonial power is sutured to postcolonial discourse is part of the self-reflexive critique that a transnational Asian American rhetoric, as a diasporic practice, may produce.

CONCLUSION

Reimagining Asian America through a diasporic rhetoric that is critically situated in colonial history initiates the process of (re)inventing the trope of Asia Pacific from a uniform and essentializing discourse to

a more complex articulating category that elicits an alternative use value of Asian diaspora. Such a rhetoric would begin critical analysis with the diasporic dilemma—that is, the dilemma of a resident colonial imaginary and habitus that has been produced through the structured institutions of a western nation-state. In this way, a transnational Asian American rhetoric as a diasporic practice would not confirm new-world-order fantasies that, as Ien Ang points out, “[consist] of self-contained, self-identical nations—which is the ultimate dream of the principle of nationalist universalism,” and “is a rather disturbing duplication of the divide-and rule politics deployed by the colonial powers to ascertain control and mastery over the subjected.” In fact, because diasporas are transnational, “linking the local and the global, the here and the there, past and present, they have the potential to unsettle static, essentialist and totalitarian conceptions of ‘national culture’ or ‘national identity’” (2001, 34). Therefore, a transnational Asian American rhetoric that operates as a diasporic practice creates alternative discursive spaces that can potentially reveal and unravel the social, cultural, and economic sutures that administer the Asian diaspora in the United States. Such a rhetoric transpires from transnational border-crossing practices that redeploy commonplace markers like nation, community, and family as diasporic idioms that account for the incongruous lived experiences of Asian diasporic subjects. The greater hope is that a transnational Asian American rhetoric has the potential to provide a framework for reimagining and revaluing a more critically robust and radically democratic rhetoric and critically reflexive practice that exposes the colonial and imperial suture.

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