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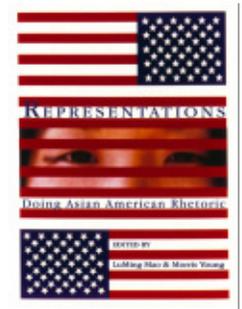
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AFTERWORD

Toward a Theory of Asian American Rhetoric: What Is to Be Done?

LuMing Mao and Morris Young

Now that we are about to bring an end to this project, we feel both satisfied and in want of more. Satisfied because we, together with our contributors in this volume, have now given much-needed voice to Asian Americans, to their efforts to use language and other discursive means to effect change and to write themselves into the larger American narrative. In want of more because we have been made acutely aware, by our work, of the urgent need to press on with this rhetorical project and to open up more space for Asian American rhetoric and for other minority discourses. In particular, our work has made it possible to raise some broader questions for doing Asian American rhetoric and for the representation of an Other in the twenty-first century.

We have, both in our introduction and throughout this volume, characterized Asian American rhetoric as a rhetoric of becoming. In so doing, we want to emphasize that Asian American rhetoric is always situated in particularizing situations and that it always generates new meanings and new significations at every discursive turn possible. Does it, then, mean that we can now look for any or every occasion, past and present, where Asian Americans have used language and other discursive means to have their stories told and heard, and say, "That's it! That's Asian American rhetoric!"? Are there any necessary constituents that make the discursive acts of Asian Americans sufficiently rhetorical? Further, if the emphasis now is on the specific occasions of use, can we claim a sense of history or tradition for Asian American rhetoric? Are there any family resemblances between what Asian Americans did in the past and what they are doing now? What are those rhetorical strategies that have been deployed by Asian Americans across time, space, and purpose? Are there any strategies or discursive forms that have newly emerged and that are in direct response to the rhetorical exigency of our own time? Is there, ultimately, any sense of contradiction between

calling Asian American rhetoric a rhetoric of becoming and wanting to anoint it with a sense of history or continuity?

Central to what we are doing in this volume has to do with the idea of representation and the consequences, both material and symbolic, of actually doing it. We staked our position early in our introduction when we chose the singular “rhetoric” in representing Asian American rhetoric. That is, we want to use Asian American rhetoric as a singular signifier to represent a distinctive rhetorical identity *and* to “insist that others recognize that what they [we] have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that *everyone* speaks from positions within the global distribution of power” (Hall 1989, 133; emphasis in the original). At the same time, we are quite mindful that the tension will forever vex and challenge us between the desire to reclaim discursive agency and authority by using the singular signifier and the need to recognize and represent Asian American rhetoric realized in, or made possible by, its various and heterogeneous forms. For example, how can we most effectively negotiate such a tension without either erasing internal difficulties and conflicts or presuming unity and collective identity as the basis of our rhetorical action? More specifically, how best can we represent Asian American rhetoric when it is being performed in myriad temporal and spatial contexts? Further, what happens when such contexts begin to cross cultural and national boundaries, and when such contexts become fraught with expressions of hybridity and intertextuality? How Asian American or *un*-Asian American will our discursive practices then become? How do these kinds of engagements or entanglements in turn affect our identity as Asian American? And finally, in what ways will such experiences intrude upon and transform our discursive experiences in the Asian American community within the United States?

In the introduction to their edited collection, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1991), Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd describe the project of minority discourse and the constituent practices that must be taken up in order to address what they identify as a history of marginalization of minority cultures at the hands of dominant western hegemony. We echo JanMohamed and Lloyd’s call in the title of their introduction, “Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?” by offering our own challenge: “Toward a Theory of Asian American Rhetoric: What Is to Be Done?” We issue this call because as the work in this collection has argued, Asian American rhetoric has been underexamined and undertheorized.

While this project has begun the work of organizing our ideas about Asian American rhetoric and has offered illustrations of where Asian American rhetoric exists, what it does, how it does, and why it matters, much work remains to be done. Building on JanMohamed and Lloyd's articulation of a theory of minority discourse and maintaining our belief that Asian American rhetoric is a rhetoric of becoming, we suggest the following strategies for further engaging in this project.

RECOVERY AND DISCOVERY

As the essays in this collection have illustrated, there is much to recover and discover in Asian American rhetoric. To counter "institutional forgetting" and the damage done by the erasure, denial, or ignorance of a culture and its practices, archival and recuperative work has often been undertaken as an important act of countermemory. In recent years there has been much rhetorical activity by many scholars who have sought to broaden discussions about the history of rhetoric, rhetorical theory, and rhetorical action. Perhaps most substantial have been the critical studies and archival/editorial work by scholars such as Anne Ruggles Gere, Cheryl Glenn, Susan Jarratt, Nan Johnson, Andrea Lunsford, and Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, who have brought to light the important contributions of women to the rhetorical tradition. Work by Keith Gilyard, Shirley Wilson Logan, Elaine Richardson and Ronald Jackson, and Jacqueline Jones Royster has theorized an African American rhetorical tradition that stretches back two hundred years. And collections such as Ernest Stromberg's *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance* (2006) or Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter Mignolo's *Writing without Words* (1994) have helped to recover the rhetorical and literacy practices of indigenous peoples of the Americas. In the efforts of the scholars named above and many others, we have seen important archival work that broadens our understanding of the rhetorical tradition and points to the possibilities of much more work to be done in many other communities, including the Asian American community.

Perhaps a first step is to identify where those "archives" of Asian American rhetoric exist and to uncover or make visible those events and circumstances where Asian American rhetorical activity has occurred. The history of Asians in America began as far back as the eighteenth century, when Filipinos left Spanish ships and settled in Louisiana and moved forward through the nineteenth century as the United States extended its reach across the Pacific to Asia, and substantial numbers

of Asians, especially the Chinese, started to flow into the United States. In the twentieth century immigrants from a variety of Asian countries entered the United States as laborers, while restrictions on immigration and conflicts with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam created tensions in Asian American communities. Since comprehensive immigration reform in 1965 and the rising tide of globalization, Asian American culture has moved beyond exotic and orientalist stereotypes and in fact has become ubiquitous, as Asian cuisines (beyond the typical Chinese) are popular, yoga studios exist in every neighborhood, and Kanji character tattoos are commonplace. But does this infusion of Asian/Asian American culture into the American imaginary mask the rhetorical work of Asian Americans? Worse still, does it create a false sense of “togetherness-in-harmony?”

In this collection, the work of recovery has begun through Haivan Hoang’s examination of rhetorical memory performed by Asian American student activists, Terese Guinsatao Monberg’s look at the Filipino American National Historical Society, Mira Chieko Shimabukuro’s discussion of texts produced in Japanese American internment camps, and Subhasree Chakravarty’s look at educational materials used in North American Hindu communities. But there is still much out there to recover and examine as rhetorical texts, from the oral histories and written accounts by the descendants of those first Filipino settlers in eighteenth-century Louisiana to the Angel Island poetry written by nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants to the many legal cases where Asians and Asian Americans have had to argue for their place in U.S. society. Other oral history archives, from the plantation era in Hawai‘i or Chinatowns across the country, in public history sites/museums such as the Japanese American National Museum or the Wing Luke Asian Museum, all act as sites of countermemory that teem with rhetorical possibilities and that call for our immediate attention.

In this collection, the work of discovery has also begun through the examination of new media technology and rhetorical expressions by Jolivette Mecnas, or in looking at the rhetorical work of performers such as Margaret Cho or Jake Shimabukuro by Michaela Meyer and Jeffrey Carroll. These examinations identify new rhetorical work that is taking place and that is being transformed through technologies, genres, forms, or other means of production or forms of expression to create new knowledge and ideas. But there is still more out there to discover. For example, American vernacular work such as hip-hop has

been taken up by a variety of communities within the United States to address specific cultural experiences. More recently, we have seen a rise in Asian American spoken-word and hip-hop artists, from Yellow Rage, whose members refute powerfully the gendered stereotypes of passive and exotic Asian women; to *i was born with two tongues*, a Chicago-based Pan-Asian Spoken Word Troupe that has developed a highly inventive, heterogeneous form to confront racism and to legitimate Asian American experiences; to Jin, a Chinese American performer who has integrated Cantonese language into his rhymes. In addition, we have witnessed the transnational movement of hip-hop into Asia, where performers from South Korea to the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China have transformed this distinctive American form into one marked by their local contexts and local exigencies. It is this kind of rhetorical work across and within the borders of the nation-state by Asians and Asian Americans that demands our immediate action.

REFRAMING AND REVISION

While an important part of our call for action has been to recognize and recover the cultural work in minority and emergent cultures, there is also a need to understand how dominant discourses have constructed minority cultures. For example, Mary Louise Pratt's (1991) theory of autoethnography describes how dominant and minority cultures engage each other and how such engagement can allow for minority cultures to reimagine and subvert the representations that have been constructed of them. Similarly, we take up this autoethnographic practice in considering how dominant disciplinary discourses (such as history, literary studies, and other fields of study) have often marginalized rhetoric as a discipline and mode of inquiry. What does it mean to reframe and revision a text within a rhetorical framework rather than within a literary or historical mode of inquiry? How does considering an expressive act in its rhetorical dimensions differ from considering it for its aesthetic or explicitly political value? Tomo Hattori and Stuart Ching begin the important work of finding connections between disciplinary discourses by examining shared metaphors between rhetoric and composition and Asian American studies.

An obvious but important body of work to examine with a rhetorical lens has to be Asian American texts that have been taken up in Asian American literary and cultural studies. In general, the field of Asian American literary and cultural studies acts as a critical model for Asian

American rhetorical studies as it has moved through the stages of recuperation, criticism, and development of new modes and forms. Asian American literary and cultural studies has exploded over the last twenty-five years, as a generation of students and faculty, trained and prepared to engage in research and teaching of Asian American texts, began to develop and contribute scholarship about literature produced by writers of Asian descent.¹ But in the early 1990s, there still existed only a handful of critical studies that examined Asian American literature as their central focus, including the still-important *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Contexts* (1982) by Elaine Kim, *And the View from the Shore: Literary Traditions of Hawai'i* (1991) by Stephen H. Sumida, and *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (1992) edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling. *AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974) and *The Big AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Writers* (1991), both edited by Jeffrey Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong, were still often turned to as important early critical expressions about the cultural work of Asian American writing. However, just as we saw an explosion in creative work by Asian American authors in the years following Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, we have also seen an explosion of critical production following the groundbreaking work of Kim, Sumida, Lim, Ling, and others. Since the early 1990s we have seen dozens of dissertations written that focus squarely on or at least in part on Asian American literature, and since 1993 in excess of thirty critical studies, edited collections of criticism, and resource guides have been published.

However, much of this critical work has not applied a rhetorical framework in the examination of texts despite the fact that themes of language, identity (or *ethos*), and political expression are often explicit or embedded in these works. As we discuss in our introduction, *AIIEEEEE!* and *The Big AIIEEEEE!* can be read as Asian American rhetorical texts for their arguments about language, sensibility, and the power of Asian American writing. Read as Asian American rhetoric, then, the introductions to *AIIEEEEE!* and *The Big AIIEEEEE!* work to reframe and revision the work collected in these anthologies as having specific rhetorical projects, whether in reading Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* as a social protest novel or John Okada's *No-No Boy* as a narrative of ethical formation or Michi Weglyn's *Years of Infamy* as a documentary exposition

1. See Young 2006 for a discussion about the development of the field.

on the Japanese American internment. In this collection, Bo Wang and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner each reframe the texts of Asian American writers that have been read through a literary studies lens as rhetorical texts offering specific arguments that address identity formation and the Asian American experience.

But how might we reframe and revision other Asian American texts as rhetorical texts? For example, how might *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1989), edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, or *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (1989), compiled and edited by the collective Asian Women United of California, be reframed and revisioned as collections of Asian American rhetoric more broadly and Asian American women's rhetoric more specifically? In particular, these collections were conceived as a challenge to orientalist stereotypes of Asian and Asian American women as passive and submissive and to argue that Asian/Asian American women have always been engaged in the work of writing, which has been sometimes forbidden but is now "making waves." Especially in the context of Third Wave and women of color feminism, anthologies such as *The Forbidden Stitch* and *Making Waves* offer specific histories of women's rhetoric as informed by and expressed within and beyond the Asian American community. How do the writers included in these anthologies address the topoi of gender, race, cultural identity, and social justice, among many other topics, as shaped by their experiences as Asian American women? How do these collections imagine and deploy genre (poetry, fiction, prose) and form (textual and visual) for rhetorical purposes? And finally, how do Asian American women employ the available means to persuade, argue, and situate themselves in the history of the United States and in the history of rhetoric?

Similarly, we might want to reframe discussions about Asian American alternative discourses. For example, the *IIIIIIIIII!* editors argue for an authentic language that reflects an Asian American sensibility, while examinations of Hawai'i pidgin or similar Asian American discourses have often been characterized as authentic expressive forms or highly stylized literary languages. While this suggests on one hand the idea that there are language practices that "capture" and reflect the experiences of a community, on the other hand this reduces these practices as simply organic expressions of being. However, what does it mean to consider pidgin or other Asian American linguistic forms, as Robyn Tasaka does in her chapter on Asian American student writing, as an intentional

rhetorical act that is aware of the subversive nature of form and its effect (either positive or negative) on an audience?

Finally, how might we reframe popular cultural texts that have often been consumed and interpreted for their social and political consequences but often undertheorized for the rhetorical work that they do? While American culture may have progressed to the point where we no longer see white actors performing “yellowface” in films (such as Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* or Katherine Hepburn in *Dragon Seed*), the construction and reception of Asian American actors and/or characters in media such as film and television can remain problematic. How do Asian Americans reframe and revision popular culture to intervene in the dominant discourses that have either romanticized or stigmatized Asian Americans, with serious material and symbolic consequences? In their chapters, Rory Ong and Vincent N. Pham and Kent Ono each offer alternative popular cultural texts that act in the interests of Asian Americans, to examine how these cultural texts are intentional rhetorical acts that challenge dominant representations.

DOING ASIAN AMERICAN RHETORIC

As the title of this collection suggests, representation is a central concern in the project of Asian American rhetoric. Not only does such a project involve the representation of Asian Americans in the Rhetorical Tradition and in doing rhetorical work, it is also about how Asian Americans and their cultures have been represented through the use of language and other symbolic means. We hope that this collection has begun the work of “translating” and “transforming” discourses about Asian Americans and their rhetorical work. As the essays in this collection illustrate, self-presentation or the development of ethos is an important rhetorical act for Asian Americans, who have often been subject to having ethos imposed upon them by others. However, what is also clear throughout this collection, and as Hyoejin Yoon has argued in her chapter, Asian American rhetoric is an embodied practice, where Asian Americans are in a constant process of challenging the ways they have been constructed through the available, and yet-to-be-available, means of persuasion.

We call on the field to do the work of Asian American rhetoric: to participate in the representation of self and community, to engage with representations, and to challenge those representations that produce damage for Asian Americans. Doing Asian American rhetoric is not

simply the process of using language for persuasive purposes. Rather, it involves the work of recovering and discovering Asian American rhetoric, of reframing and revisioning those texts produced by Asian Americans through a rhetorical lens, and of representing this rhetorical work within and beyond our community and within and beyond our nation-state. What is to be done? Much, and these projects become more significant and consequential as the U.S. community continues to change and as globalization challenges us to engage with the Other across cultures and communities to seek better understanding and to cultivate a common sense of purpose that can bind us all.

It is perhaps befitting for us to end this volume here by returning to where it all began—that is, to the book cover image by Susan Sponsler, a Korean adoptee and an Asian American artist. The image, titled “All American Girl I,” superimposes an American flag over the barely visible face of an Asian girl, whose Asian/alien identity is made visible only by her *slanted* eyes. We chose this image for the cover of this volume for two main reasons.

First, we wanted to use this image to remind us all that the world this image evokes or symbolizes may still be lurking in our lives in ways big and small. It is a world where Asian Americans can only make their presence felt, if at all, not by what they truly stand for, but by what they may look like; not by being in the foreground, but by being in the background or on the periphery; and not by an identity that is being realized through their own words and actions, but by an identity that can only be seen on the strength of and/or due to the visibility of an American flag.

Second, and more important, we wanted to juxtapose this image or the world it symbolizes with a very different world—one that this volume begins to portray and one that we very much want to use to supplant the other. We wanted to suggest that this is a world where Asians and Asian Americans have begun to re-present what has been represented of them and to reassert and perform an identity that has been denied them for so long. It is a world where the American flag is no longer their sole *cover* for identification or existence but becomes *one* of many discursive means to represent their identity. To the extent that we have done that in this volume, and to the extent that we have made Asians and Asian Americans visible with this rhetoric of becoming, we will have realized our objectives, and we will have moved a step closer toward developing a theory of Asian American rhetoric.

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