

# Letter from an American Professor: An Asian American Education in the South

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## ABSTRACT

As the field of Asian American studies has grown and developed, so too has the number of professors teaching Asian American studies content, particularly within the South. Diverting from the conventional format for academic writing, this paper offers a series of personal as well as professional observations on teaching Asian American studies in the South (at UNC). Responding to segments of Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, I attempt to illuminate the nexus of abstract theory and lived experience, the episodes I relate demonstrating my own nascent theorizing on Asian American studies in the South and the multiple intersections I encounter as an Asian American woman teaching Asian American studies in the U.S. South.

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## I: INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?

*"He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours [sic] and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world." (70)*

—HECTOR ST. JOHN DE CREVECOEUR, "WHAT IS AN AMERICAN" FROM  
*LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*

**I**n *Letters from an American Farmer*, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's most often quoted and well known chapter, "What is an American," articulates the "American dream" of reinvention: in America you can be anyone you want to be. De Crevecoeur's vision of reinvention pivots on the idea that one can be

born anew in the crucible of the American melting pot and be part of a new “race” of Americans. As the above epigraph stipulates, membership requirements are a simple means of exchange: you give up the old and are embraced by the new. Yet looking at a few lines previous to the above quotation, de Crevecoeur’s delineation of who, exactly, qualifies as an “American” in 18<sup>th</sup> C. colonial America is clear: “He is either an European, or the descendant of an European” (69), and in answering the hypothetical query of the national origins of all these new “Americans,” de Crevecoeur states that “[t]hey are mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” (68). De Crevecoeur’s earliest notions of who “counts” as an American was based on the ethnic lineage of the earliest European immigrants to the new world and not on the African slaves they brought with them nor the indigenous “Indians” they displaced. It is always important to remember that who counts as an American and who is envisioned as part of the new American race has often been a European dream of assimilation, even as de Crevecoeur discussed other “races” of Africans and Native Americans within his text. Yet despite or perhaps even because of this elision, the myth of remaking oneself in the American crucible of “race” is one that is compelling—the idea that one can remake oneself and become something beyond one’s origins of birth or upbringing. Although I, and others, may have been left out of de Crevecoeur’s original conception of “What is an American,” I can still believe that as an American, I, too, am promised the opportunity for reinvention, even if my path may be different than others.

I begin with de Crevecoeur because his *Letters from an American Farmer*, canonical in the world of American letters, has been useful in my own thinking about my subject position as an American professor<sup>1</sup> teaching Asian American literature in a land, the “South,”<sup>2</sup> alien to both my personal childhood in California and my professional upbringing in New England. In other words, de Crevecoeur’s subject position as a European immigrant writing imaginary letters to a friend in England about experiences loosely based on his own life resonate with my own experiences as an outsider looking into a culture unfamiliar to me.<sup>3</sup> I also share with him a sense of being a pioneer, a frontiers(wo)man of sorts. While de Crevecoeur worked to cultivate his farm and introduce plant species and animal husbandry to an untamed land, I work to cultivate knowledge by and about Asian Americans and to introduce Asian American epistemology to a place that has largely only thought of race in black and white terms.

Asian American Studies, as an academic discipline, is a developing field within U.S. universities and colleges. Emerging out of the Civil Rights and anti-war protests of the 1960s, Asian American studies has been slow to make inroads east of California, and even slower in the Southern region of the United States.<sup>4</sup> However, as Asian American studies has grown as a discipline,

so too has the number of professors teaching Asian American studies content, particularly within the South.<sup>5</sup> For the last few years at the Association for Asian American Studies conference, there has been a roundtable panel on the challenges of teaching Asian American studies south of the Mason-Dixon line. Most recently in 2006, the annual meeting of the AAAS was held in Atlanta, the first time the conference was convened in the South, and the program offerings reflected the intersections of Southern studies and Asian American studies.

As a recent hire to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and their first tenure-track line dedicated to Asian American studies, I have been literally living at this intersection of Asian American and Southern Studies at the flagship university of the state of North Carolina.<sup>6</sup> This essay, the title of which plays off of de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, offers a series of personal as well as professional observations on teaching Asian American studies in the South. The education I allude to in my title does not simply refer to the one that goes on in my classroom but an education of my colleagues and larger community about what Asian American studies encompasses as well as my own education on being an Asian American educator in the South.

Although the format of this paper is unconventional from a traditional academic perspective, my intention is to offer these observations as an intersection of theory and praxis. As feminist scholar Barbara Christian has so eloquently argued, "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing...is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language" (226). The stories I wish to relate form part of my own nascent theorizing on Asian American studies in the South and the multiple intersections I encounter as an Asian American woman teaching Asian American studies in the U.S. South. As De Crevecoeur does in his own *Letters*, I will be melding fact with fiction, changing names and the chronology of events as a way to protect both myself (as a yet to be tenured assistant professor) as well as others (those of my friendship and acquaintance who may not want to see themselves rendered in this essay). Like de Crevecoeur, I offer sketches of my impressions of life in the South and descriptions of the education I have received about the South as an Asian American as well as the Asian American education I believe others—my students, colleagues, neighbors, and strangers—have been subject to since my arrival.

## II: MANNERS AND CUSTOMS OF "THE SOUTH" – MUTUAL MISPERCEPTIONS OF THE SOUTH AND OF ASIAN AMERICANS

*[A] considerable number of them purchased a large track of land in the county of Orange, in North Carolina, situated on the several spring heads of Deep River,*

*which is the western branch of Cape Fear, or North West River. The advantage of being able to convey themselves by sea, to within forty miles of the spot, the richness of the soil, &c. made them cheerfully quit an island on which there was no longer any room for them. . . . No spot of earth can be more beautiful; it is composed of gentle hills, of easy declivities, excellent low lands, accompanied by different brooks which traverse this settlement.”(145-46)*

—DE CREVECOEUR, “MANNERS AND CUSTOMS AT NANTUCKET,”

*LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*

I live in Orange County, North Carolina, but it is not the Orange County of my California days—the place south of Los Angeles that television made famous through recounting the exploits of beautiful people who live in the “OC.” Orange County, North Carolina is home to Chapel Hill and the oldest public university in the U.S.<sup>7</sup> that shares its name: UNC Chapel Hill, or “Carolina” as most North Carolinians like to say.<sup>8</sup> The Orange County that de Crevecoeur describes above looks vastly different today, yet it is still a beautiful place of rolling hills and a soil that sustains enormous Southern magnolia trees and wisteria blossoms in the springtime. Before moving to Chapel Hill, I had heard many friends and acquaintances extol the virtues of living in Chapel Hill—what locals here call “a little slice of heaven.”

Yet I did not plan to move South, either from California (where I was raised, discounting the first four years of my life spent in Flushing, Queens) or from Massachusetts (where I completed my PhD in English). My experiences south of the Mason-Dixon line were limited to a cross-country trip from Santa Barbara to Boston, with stops in New Orleans, LA, Atlanta, GA, and Asheville, NC, and a conference in Knoxville, TN, where the taxi driver who took me to my hotel asked whether I had any “Injun” in me, as he pulled my suitcase from the back of his cab. Apparently I looked like a member of the nearby Cherokee nation (and apparently he had not encountered any Chinese Americans before), and he was disappointed to hear that my answer was “no.” Despite the number of people in my acquaintance who assured me of the excellence of UNC Chapel Hill’s academic reputation and the high quality of life found in Chapel Hill, NC and the surrounding environs, my concerns and my stereotypes of the South made me apprehensive about life in this ex-Confederate state.

In particular, I was worried about how I would be received as an Asian American—would I encounter a lot of racism? And more importantly, how were Asian Americans treated in the South? In voicing my racial anxieties to two friends born and raised in the South, one black and one white, both assured me that I would not have any problems because Asian Americans are treated like they are “white” in the South; thus, I wouldn’t experience any overt racism. Yet this answer, rather than alleviating my concerns, exacerbated

them. Furthermore, their answer seemed both unintentionally condescending (towards myself and everyone I would encounter in the South) and confusing to me. Did my friends mean that Southerners would be unable to recognize Asians as a separate racial group or that African Americans were such a despised and downtrodden minority that I should be thankful for my model minority status? Or that racism was so rampant towards African Americans that I would be safe as an “honorary white” while living in the South? As one who researches and teaches on Asian American topics and as one who identifies as Asian American, I was concerned about this honorary white status in its implication of eliding racial issues that Asian Americans face. And although I had my friends’ sentiments corroborated by at least one colleague once I moved to North Carolina,<sup>9</sup> I am still perturbed by the glib reassurances of some others who feel that Asian Americans suffer no racial animosity or racial difference from whites here in North Carolina, both because I believe it to be untrue and because I believe Asian Americans need to be understood as a racial category separate from either black or white.<sup>10</sup>

In truth, my friends’ assertions have turned out, largely, to be right in the sense that I have not suffered from any undue racial animosity or hostility since moving here, though I have had my share of comic, confusing, and condescending interactions from people who aren’t sure how to place me or react to my “Asian” status. Case in point: twice while walking down a popular street in Chapel Hill, I was stopped by two different pairs of African Americans—in the first instance, a man and woman in their twenties paused as I approached them, and the man in the duo took a kung-fu stance and karate chopped the air while he said “Hi-ya! Bruce Lee!” His companion hit him on the arm and told him he was messed up, and then they both smiled and passed by me. I stood there, completely baffled at this exchange, which oddly enough was repeated a week later by two different African American young adults, this time two men who did almost the same identical gestures and phrasings when they saw me approach. In neither instance did I feel hostility from these interactions. In an odd way, I felt that both pairs were trying, somehow, to be friendly, if in a condescending and mocking way.<sup>11</sup>

The other stereotyping I’ve received since moving here has come from well-intentioned white Southern men who have asked me whether I am “Hawaiian” or who simply want to know “where I’m REALLY from.”<sup>12</sup> When I insist to these gentlemen that I am NOT Hawaiian, they insist that I “look” Hawaiian—with one older gentleman going as far as to quiz me about my ethnicity—asking me if I’m “sure” I’m not Hawaiian and then telling me that I look exactly like the women he has encountered in Hawaii, before going into the standard set of questions that many Asian Americans face: what is our “nationality,” where were we born, what language do we speak, and when did we last visit our “mother” country. When I’ve encountered this line of inter-

rogation, I am always surprised by the unacknowledged entitlement that my interlocutors possess—that it never dawns on them that their questions are rude, invasive, presumptuous, or designed to root out the exact “foreign” element of my person. And in doing so, they once again remind me (and themselves) of my inauthentic American status—that I do not truly belong here as a “real” un-hyphenated American such as themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond these odd racial incidents and my concerns about my honorary white status or my racial identity as Asian American being invisible to others in the South, I must admit that I have my own share of stereotypes and knee jerk reactions about life in an ex-Confederate state. Namely, that most white Southerners I would encounter would hold racist beliefs and opinions only kept in check by politeness and that life would be slow-paced, un-cosmopolitan, and bereft of the culture I had grown accustomed to growing up in California and studying in New England. In other words, I brought with me the biases and prejudices typical of most non-Southerners, particularly most “Yankees” of people in the South: that those with a southern accent, particularly white Southerners, were racist and uneducated hicks.

I don’t know that I would have admitted to this bias when I first moved to Chapel Hill, but after living here for five years, I must reluctantly admit to these narrow beliefs and to take responsibility for dismantling these stereotypes and working against these prejudices I have about Southern culture and Southern people. And in meeting and getting to know my colleagues at UNC Chapel Hill, as well as befriending my neighbors and members of the community, many of whom are white Southerners who grew up either in North Carolina or other ex-Confederacy states, I must admit that my stereotypes about Southern culture and people are being challenged and upended—which is always a good thing because it reminds me that my education as an Asian American professor must be on-going. As much as I’ve attempted to provide an education to my students about Asian American literature, I have gained an education in Southern norms and culture since I’ve moved here, thus allowing me to recognize my own internal discriminations and to strive towards eradicating them. Only by working on my own prejudices can I be an effective teacher of anti-racism myself.

### III: DISTRESSES OF AN ASIAN AMERICAN PROFESSOR TEACHING ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE SOUTH

*“There I shall contemplate nature in her most wild and ample extent; I shall carefully study a species of society, of which I have at present but very imperfect ideas; I will endeavour [sic] to occupy with propriety that place which will enable me to enjoy the few and sufficient benefits it confers. The solitary and unconnected*

*mode of life I have lived in my youth must fit me for this trial, I am not the first who has attempted it.*"(226)

—DE CREVECOEUR, "DISTRESSES OF A FRONTIER MAN," *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*

Like de Crevecoeur, at times I believe that my new home here in North Carolina has afforded me an opportunity to "carefully study a species of society, of which I have at present but very imperfect ideas," and at other times, I believe this is what my students and colleagues feel when they encounter both myself and the discipline of Asian American studies, because I think we often misunderstand and misinterpret one another. As an Asian American scholar who finds myself not only teaching east of California but south of the Mason-Dixon line, I have encountered many challenges in trying to introduce my students, and even my well-intentioned colleagues, to the field of Asian American studies. At times, I feel as if I were in a time warp, for the issues I find myself grappling with in the South are ones I grappled with as an undergraduate studying in the late 1990s in California.

Perhaps the most central point of distress for me as an Asian American professor researching and teaching Asian American literature in the South, has been the uphill battle of trying to make Asian American epistemology recognized as related to but distinctly separate from Asian studies. It's ironic, really, because within American Studies as well as Asian American Studies, the direction of both disciplines has been towards the transnational and the diasporic, with monographs, articles, and conference papers discussing the complexities of post-colonialism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism.<sup>14</sup> Yet I've been oddly nationalistic in my definition and defense of Asian American literature as a distinctly "American" writing, which has come in the face of the assumptions and stereotypes I've had to counter from both students as well as colleagues.

The central difficulty I've had in teaching Asian American literature in the South is in explaining the difference between Asian studies and Asian American studies, or Asian literature and Asian American literature. When I first began teaching Asian American literature here and queried my students about the works of Asian American literature they had already read, what became quickly apparent was their elision of Asian with Asian American, as novels by Banana Yoshimoto, Haruki Murakami, and Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, were among the works that they most often named.<sup>15</sup> Although I was heartened to hear that they had read some very fine Japanese authors (the mention of Arthur Golden notwithstanding), I was saddened to know that they were not distinguishing between Asian and Asian American.

Yet even among my faculty colleagues, I have been surprised at their confusion over the difference between Asian and Asian American literature. For

instance, I have had colleagues ask me if it's difficult for me to conduct research in Asian American literature when I am not fluent in Mandarin; whether it is difficult for me to find works in translation for my students; and general confusion over the simple difference between understanding Asian American studies and Asian studies. In answering their questions, I have patiently replied that neither my research nor teaching is impacted by my lack of Mandarin or any other Asian language since all the books I teach and use in my research are written in English by authors who almost all identify as American, whether in terms of their actual nationality or in terms of their cultural identity, and I explain that Asian American literature should really be considered a branch of American literature, much in the same way as one thinks of African American literature.<sup>16</sup>

My second realization that teaching Asian American literature and talking about Asian American studies at UNC Chapel Hill would be distinctly different from the conversations I have had in New England and California was when I first encountered a colleague in the School of Education. This faculty member self-disclosed that she was the white mother of an adopted Chinese daughter and was pleased that UNC Chapel Hill had hired someone who was Asian American to teach Asian American literature. I replied that I did, indeed, feel qualified to teach Asian American literature since I had written my dissertation on this topic and had been attending professional conferences in Asian American and multiethnic American literature over the last five years, but my interlocutor insisted that my students would benefit from taking a class with an "authentic" Asian American person who could "relate" to them.

Embedded in this well-intentioned colleague's remarks are sentiments that I've heard echoed by various people, both inside and outside of the campus community: that my identity as an Asian American woman uniquely qualifies me to understand and hence competently teach Asian American literature and that the students most interested in taking Asian American literature classes will be Asian American students looking to "find" themselves through the novels I teach. What is unacknowledged in these sentiments is the assumption that one's identity grants one authority over a subject matter—that as a woman I must be qualified to teach Women Studies classes—and that only students who share an identity with the subject matter will find their way into certain courses—which does leave me wondering at the number of non-English citizens who manage to enroll in their Shakespeare and Milton courses.

These assumptions about authenticity, authority, and identity are not limited to non-Asian Americans in the university. Indeed, an Asian American colleague in one of the professional schools once made a pitch to a senior level administrator arguing that Asian American studies classes were necessary for healthy identity formation of Asian American students. He was agitating for Asian American studies classes based on a belief that Asian American stu-

dents who were not exposed to Asian American history and culture would be lost, white-washed souls. In his model of Asian American studies, classes become a type of self-help group therapy, where the professor acts as a counselor for the students' healthy resolution of their identity troubles.

I attempted to point out to my well-intentioned Asian American colleague (whose research and teaching, I should now disclose, were not in the fields of Asian American or ethnic American epistemology whatsoever) that a stronger argument to make to the administration of UNC Chapel Hill for the formation of an Asian American studies program was that Asian American epistemology was a vibrant and growing field: that Asian American studies courses would benefit ALL students, particularly non-Asian American students. Furthermore, as a state that has a burgeoning Asian immigrant population community, North Carolina students would certainly benefit from learning about the history of Asian Americans in the U.S. as well as from reading (and discussing) Asian American literature. Unfortunately I was unable to make my Asian American colleague understand that an argument based on demographics alone was a losing one—certainly those of us who have colleagues in American Indian studies know all too well that we cannot make arguments for ethnic studies based on the demographic of one's community population. Yet, the therapeutic and demographic arguments seem to be the ones that are most compelling to those, both Asian American and otherwise, here in the South.

Finally, what distresses me the most about teaching Asian American studies in the South is the lack of visibility and support for understanding Asian Americans as a racial group distinct, separate, and yet important to conversations about race occurring in this region. Again, I must confess my own nascent ignorance about the complicated, traumatic, and intricate history of race relations in the South. Since moving to North Carolina, I have been pleased to receive a rich education on the history of the state's race relations, both formally and informally through sitting in on symposiums, discussing the state of race relations over coffee with friends and colleagues, and talking with my students about their understanding of "race" growing up in North Carolina. And what I have learned is that predominantly North Carolinians, those who are either African American or Caucasian, largely comprehend race as a shorthand for black-white relations here in the South. Although Latino immigrants have grown exponentially in this state and although Asian Americans have been a small but persistent presence here (even in the Jim Crow era), growing in numbers post-1968 Immigration Act, the conversations about race largely take place within black-white paradigms in the South, with a nod, sometimes, to local Native populations, like the Lumbee Indians, and increasingly with attention towards Latino populations. Nevertheless, Asian Americans, by and large, remain an invisible minority group within the university

environment as well as the larger conversations about race happening around the state.

#### IV: ON THE SITUATION, FEELINGS, AND PLEASURES OF AN ASIAN AMERICAN EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH

*“Good and evil I see is to be found in all societies, and it is in vain to seek for any spot where those ingredients are not mixed. I there-fore rest satisfied, and thank God that my lot is to be an American farmer, instead of a Russian boor, or an Hungarian peasant.”(51)*

—DE CREVECOEUR, “ON THE SITUATION, FEELINGS, AND PLEASURES OF AN AMERICAN FARMER,” *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*

I am among the more fortunate people in this country to find myself satisfied and grateful in my chosen profession. That my lot in life is to be an American professor still fills me with awe. I say that not to wax romantic about the life of a professor since any one of you fellow academics reading this article knows all too well the hurdles of getting into a PhD program, let alone finishing your dissertation and landing a tenure-track job. And if you grew up working class, as I did, then getting into college from a public school that sent only 25% of its student body onto a four-year college added another potential block in the marathon obstacle course we call the academic profession. But I chose this quotation from de Crevecoeur to begin this section because I think too often we do not stop to think about the pleasures of our profession—to recognize that there is no career or region where life is perfect. As de Crevecoeur astutely observes, “it is in vain to seek for any spot where these ingredients [good and evil] are not mixed” (51). And while the section above discussed the distresses of being an Asian American educator in the South, this section will try to deal with some of the pleasures I’ve found in my profession and discipline.

If I must begin with talking about the pleasures of the profession, then I must first and foremost talk about the students I’ve had the privilege of teaching here at UNC Chapel Hill. I was nervous coming to teach here from Mount Holyoke College because my experience in the classroom there had been overwhelmingly positive and nurturing for my identity as a young teacher and scholar.<sup>17</sup> Leaving the environs of a small, liberal arts New England women’s college for a large co-ed public research university where I’d be teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses was a very distinct change in demographics. However, the first class I taught at UNC Chapel Hill alleviated any concerns I had about the students at UNC Chapel Hill, for it remains one of the best I’ve taught in my professional life. The students were inquisitive and intelligent; like the best and brightest students that any of us have taught at our

respective institutions, they pushed me to be a better teacher in the classroom and a better scholar for my research because I wanted to bring the literature to life for them. And since that time, I've had the pleasure of teaching several classes of intelligent, motivated, and enthusiastic students, almost every single one of whom had never taken an Asian American literature class before and was eager to learn more about Asian American studies.

And maybe due to the fact that there have been so few Asian American courses that these North Carolina students have ever had the opportunity to take—and that mine is usually their introduction to the field—I've found that there are a few moments that stand out as some of the proudest in my teaching career. During my first semester, I had a student I'll call "E" who identified himself as an Evangelical Christian on the first day of our class. By way of introduction and in answer to the question of what brought him to this introductory course on Asian American literature, he said that he would be graduating in May and was planning to go on a missionary trip to China to convert Chinese citizens to Christianity and thought that the class would help him to understand his future Chinese converts. Needless to say, this was not the answer I had ever thought I would hear about why students would choose to enroll in a class on contemporary Asian American literature. "E" was a good student—smart and thoughtful—and one day a few weeks after the Chinese New Year, he came up to me and said that he had gone to a celebration of the lunar New Year that a collection of Asian student organizations had put on. One of the performances was a skit parodying Asian American stereotypes, particularly the stereotype of the nerdy, asexual Asian American male geek. When "E" came home and told his roommates about the skit, they didn't understand its humor because they believed the stereotypes were accurate—that Asian American men were computer science nerds who didn't date. "E" argued with his roommates, trying to show them the ways in which Asian American men have been stereotyped throughout American history and depicted in this one-dimensional light through Hollywood cinema and American television.<sup>18</sup> He said it was at that point that he realized that his thinking had changed. After taking this course on Asian American literature, his perspective on how he had seen the world had shifted, and he wanted to thank me for the course.

That was one of my proudest teaching moments, and like "E's" initial response for why he was taking the course, not one I ever expected. I was flattered that I played a small roll in "E's" intellectual growth, and I have had other undergraduates share similar stories with me since that first semester. For instance, an Asian American English major who was writing about Victorian poetry decided, after taking my class, that she wanted to go into politics and to make Asian American issues more visible in American political life and government. Another student decided to pursue a PhD in English with a focus on Asian American literature after studying contemporary Asian Amer-

ican literature and theory because the epistemological questions that interested her found an intersection in Asian American narratives. Other students have simply told me how much they enjoyed reading about Asian American literature and have asked me for more recommendations on what they could read and classes they could take to continue their knowledge of this field.

I share these stories not to glorify myself or to pat myself on the back for being a great teacher. I do not believe I am a great teacher; I believe that the students who found their way into my courses had a hunger for learning the material, and I was fortunate enough to help satisfy their desire for this type of knowledge, which is, perhaps, a pleasure in itself—to realize that students are enthusiastically reading Asian American literature and are interested in discussing the themes of the literature and the secondary literary criticism. They are eager to see the connections between other courses they are taking in African American literature or courses in Sociology on race and ethnicity with the topics we tackle in my class: the history of Asian immigrant exclusion in the first half of this century, the unconstitutional act of the Japanese American internment, the cultural rituals surrounding the fifteen days of the Chinese new year celebrations, and other themes that emerge in the readings on our list.

In this way, my North Carolina students are no different from the students I taught at Mount Holyoke who were also engaged with the narratives and eager to talk about the themes in our course and excited to learn about Asian American culture, history, and literature. Indeed, the main difference I encountered between my native North Carolinian students, of any racial background, and non-Southern students I had previously taught was a lack of familiarity of Asian American history and culture. It's not necessarily that they were stereotyping Asian Americans more than their peers to the West or North; rather, it was the lack of familiarity with Asian American life and stereotypes that actually surprised me. Either as a sign that times have become more progressive or as a sign of the lack of racial diversity in terms of an Asian American presence in their K-12 schools, my North Carolina students did not grow up learning the racist rhymes that taunted me as a child or the racial slurs and stereotypes used against Asian Americans. This realization hits me when I find myself in the awkward position of having to explain racist school rhymes or to define the term "banana" and why it's offensive to many Asian Americans, since these references pop up in the novels and short stories on my syllabus. Again, it's unclear to me whether this is a sign of racial progress or simply a lack of Asian American diversity in their schools, but in truth, this is the only appreciable difference I have seen between Southern college students and their counterparts to the north.

Yet even as I recognize that there is no real difference between students at UNC Chapel Hill and Mount Holyoke College in terms of the caliber of their intellectual acumen, the cultural difference between being in an institu-

tion that has a history of recognizing Asian American studies and students actively agitating for Asian American courses versus being in a place that does not have this history, and that, in fact, has a history of understanding race relations along a black-white axis, does situate me in an odd position—because I find that I am a type of pioneer here at UNC Chapel Hill, even though it was never a goal of mine to become a trailblazer for Asian American studies in the South. Because I do find that I am providing an education for my students and colleagues, one that occurs both inside and outside my classroom, being a pioneer, of sorts, is not without its pleasures—even while I find it challenging at times to negotiate requests to serve on committees, task forces, and panels to speak about my experiences both as an Asian American woman and as an Asian American studies scholar. When I speak to audiences about my experiences as an Asian American educator, there are often people who have come up to me afterwards, from a diverse range of racial backgrounds, to tell me that they appreciate my voice intervening in the discussion on race—that they appreciate hearing about my Asian American perspective—because it provided a different point-of-view than they were used to thinking about, and it made them see Asian Americans in a new light. And I dare say for some, it perhaps made Asian Americans visible and explicable to them for the first time in a region where the dialogue on race has been entrenched in racial binaries for decades.

**V: CONCLUSION: WHAT IS AN “AMERICAN” REDUX: WHAT IS AN ASIAN AMERICAN?**

*“The account of the property he acquired with his own hands and those of his son, in four years, is under: Dollars.  
 The value of his improvements and lease.....225  
 Six cows, at 13 dollars.....78  
 Two breeding mares.....50  
 The rest of the stock.....100  
 Seventy-three bushels of wheat.....66  
 Money due to him on notes.....43  
 Pork and beef in his cellar.....28  
 Wool and flax.....19  
 Ploughs and other utensils of husbandry.....240.  
 Pennsylvania currency—dollars 640”(105)*

—DE CREVECOEUR, “WHAT IS AN AMERICAN” FROM *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*

De Crevecoeur’s chapter “What is an American,” ends not with an encomium to America or the American man, but an accounting of one farmer’s capital in

late 18<sup>th</sup> century dollars—the fruits of his labor as a newly formed “American farmer.” Newly arrived to America, Andrew the Hebridean, as Farmer James calls his friend and neighbor, was able to build a home in the wilderness, tame the land, and breed animals for his profit, all in four short years, through the stint of his hard labor and the generosity of his neighbors. I think of de Crevecoeur’s tale of Andrew and find my own accounting somewhat short if I compare what I have accomplished in the way of an Asian American education in the South in the four years I have been an Assistant Professor at UNC Chapel Hill—for I cannot boast of comparable measurements to Andrew’s. I have not established a program of Asian American studies nor have I shepherded a single dissertation student towards a tenure track position in Asian American literature nor can I boast of bringing to campus renown scholars of Asian American repute to further edify my Southern students and fellow faculty.

Instead, my accounting shall be much more modest and simple. Over the past four years that I’ve been teaching courses in Asian American literature, specifically, and American literature, generally, at UNC Chapel Hill, this is a record of what I’ve accomplished:<sup>19</sup>

- Number of Asian American literature classes taught.....4
- Number of Asian American novels taught in any class .....10
- Number of panels I took part in talking about Asian American issues....8

Yet what these numbers cannot describe is the education that I’ve received in being an Asian American professor. In an effort to educate myself about Asian Americans in the South, I have discovered wonderful research by colleagues in the fields of history, sociology, and literature that examine Asians in the South from the nineteenth century to our present day,<sup>20</sup> which has inspired me to think about the intersections of Asian American and Southern literature, particularly the subject of “the South,” in works of Asian American literature.<sup>21</sup> One day I hope to offer a course on Asian American literature of the South that will show students the ways in which Asian American bodies have been part of the Southern landscape for over a century and how Asian American studies can provide a new perspective on Southern studies.

Indeed, I believe that these intersections may help invigorate new life into both fields. Speaking with a friend and colleague, David Cecelski, a Southern studies historian and independent scholar, David ruminated on the intersections of Asian American and Southern studies. David thinks that the place of Asian Americans in the South could, potentially, be a progressive movement within Southern Studies, a conservative field that is looking to find its identity. As David aptly noted, Southern Studies tries to “hold on to a place and region in a world that doesn’t make that easy anymore.”<sup>22</sup> The post-civil rights movement and cultural shift from racial segregation to racial equality, the influx of new immigrants from Latin America and Asia as well as the movement of

people to the South from other areas of the U.S., and the forces of cosmopolitanism and globalization have altered what it means to be from the South or to be a Southerner. Making Asian Americans visible in a Southern landscape and understanding the longer history of Asian Americans in the South complicates the conventional wisdom of Asian immigration to the U.S. occurring as a bi-coastal phenomenon. It also revises our traditional notions of American studies by looking at the role of the Pacific Rim in the transatlantic slave trade and culture of American (which includes Caribbean) plantation labor.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, by looking at the historic role of Asian Americans in the South (the work they provided on sugar plantations after the Civil War; their entry into a middleman shopkeeper economy in various parts of the South, especially Mississippi; and the rise of Southeast Asian communities in the wake of the war in Viet Nam) and their current position in Southern culture as a rapidly growing demographic, Southern studies could transform from a conservative field into a progressive discipline.<sup>24</sup> As such, an intersection of Southern and Asian American studies would be uniquely situated to solve real-world problems associated with immigration, the change from a rural economy to a globalized one, and race relations that mirror those in the larger U.S. as well as around the world.

Ultimately, an Asian American education in the South offers the possibility of truly complicating de Crevecoeur's rhetorical question of "What is an American?" or my own gloss, "What is an Asian American?" The classes I teach at UNC Chapel Hill provide an ongoing answer to both rhetorical questions, for I am a visibly Asian American body who is teaching a body of knowledge, Asian American studies, to the student bodies of my classroom, pushing them to see the works of literature we are reading as both American and Asian American, and to see and recognize me as both American and Asian American as well. I believe that in this way, an Asian American education in and of the South, for myself and for my students and colleagues, offers fruitful possibilities to see that "What is an American" has never been static; rather, it has always been as permeable and diverse as America itself.

## Notes

1. I claim a national identity for myself as "American" (unhyphenated, unqualified) because in the spirit of de Crevecoeur I believe that I am an American, because I was born in the U.S. (New York City specifically) and raised with American social and cultural norms. Although I do claim a racial identity as an Asian American and an ethnic identity as a Chinese American, for the purposes of this essay and in the spirit of older models of Asian American literary criticism a la Sau-ling Cynthia Wong by way of Maxine Hong Kingston, I too claim America as my own.

2. I recognize that the region of "the South" is much more diverse and complex than a simple regional rendering suggests, yet the phrase "the South," has been used in the public imagination and in various types of American discourses (political, social, cultural) as a shorthand that provides a

useful parallel to the term “Asian American,” which has similar complex and competing definitions due to its inherent diversity. Furthermore, I will not be using scare quotes around either the term “the South” or “Asian American” for the duration of this essay.

3. Although there is a tendency in American literature to read de Crevecoeur’s *Letters* as autobiography, I agree with Edward Larkin, and others, that this work should be read as a fictional accounting rather than a strictly representational relating of de Crevecoeur’s life; as Larkin notes: “It is a mark of the success of this particular fiction that critics have often treated its representations as factual accounts of the social and cultural landscape of Revolutionary America, but to read this work as anything other than a fiction is to miss the central point of the text” (54).

4. For more on the history of Asian American studies as a discipline, see William Wei’s *The Asian American Movement* and Sucheng Chan’s *In Defense of Asian American Studies: the Politics of Teaching and Program Building*.

5. As of December 9, 2008, the on-line directory of the Association of Asian American Studies listed 36 members of the following Southern states: Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. This figure of 36 members only means that these individuals paid dues to the Association for Asian American studies and not that these are faculty members teaching Asian American content courses or graduate students conducting research in Asian American studies. However, a cursory look at the names and university affiliations does suggest that at least two-thirds of these members are either faculty members in tenure-track positions or graduate students in PhD programs. This figure does not also include graduate students or faculty members who have chosen not to join AAAS. Therefore the figure of 36 must be understood within these contingencies. One additional note: the states of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina were not listed among the membership rolls of AAAS; in other words, in the pull-down menu on the AAAS directory, these states were not listed as searchable options. In private email correspondence (Dec. 9, 2008) with Vladimir Micic, an administrator with the Association for Asian American Studies, he confirmed that as of the October membership rolls, there were no members in the Southern region of the U.S. from those states out of the 707 active members affiliated with AAAS.

6. I will be abbreviating The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to UNC Chapel Hill throughout the remainder of this essay.

7. There is some dispute over the title of “oldest public university” in the United States. The University of Georgia had its charter in 1785, four years before the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill would receive its charter. However, UGA did not matriculate its first students until 1801, whereas UNC Chapel Hill opened its doors to students in 1795. However, both universities are eclipsed by the College of William and Mary, whose charter dates back to 1693; yet William and Mary, though now a university, began its life as a “college,” thus making it the oldest public college in the United States, whereas UGA and UNC Chapel Hill enjoy competition over the oldest public university in the U.S., depending on whether one considers the dates of their charters versus dates of matriculation.

8. Both places, UNC Chapel Hill and Chapel Hill, NC, are considered very “liberal” places from the point-of-view of North Carolinians as well as Southerners in general. One of the most well-known quotes about its liberal atmosphere came from the infamous conservative senator, Jesse Helms, who said that North Carolina didn’t need a state zoo because all you had to do was put a fence around UNC Chapel Hill.

9. When I had once remarked to a senior African American faculty member that I felt Asian Americans were both an underrepresented and misunderstood minority group in North Carolina, my colleague agreed but also pointed out that for all intents and purposes, Asian Americans were “white.” I voiced my dissent from my colleague, but I do not know that it made any difference in changing an attitude that I think is prevalent among many in the South.

10. While the racial discourse of the South has largely been along a white-black axis, slowly other racial groups are asserting their presence, most notably the indigenous populations of North Carolina, the Lumbee and Cherokee, as well as the expanding Latino population. And Asian Americans, while

often invisible and unrecognized within North Carolina, are making their mark through professional organizations such as local chapters of the National Asian American Professionals Association and a group organized by the Chapel Hill school district of parents of Asian American students.

11. Of course, my own reaction may have been mediated by the fact that these interactions occurred between myself and pairs of African American Southerners rather than white Southerners.

12. I am most often mistaken as “Hawaiian” when people have tried to guess where I’m “from”—and all my interrogators thus far have been white men with Southern accents, two odd coincidences but true.

13. I must be honest and admit that I haven’t been subjected to a greater number of inquiries here in the South than in other places in the country, at least places outside of California. Indeed, I receive similar inquiries from people I encountered living in both Boston and Western Massachusetts.

14. The most recent presidential addresses by past presidents of the Association of American Studies, Shelly Fisher Fishkin and Emory Elliot, have discussed the exciting and innovative direction of scholarship with American Studies to consider transnational and diasporic issues within American Studies, and to consider scholarship in American Studies outside the borders of the U.S., in terms of our colleagues in other nations and continents. Furthermore, innovative research by scholars of Asian American studies are looking at themes of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. Indeed, a panel at the most recent East of California conference (October 31–November 1, 2008), the panel “Transnationalism and Asian/Asian American Studies” specifically addressed this intersection.

15. Among the most prevalent title to come up with students and faculty alike when queried about what Asian American work they have previous read is Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*.

16. The most recent example of this confusion occurred when a colleague from another department advised a graduate student to have me on his comprehensive exam committee because his future dissertation will be looking at Vietnamese literature during the period of French colonialism. I patiently explained to the student that I am not an Asian Studies scholar and that while I am familiar with Vietnamese American authors, I am neither fluent in Vietnamese nor French, and I do not study Vietnamese literature.

17. For three years, 2000–2003, I taught as a visiting instructor at Mount Holyoke College, originally arriving there on a pre-doctoral dissertation fellow and staying on as a visiting instructor, and eventually visiting Assistant Professor once I received my PhD in January 2003 from Boston University. I credit Mount Holyoke College for beginning my professional development as an Asian American teacher and scholar.

18. The films *Slaying the Dragon* and *The Slanted Screen* are excellent documentaries charting this stereotype in American cinema.

19. I should note that, technically speaking, I first came to UNC Chapel Hill in July 2003 on a post-doctoral fellowship, which allowed me to teach one class each year. However, for the purposes of “counting,” I am starting with the time I was officially hired in a tenure-track position at UNC Chapel Hill, which also includes a year’s research leave I took 2007–2008, which means that the above accounting of courses is over the span of three academic year cycles.

20. Scholars I admire who do research in Asian Americans in the South include Moon-Ho Jung, Carl Bankston, Elena Tajima Creef, and Leslie Bow. Certainly there are many others, but these scholars, in particular, have written works that have helped clarify and push my thinking about the intersections of Asian American and Southern studies.

21. Indeed, in addition to this essay I have published an article on Asian American literature in the South called “Southern Eruptions in Asian American Narratives,” forthcoming in the collection edited by Jigna Desai and Khyati Joshi, *Asian Americans in the New South* (University of Georgia Press).

22. Personal interview, September 24, 2008, Chapel Hill, NC.

23. English professor Lisa Yun's *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* is among the latest innovative scholarship that looks at these intersections.

24. Historian and sociologists who have looked at the roles of Asian Americans in Southern history include Moon-Ho Jung, Robert Seto Quan, and Carl Bankston.

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