Introduction

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Born out of the Civil Rights and Third World Liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American Studies has grown considerably over the past four decades, both as a distinct field of inquiry and as a potent site of critique. In the late nineteenth century, most of what was written about the Asian presence in America was by those who sought to impede the immigration of Asians to America or to curtail the social mobility of Asians already in the country. This tendency in the literature of the time, and subsequent scholarship on Asians and Asian Americans that appeared into the late 1960s, led Roger Daniels to observe, “Other immigrant groups were celebrated for what they had accomplished, Orientals were important for what had been done to them” (375). As the field developed starting in the late 1960s, more emphasis was placed upon the lived experiences of Asian Americans, in terms of what they have endured, accomplished, and transformed. In the early stages of the development of Asian American Studies as an academic field of inquiry, more attention was paid to the history and experiences of Chinese, Japanese, and to some extent, Filipinos in the United States.

Among the first foundational texts in Asian American Studies were edited collections that included contributions by an eclectic group of Asian American activists, artists, and academics. *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Tachiki et. al. 1971) was intent on going to the “root” of the issues facing Asians in America and included three sections “Identity,” “History,” and “Community” focusing on the “imperative that their voices be heard in all their anger, anguish, resolve and inspiration.” (p. vii). *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (Gee 1976) questioned the “self-image of America as a harmonious, democratic, and open society” calling
for a reexamination of the mistreatment of Asian Americans to deepen “their understanding of their own past and present political, economic, and social position in American society” (xiii). While some of the authors in these two collections, published by the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, had established careers, many of them were emerging community activists, writers, and academics who would become the important first generation of noted Asian Americanists. Although they came from different backgrounds, they were committed to bringing the Asian American experience to the foreground, in order to stress how they had been marginalized in the dominant narrative of our nation’s history, society, and culture. The articles and essays in these two publications represent themes that would dominate the field for years: labor exploitation, immigration policies, racial stereotypes and oppression, community development, gender inequalities, social injustices, U.S. imperialism in Asia, struggles of resistance, and the formation of Asian American identities. The Immigration Act of 1965 and the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 drastically changed the demographics of the Asian American population, bringing ethnic Chinese from the diaspora as well as expanding the number of Filipinos, Koreans, and Asian Indians and adding refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, and these ongoing shifts create new scholarly directions for the field.

Presently, in private and public institutions across the country, Asian American Studies courses, emanating from these tumultuous histories of struggles, are an identifiable and often integral part of university and college curricula. Most notable was the creation of the only College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in 1969, which incorporated Asian American Studies. Currently, Asian American Studies courses can be housed in traditional departments, while others are in American Studies or Ethnic Studies, with some campuses creating Asian American programs or centers and others establishing Asian
American Studies departments. The expansion of the field led to the creation of the Association for Asian American Studies in 1979 and organizers held their first conference the following year. Faculty and scholarship that focus on Asian Americans originate from a range of fields including anthropology, art, communications, economics, education, history, literature, political science, psychology, law, public health, public policy, religion, sociology, theatre, urban studies, and women and gender studies. This has created a robust discipline that has broadened its scope in ways that were unimaginable when the field began to take form in the early days, but it has also generated varying pedagogical directions and competing theoretical frameworks. The nature and tenor of Asian American Studies has shifted dramatically since student strikes and undergraduate demand instantiated its formation.

As recent scholarship underscores, Asian American Studies is presently characterized by transnational, trans-Pacific, and trans-hemispheric considerations of race, ethnicity, migration, immigration, gender, sexuality, and class. On the one hand, the pervasiveness of “trans” as a legible methodological prefix productively highlights the ways in which scholars in the field divergently evaluate the intersections between politics, histories, and subjectivities. On the other hand, such interdisciplinary approaches, ever attentive to past/present histories of racialization, social formation, imperialism, capitalism, empire, and commodification, engage a now-familiar set of what cultural critic Raymond Williams famously defined as “keywords.” These terms, which constitute “the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion” (24), serve as a significant foundation for *Keywords for Asian American Studies*.

Some of the essays included in *Keywords for Asian American Studies* demarcate the origins of the field as well as critiquing its scholarly development. Certainly essays on “education” and “incarceration” speak to what has happened to Asian Americans as well as
addressing critical transformations in the field. Essays on “diaspora” and “community” examine how Asian Americans have navigated their way around the world and established themselves in the United States, indirectly reshaping the field in the process. As significant, essays about “memory,” “terrorism,” and “postcolonial” signal the field’s intimate yet nevertheless expansive engagement with U.S. imperialism and American war-making.

Like *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler) and the other volumes in the series, *Keywords for Asian American Studies* is not an encyclopedia. Instead, *Keywords for Asian America Studies* is repeatedly guided by Williams’s provocative assertion that such a vocabulary “has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions” that nevertheless must “be made at once conscious and critical” (24). Expressly, the keywords included in this collection – central to social sciences, humanities, and cultural studies – reflect the ways in which Asian American Studies has, in multidisciplinary fashion, been “shap[ed] and reshap[ed], in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view” (25). Attentive to the multiple methodologies and approaches that characterize a dynamic field, *Keywords for Asian American Studies* contains established and emergent terms, categories, and themes that undergird Asian American Studies and delineate the contours of Asian America as an imagined and experienced site. On one level, such “imagined” and “experienced” frames highlight what Sucheng Chan evocatively characterized in *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991) as distinctly racialized modes of hostility via “prejudice, economic discrimination, political disenfranchisement, physical violence immigration exclusion, social segregation, and incarceration” (45).

On another level, Chan’s use of “interpretive” as disciplinary modifier functions as a theoretical touchstone and methodological foundation for *Keywords for Asian American Studies*.
As field interpreters, the collection’s contributors contextualized and situated their keywords according to their disciplines, points of entry, and critical engagement, while simultaneously attuned to the fluidity and trajectories of the field. Determining the selection of keywords has been an organic progression. In terms of structuring the collection, we initially envisioned and prioritized keywords that capture the contours of multiple scholarly disciplines and that resonate with our pedagogical methodologies. As editors, we established few parameters for the contributors; however, we had the difficult task of assigning varying lengths to each keyword, recognizing that spatial limitations would be the major challenge for all authors, most who have written books related to their keyword. Strategically we did not inform the contributors of the other entries, with the intent of allowing them to develop their keyword unencumbered, although as editors we suggested revisions so that the collection would be comparative in scope and tangentially cohere.

Additionally, we were interested in exploring core terms that suggestively demarcated distinctive Asian American histories, curricula, and pedagogies. While some of these keywords, such as “assimilation,” “citizenship,” and “trauma,” may be universal terms applied to immigrants in general, our contributors were observant to their specific application in Asian American Studies, and mindful of the need to shift dominant paradigms that have been exclusionary. As the project moved from proposal to completed manuscript, our original purview grew to encapsulate divergent approaches, nomenclatural shifts, and disciplinary variations. For example, while “internment” remains a recognizable term within the field, it nevertheless fails to contain (as Lane Hirabayashi productively notes) the racial, gendered, and classed dimensions analogously associated with present-day understandings of “incarceration.” Armed with the editorial desire to represent spheres of knowledge and diverse methodologies, we deliberated
over terms such as “capitalism,” “democracy,” and “prostitution,” which are fundamentally subsumed or embedded within other terms (hence, the omission of such words in this iteration). We were similarly attentive to parsing out keywords that are often considered synonymous with one another (for example, “gender,” “sexuality,” and “queer”). At the same time, we recognized the need to include terms that are foundational to the field, such as labor, exclusion, identity, ethnicity, immigration, and war. Last, but certainly not least, we encouraged contributors to engage the heterogeneity of Asian American in their respective essays, wherein analyses were not limited to one ethnicity or a singular historical moment.

This capaciousness frames this overall collection, which features interconnected references between keywords, includes overlapping examples, and involves reiterated events (such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the incarceration of Japanese Americans, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, or the ongoing War on Terror). The derived meaning or relevance and justifications or reasons for these events have transformed over time for both the populations they impact as well as for the critical scholarship they generated. Although there may be repetitions of some concepts or events in these essays, they are illuminated by differing perspectives and contextualized through varying lens. The transforming demographics of the populations continues to contribute to fundamental debates regarding the racial positioning of Asian Americans and this has impacted the crucial terms and concepts in the field. In some instances, the emergence of a particular keyword within the field (e.g., “genocide” and “refugee”) is due to history and policy more closely tied to a specific ethnic group (for example, Southeast Asian Americans). Yet, to a certain extent, we encouraged authors to move beyond the expected boundaries of ethnic containment and address how their keywords are historically, ideologically, or empirically interconnected to various groupings. Following suit, the collection’s
contributors demonstrate the ways in these diverse groups, in the face of colonial histories and imperial structures, have resisted cumulative pressures by creating their own dynamic identifications.

Although directed to consider the field’s expansiveness, contributors were purposely provided latitude in the formulation and tone of their keyword to more aptly represent the genealogies in which ideas and ideologies traverse theoretical and disciplinary insularities. Even with these intentional coherences, each essay illustrates variations in approach and relevancy in articulating the significance or utilization of a keyword. Correspondingly, while Asian American studies remains an interdisciplinary field, its practitioners nevertheless bear the mark of their respective discipline with regard to terminology and emphasis. Rather than serve as a limitation, these disciplinary linkages make visible new ways of seeing not only established fields but also rethinking seemingly familiar topics.

Set adjacent to this editorial context, two terms that admittedly do not appear as specific entries in this collection serve as an implicit point of entry for each contributor: “Asian” and “American.” Encompassing geographical sites, political affiliations, and ethnoracial categories, both “Asian” and “American” are incontrovertibly qualified terms that syntactically operate as modifiers (e.g., adjectives) and subjects (specifically, nouns). As John Kuo Wei Tchen previously surmised in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, “Asian” (along with “Asia” and -- more problematically -- “Asiatic”) is necessarily “loaded with particular spatial orientations rooted in temporal relationships” that are anthropological, geopolitical, and cartographic in scope (22). These concepts have been constructed as antagonistic to or in competition with one another, evidenced from the political conflicts in the Pacific, or in the cultural juxtapositions of the oppositional identifiers “traditional” and “modern” associated with each. Concomitantly,
“American,” as an analogously overburdened concept, encompasses cultural, social, and political understandings of citizenship. Within the dominant U.S. imagination, these senses of belonging -- fixed to characterizations of the United States as a “nation of immigrants” -- correspond to assimilative and euphemistic claims of *e pluribus unum* (“out of many, one) selfhood.

Notwithstanding the encumbered nature of each word, the term “Asian American” (which pairs continent and country) emphasizes Yuji Ichioka’s intent when he coined it to replace such derogatory labels as Asiatic or Oriental and envisioned its politicized possibilities. On one level, the adjecival use of “Asian” as a descriptor for “American” accentuates the degree to which the field reflects multiple coordinates (in East, South, Southeast Asia, and the United States). On another level, “Asian American” as identifiable ethno-racial category underscores the migration histories of variegated peoples whose experiences divergently involve overt exclusion, aversive discrimination, and paradoxical incorporation.

In sum, this collection is a gathering of scholarship by those who have dedicated their careers to creating what is now an established field of knowledge, which has been remarkably dialogic in nature and fostered meaningful collaborations. The field emerged under conditions of contestation and resistance and it has generated controversies regarding its epistemological legitimacy, direction, and purpose. The essays are not intended to be definitive, but to encourage readers to creatively engage with the multilayered historical and contemporary debates and the vexing contradictions that reflect the shifting and evolving terrain of Asian American Studies. In these times of global and domestic instability, tension, and hostility, our expectation is that this collection will provide intellectual stimulation for the seasoned scholar and activist as well as a critical tool for those initially encountering the field to further their inquiry and research.