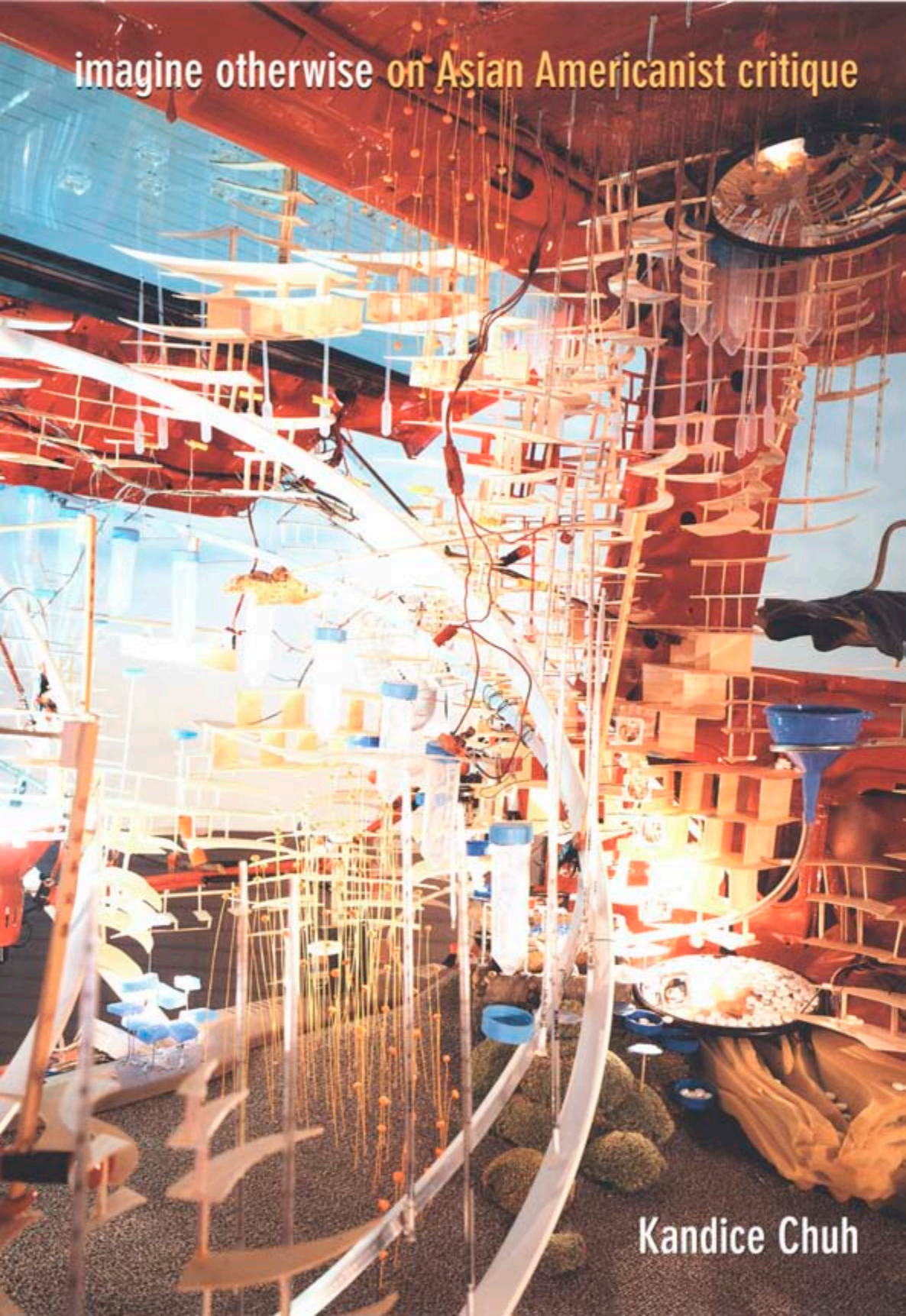


imagine otherwise on Asian Americanist critique



Kandice Chuh

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to my parents, with love and gratitude

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preface:

imagine otherwise

That life is complicated is a theoretical statement that guides efforts to treat race, class, and gender dynamics and consciousness as more dense and delicate than those categorical terms often imply. It is a theoretical statement that might guide a critique of privately purchased rights, of various forms of blindness and sanctioned denial; that might guide an attempt to drive a wedge into lives and visions of freedom ruled by the nexus of market exchange. It is a theoretical statement that invites us to see with portentous clarity into the heart and soul of American life and culture, and to track events, stories, anonymous and history-making actions to their density, to the point where we might catch a glimpse of what Patricia Williams calls the “vast networking of our society” and imagine otherwise. You could say this is a folk theoretical statement. We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there.

—Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological*

Imagination (1997)

This book takes its title from Avery Gordon's call to evoke the potential transformative power of envisioning life and culture in ways deeply cognizant of the diverse and intricate forms they assume. The idea of imagining otherwise captures my sense of Asian American literatures—of how they articulate the complexities of power and personhood involved in imagining and narrating relations to the nation, America, which is at the same time the same as and more than the U.S. nation-state. It evokes how they at once critique the ways of knowing forwarded in the name of "America," but also work prophetically, presaging the elsewhere of Gordon's "folk theory." I mean this title, this idea, to inscribe Asian American literatures as epistemological projects engaged in a politics of knowledge. *Imagine Otherwise* advances a critical approach to the study of Asian American literatures that conceives of that work as theoretical devices that help us apprehend and unravel the narrative dimensions of naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities. I argue for a definition of "Asian American" that relies not on the empirical presence of Asian-raced bodies in the United States for its intelligibility, but for one that instead emphasizes the fantasy links between body and subjectivity discursively forged within the literary and legal texts considered here. *Imagine Otherwise* attempts to demonstrate how this understanding can provide grounds for continuing to mobilize and deploy the term "Asian American" in light and in spite of contemporary critiques of its limitations. Informed by poststructural insights into the nature of language and knowledge, my interest here is in investigating the structures of power and meaning that give rise to identity and difference as national and racial epistemes. To imagine otherwise is not simply a matter of seeing a common object from different perspectives. Rather, it is about undoing the very notion of common objectivity itself and about recognizing the ethicopolitical implications of multiple epistemologies—theories about knowledge formation and the status and objects of knowledge—that underwrite alternative perspectives.

Although the title of this book draws from Avery Gordon, its arguments and, indeed, the very fact of its completion owe much to the critical generosity of many others. Most immediately, I acknowledge with deep thanks Lisa Lowe, whose rigorous readings of multiple drafts of the manuscript—always offered in a spirit of constructive, collaborative effort—were in so many ways crucial to this endeavor. I am grateful to Ken Wissoker, at Duke University Press, who had an astonishing faith in this project when, at

times, there was perhaps little reason to do so. I have also had the inestimable benefit of the sustaining friendship and intellectual camaraderie of Karen Shimakawa, who continues to shape my thinking in all of the important ways. Likewise, Nicole King and William Cohen were the most necessary of touchstones as I worked to complete this book. Both reached across distances and differences of various kinds to offer critical input and boundless support.

What I am describing in relation to all of those acknowledged here is precisely the practice of critical generosity. The phrase comes from David Román and is particularly appropriately used here because he was instrumental to the development of the initial germs of this project during my years as a graduate student. Carolyn Allen, Tani Barlow, Evan Watkins, Shawn Wong, Traise Yamamoto, and, especially, Susan Jeffords have my great thanks as well in this regard. And I have been enormously fortunate to find colleagues at the University of Maryland who are equally critical and generous. In that context, I thank Jonathan Auerbach, Susan Leonardi, and particularly Robert Levine and Sangeeta Ray for offering truly helpful commentary on various chapters. Let me acknowledge also students at the University of Maryland with whom I have the privilege of working. The ways in which they challenge my thinking and energize my efforts are embedded in this book.

I am glad also to have the opportunity to thank Leti Volpp, who shares her work and engages with mine in the most productive of ways; and K. Scott Wong, whose critique was enormously important to the final shape of chapter 4 in particular. The insights I have mined from illuminating exchanges over the many years it has taken to complete this work with, variously, Cathy Davidson, Rosemary George, Gayatri Gopinath, Neil Gotanda, Judith Halberstam, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Daniel Kim, George Lipsitz, Nayan Shah, Mary Helen Washington, and Lisa Yoneyama in many ways animate the arguments here. And Christine Dahlin, Rebecca Johns-Danes, and Fred Kameny at Duke University Press have my thanks for their work in shepherding this project through the publication process.

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introduction:

on Asian Americanist critique

Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation; it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state.—Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996)

Justice remains, is yet, to come. Perhaps, one must always say for justice.—Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law” (1992)

We need to remember as intellectuals that the battles we fight are battles of words. . . . What academic intellectuals must confront is thus not their “victimization” by society at large (or their victimization-in-solidarity-with-the-oppressed), but the power, wealth, and privilege that ironically accumulate from their “oppositional” viewpoint, and the widening gap between the professed contents of their words and the upward mobility they gain from such words.
—Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora* (1993)

The Hawai'i of Lois Ann Yamanaka's novel, *Blu's Hanging* (1997), is anything but paradisaical. Filled with poverty and meanness, with violence and uncertain futures for the Ogata children who anchor the novel, *Blu's Hanging* directly challenges edenic images of the islands. It is indeed a challenging book on many fronts, depicting as it does vivid accounts of child abuse entwined with cruelty to animals, and culminating in the rape of the novel's eponymous character. And it does so in a lyrical prose that underscores the intolerability of the situation presented by juxtaposing poetics with violation.

In some perhaps perverse sense, it seems fitting that this thematically provocative novel should have animated the intense discussions that reached a climax at the Association for Asian American Studies' 1998 Annual Conference, held in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Practitioners of Asian American studies will no doubt be familiar with the controversy surrounding the novel. Briefly, criticized for its putatively racist representations of Filipino Americans, the novel's naming as Best Fiction by the association incited impassioned debate that led ultimately to the rescinding of the award and concomitant en masse resignation of the association's executive board.¹ For many, the awarding of this prize to *Blu's Hanging* signified the validation of racist representations by the Association itself, charges especially troubling for an organization in a field that emerged in large part precisely to counter racism. Perhaps for all, it provoked debate regarding freedom of artistic expression and critical evaluation—a thematization of the relationships between politics and aesthetics forwarded by this kind of association and award. In one sense, this controversy functioned as a crucible for testing the politics and practices of the association and its membership, dramatically highlighting marginalization and exclusionary knowledge politics within Asian American studies. And certainly, though these events are contemporary, these issues are not. They have circulated in the field since its inception in the 1960s and 1970s, as the grounding assumptions of to whom and to what "Asian American" refers, of the nature and constitution of the object of knowledge of Asian American studies, have faced repeated interrogation. Criticized for its homogenization of peoples, artifacts, and histories, and for its sometime deployment with masculinist and heteronormative biases and tacit East Asian orientation, "Asian American" as a term of criticism has never functioned as a label free of dispute. Through this controversy, perhaps because it seemed that the future of the

association—one of the relatively few institutional sites for Asian American studies—was in jeopardy, attending critically to marginalization has gained a sense of field-wide immediacy.

In the aftermath of these events, as the association has rebuilt itself and many have attempted to apprehend their precipitating conditions, that multiple issues of concern for Asian American studies collided around the award has become evident. In retrospect, allegations of marginalization seem to have referred not only to biases in terminology and critical practice, but obliquely to the very orientation of the field as well: Activist or academic? Practical or theoretical? Had the association, the field, become too institutionalized, cut off from not only its membership, but also and maybe more importantly, “the community”? Had it lost, through that disconnection, a clear sense of how to conduct antiracist work?

Such questions arise at a time when discourses like transnationalism and postcolonialism solicit examination of the implicit framing principles of nation-based fields like Asian American studies. Propounding, or at least auguring, the end of the dominance of the nation-state as the preeminent unit of global organization, transnationalism recognizes contemporary flows of capital and information that seemingly find national borders irrelevant and “patriotic” loyalties displaced from nation-states to differently configured collectivities. It suggests that it is no longer clear—if it ever was—that the subject (“American”) is a discretely bounded, discretely knowable entity merely modified by a specific adjective (“Asian”). Postcolonial studies, too, has mounted its own interrogations of the nation-state form, especially regarding its viability as a site of post-colonial liberation. Although with an emphasis on European colonialisms and their consequences in Asia and Africa, postcolonialism in the U.S. academy has of late become increasingly important to illuminating U.S. practices of empire. The critiques of modernity emergent under the rubric of postcolonial studies both inform and compel investigation of the U.S. nation-state, the putative and self-proclaimed representative of the achievement of modernity’s principles of the Rule of Law, Democracy, and Equality. The already complex matter of understanding the position of U.S. racialized minorities is further complicated by recognizing the United States as an imperial metropole. I wonder, in hindsight, if the award controversy did not perhaps find especially fertile ground in light of these broad-based incitements to rearticulate the field.

Imagine Otherwise undertakes a critical consideration of Asian American studies, motivated in part by questions that arose through the award controversy, questions that give added impetus to revisit its framing assumptions in light of critiques of the (U.S.) nation-state emergent through postcolonial and transnational studies. I mean to ask after the coherency and object(ive)s of Asian American studies and to understand its work as both an academic field and an explicitly political project. I take the award controversy as my point of departure because it brings into sharp relief the significant differences too easily elided by the rubric “Asian American,” differences both enumerated and complicated in part through the critiques mounted by postcolonial and transnational theorizing. Asian Americanists continue to search for ways to negotiate such differences so that the field can remain a politicized tool for social justice; this book attempts to contribute to such a project. My focus, in working through Asian American literatures toward that end, results from working in both Asian American studies and U.S. American literary studies as my two primary field locations. What motivates “Asian American” in the face of infinite heterogeneity among its referents? What does it mean to be a practitioner of Asian American studies when the anchoring terms—“Asian” and “American”—seem so fatally unstable? Does field coherency depend on political consensus, and, if so, what are the terms of those politics? What are the connections between the political and the literary? Is “Asian American” literature to be read/evaluated somehow differently from “American literature,” and if so, how?

These questions animate *Imagine Otherwise*. In their interrogations of referentiality and calls for reflexivity in discourse and politics, they register this book’s engagement with poststructural theorizing and its influence on the contemporary U.S. academic scene. Investigation of the currency and intelligibility of “Asian American” occasions scrutiny of that influence as an exigent condition of contemporary knowledge production. Arguably inaugurated by Ferdinand de Saussure’s theorization of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign in the opening decades of the twentieth century, poststructuralism’s radical destabilization of fixity and transparency in language has been manifested in what is often understood as the postmodern phenomenon of the assertion and recognition of the constructedness of “the real.” That is, under the name of postmodernism, and underwritten by the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s that similarly de-

manded a radical interrogation of authority, poststructuralism's insights articulate to a critique of European master narratives of progressive subjective enlightenment characterizing modernity. And in the U.S. context, that articulation has conditioned the emergence of multiculturalism, which can thus be seen as a consequence of challenges to and the unraveling of structuring meta-narratives.² A paradigm that acknowledges the limitations of meta-narratives of Identity and History, multiculturalism is often evoked as justification for fields like Asian American studies. In other words, Asian American studies may be seen as a formation of the critical landscape configured by a (poststructural) problematization of referentiality, which facilitates the (postmodern) jettisoning of the authority of the meta-narrative.

Despite these genealogical links to poststructural theory, Asian American studies has yet, I believe, to contend thoroughly with their implications. And at least two reasons for this are immediately apparent. First, the dominant narrative of Asian American studies consistently foregrounds political activism, especially in the language of community work and social transformation, an emphasis that derives from its rootedness in the socio-political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Student strikes in that era on the campuses of San Francisco State University and the University of California at Berkeley compelled the academic institutionalization of Asian American studies, a process that continues today at various sites around the nation. The vitality of this narrative, which has in many ways been instrumental to establishing Asian American studies in institutional locations over the past three decades, has tended to overshadow other possible narratives of the field's emergence.

And second, it is arguably politically suspect to claim or adopt a relation to poststructuralism, a deeply Eurocentric philosophical tradition that makes difficult immediate political intervention by means of its destabilization of subjectivity itself.³ In undermining the knowability of "knowledge," poststructural thinking corrodes the authority of the "knowing" subject, whose grounds for action are consequently called into question. Here, subjectivity is conceived as an unstable construct of repressive/constructive orders of knowledge.⁴ Neither "subject" nor "knowledge" has within this framework immanent authority/validity/stability.

Despite, on the one hand, the value of the political activist narrative of Asian American studies and, on the other, the questionability of tracing Asian American studies through poststructuralism, I believe that investigat-

ing the object(ive)s of Asian American studies in relation to poststructural theorizing illuminates ways that the field may productively imagine itself within the contexts and currents of the present historical moment. This is done in part to enable us fully to contend with the impact of liberal multiculturalism, arguably the dominating paradigm of U.S. academic culture today. Multiculturalism, contradictorily, attempts to retain a liberal conception of subjectivity while simultaneously claiming to take seriously radical critiques of precisely the liberal subject. In so doing, it occludes and effaces the historicity of racism and the deep-rootedness of racialization as a technology through which the United States, also contradictorily, has perpetuated a self-stylization as the achievement of the universalist Enlightenment values of equality and liberty. This kind of multiculturalism manages at once to sediment Asian Americanness in a narrative of otherness that achieves cohesiveness through an emphasis on (previous) exclusion and powerlessness, and to erase the continuities of the materialities underwriting such positions by insisting on the irrelevance of the past.⁵ In light of these effects, what does recognizing Asian American studies as a formation of multiculturalism mean in efforts to conceive Asian Americanist discourse under contemporary historical conditions?

The current moment includes globalized practices of capital that have instituted demographic and immigration patterns in such ways as to prompt deliberate attention to how the “national” articulates to the “global.” It is by now commonplace to recognize that globalization has made it an increasingly difficult task to determine with any certainty what peoples and cultural practices belong to or originate from where.⁶ Globalization refers to the transformations of economic, political, and social organization set in motion by the emergence of transnational capitalist practices, especially since the 1970s. Unlike the multinational corporations of the previous iteration of capitalism, transnational corporations are unanchored in a given nation but rather are highly flexible and mobile in their pursuit of the locales that will best maximize their accumulation of capital.⁷ Transnational corporations in fact prompt the development of new nation-specific laws that serve their interests, a phenomenon that signals the erosion of the sovereign power of nation-states. Transnational capitalism is a global mode of production that is globalizing in its attempts to integrate all sectors of the world economy into its logic of commodification. Class exploitation in contemporaneous forms, articulated in racialized and gendered differentia-

tion and layered unevenly across the north/south, first/third world divides, aggressively inscribes this globalized terrain.⁸ Multilateral cultural and information flows, enabled by contemporary technologies and driven by jagged relations of power, circulate across this landscape.

The shifts referred to by globalization include the changing economic significance of the Asia-Pacific region, which has affected the demographics and subjectivities of Asian-raced peoples in the United States. The U.S. 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act coincided with the post-World War II burgeoning strength of Asian economies, a difference in circumstance from earlier conditions that has resulted in a resurgence of immigration from Asia to the United States. But now, at least in part, no longer are Asian nations perceived, Eurocentrically, primarily as sources of labor and raw materials for "Western" capitalism. Rather, some are recognized exporters of capital and are influential nodes in the multilateral trajectories of transnational capitalism. Accordingly, while an underclass of immigrant laborers characterizes present as it did past flows of migration to the United States, today there is also a large professional, managerial class whose migrations may be multilateral and whose members are not necessarily interested in formally attaching themselves to the United States by way of citizenship.

Because the 1965 legislation favored the latter cohort of migrants, the roughly fivefold increase between 1970 and 1990 in the population of persons of Asian descent living in the United States has meant dramatic alterations to "Asian America" along multiple identificatory axes, including nativity and citizenship. Theorization of subjectivity follows suit, as earlier models of subject formation face revision to better correlate with this globalized scene. "Oppression," "marginalization," and "resistance," keywords in dominant narratives of Asian American studies, are terms that each require redefinition within this globalized context, as "by whom" and "against what" are questions that are increasingly difficult to answer with certitude. The uneven power relations and disparate distribution of resources to which these terms refer have not dissolved; rather, they have been articulated into new forms, necessitating investigation of the "scattered hegemonies" that characterize the present (Grewal and Kaplan 1994).

This moment too is characterized by discourses like feminism that also prompt concerted efforts to conceptualize subjectivity in ways that privilege difference over identity through interrogations of the racialized,

gendered, classed, and sexualized ideologies underwriting U.S. national subjectivity. The convergence of these socio-discursive movements that critically recognize diversity and those that illuminate the operations and effects of globalization compels the generation of epistemologies that bear a renewed sense of the difficulties of defining (much less achieving) justice given shifting material terrains and the irreducible complexities of life, culture, and politics.⁹ Poststructuralism or, more specifically, a “deconstructive attitude” contributes to this process by emphasizing the need to interrogate “identity-as-such,” as R. Radhakrishnan has put it (1996, xxiii). The maintenance of a deconstructive attitude keeps contingency, irresolution, and nonequivalence in the foreground of this discourse. Such a stance helps the interrogation of field coherency in the face of multiple kinds of differences, precisely by its emphasis on difference as anterior to and irresolvable in identity.

Recall that deconstruction is neither method nor technique; rather, it is the state of internal contradiction itself, of the constitutive difference within any seemingly stable term (*différance*). “Asian American,” because it is a term in *difference from itself*—at once making a claim of achieved subjectivity and referring to the impossibility of that achievement—deconstructs itself, is itself deconstruction. “Deconstruction takes place,” Jacques Derrida theorizes. “It is an *event* that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject” (1988a, 4). In other words, deconstruction is a state of becoming and undoing in the same moment. “Asian American” is / names racism and resistance, citizenship and its denial, subjectivity and subjection—at once the becoming and undoing—and, as such, is a designation of the (im)possibility of justice, where “justice” refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable, one that can only connotatively be implied. Arguably, the overarching purpose of Asian American studies has been and continues to be pursuit of this (im)possibility, the pursuit of an as yet unrealized state of justice by tracing, arguing, and critiquing, and by alternatively imagining the conditions that inscribe its (im)possibility. Justice is understood here not as the achievement of a determinate end, but rather as an endless project of searching out the knowledge and material apparatuses that extinguish some (Other) life ways and that hoard economic and social opportunities only for some.

As the discussion that follows will show, a deconstructive understanding of “Asian American” emphasizes a necessary reflectiveness of Asian Ameri-

canist discourse upon itself. In part, this serves as an effort to intervene in multiculturalist ways of subjectifying and conceiving Asian American and other ethnic studies fields, to work through and against, in other words, the liberal legacy of negotiating identity and difference in such a way as to flatten power relations. But also, this deconstructive attitude attempts to shift the grounds of intrafield debates about Asian American subjectivity that seem to resort to some version of identity for intelligibility. To imagine otherwise is not about imagining as the other, but rather, is about imagining the other differently. It is, to borrow from Gayatri Spivak, “to recognize agency in others, not simply to comprehend otherness” (1997, 473; emphasis original). By emphasizing the internal instability of “Asian American,” identity of and as the other—the marginal, the marginalized—is encouraged to collapse so that the power relations to which it referred may be articulated anew, as the basis and effect of an Asian Americanist discourse grounded in difference.

I recognize that in interpreting Asian American studies in these particular ways, I am prioritizing the role of literary studies despite its constitution by multiple disciplines. Clearly, my own disciplinary biases are in play. At the same time and not unrelatedly, I will suggest that approaching Asian American studies literarily traces the internal work (the deconstruction) of individual disciplines necessary for Asian American studies to work interdisciplinarily in more than name alone. And that remains a project of some significance for Asian American studies, lest its transformative energies be deflated by cooptation of its practitioners into traditional disciplinary divisions, a point to which I shall later return.

Imagine Otherwise argues that current conditions call for conceiving Asian American studies as a *subjectless discourse*. I mean subjectlessness to create the conceptual space to prioritize difference by foregrounding the discursive constructedness of subjectivity. In other words, it points attention to the constraints on the liberatory potential of the achievement of subjectivity, by reminding us that a “subject” only becomes recognizable and can act as such by conforming to certain regulatory matrices. In that sense, a subject is always also an epistemological object. If Asian Americanists have mounted sophisticated interrogations of representational objectifications of Asian-raced peoples in the United States, of dehumanizing images that affiliate certain object-ive meanings to certain bodies, we have not, I think, always paid such critical attention to “Asian Americans” and to “Asian

American studies” as “subjects” that emerge through epistemological objectification. Part of the difficulty in doing so results from the powerful demands of the U.S. nation-state’s celebration of citizenship, or national subjectivity, held out as “natural” and tantamount to achieved equality and so long denied to Asian-raced peoples. In spite of claims about the death of the Subject heralded by postmodernism, the idea and importance of a consummate subjectivity remains unabashedly vital in the state apparatuses of the law. As the uniquely authorized discourse of the nation, and in contrast to the postulation of the modern era that subjects (to monarchical power) have transformed into consensual citizens (of a nation-state), law requires subjection/subjectification.¹⁰ The centrality of citizenship and subjectivity to the politics of modernity both motivates and explains Asian American studies’ central concerns with representation and representational politics in similar terms. The importance of political/legal subject status telescopes into the importance of discursive subject status; the metaphor of marginalization manifests the distance between these—between, that is, the “American” and the “Asian American.” And clearly, as long as the state demands subjectivity and wields its particular kinds of power, Asian Americanists cannot simply dismiss those terms altogether.

At the same time, and despite how enormously enabling citizenship continues to be in the garnering of access to certain material resources, subjectivity itself, alone, cannot remedy injustice. Recognition of the subject as epistemological object cautions against failing endlessly to put into question both “Asian American” as the subject/object of Asian Americanist discourse and of U.S. nationalist ideology, and Asian American studies as the subject/object of dominant paradigms of the U.S. university. Otherwise, Asian American studies can too easily fall into working within a framework, with attendant problematic assumptions of essential identities, homologous to that through which U.S. nationalism has created and excluded “others.” Subjectlessness, as a conceptual tool, points to the need to manufacture “Asian American” situationally. It serves as the ethical grounds for the political practice of what I would describe as a strategic anti-essentialism—as, in other words, the common ethos underwriting the coherency of the field. If we accept a priori that Asian American studies is subjectless, then rather than looking to complete the category “Asian American,” to actualize it by such methods as enumerating various components of differences (gender, class, sexuality, religion, and so on), we are