IT HAS NOW BEEN FORTY YEARS since I taught my first Asian American Studies (AAS) course. My academic sojourns in different regions—Mid-Atlantic (University of the District of Columbia, two years), East Coast (The City University of New York, fourteen years), California (UCLA, fifteen years), and the Pacific Northwest (University of Washington, eight years); as well as being a 2.5 generation Chinese Canadian from Toronto, Canada, a multiethnic city that is part Midwest and part East Coast, have all enhanced my study of the Asian American experience.

Differences in Asian migration patterns and timing to various regions of the U.S. (and other Americas, and elsewhere) have intersected with local histories, economies, and racial dynamics, as well as national policies and practices. Asians in America have also created their own lives, spaces, and places utilizing their culture, skills, and aspirations within the context of opportunities and constraints that are offered to them.

East Coast Asian American experiences have made unique contributions to Asian American Studies, and I highlight three here briefly:

1. As regional studies are part of U.S. history, so we might consider this approach in Asian American Studies. Many Asians of various national origins came directly to the East Coast and their history of interactions with local populations are revealing. The absence of anti-miscegenation laws in New York and other Northeast and Midwest states, for example, resulted in Chinese and South Asian family formations with Whites, Blacks, and those from the Caribbean during the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries. These intersections and other dynamics (see item 2 below) challenge the notion of a West Coast Asian American experience as an encompassing framework that can speak for all Asians in the United States. Regional experiences shed new light on the study of Asian Americans, their history, diversity, and complexities.

2. East Coast global links with the North Atlantic, Caribbean, and Latin America, past and present, reveal distinctive Asian American settlements, economic development, and culture, such as the pan-Asian ethnic enclaves in Flushing, Queens; a “global immigrant neighborhood” in Sunset Park, Brooklyn; as well as Cuban Chinese restaurants, West Indian curry shops, and Korean fish markets in non-Asian areas. As a site of international finance and other enterprises, highly paid and busy professionals have contributed to a growth of services, including pricey restaurants with cloth napkins and affordable nail salons provided by Asian entrepreneurs who cater to a wide range of clientele. These and other characteristics provide opportunities to expand and build upon Asian American comparative studies.

3. The East Coast has its own record, from the 1970s to present day, of community activism and student protests in response to racism and other inequalities, including demands for Asian American Studies, as part of a larger Asian American movement for social justice. As Asian American Studies became identified as a West Coast, specifically California, phenomenon in its first decades, East Coast AAS supporters initiated actions to establish their positionality in the field.
Two such actions were the founding of the East of California Initiative at Cornell University in October 1986; and the hosting of the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) sixth national conference at Hunter College/CUNY in June 1989. Participants of the East of California Initiative sought greater recognition for East Coast Asian American experiences, to support community struggles, and to advance research on the region. The Initiative’s networking model was adopted by the Association for Asian American Studies, and is reflected in its regional, ethnic group, and subject matter caucuses (now called sections). By hosting its conference outside of the West Coast, AAAS helped to establish itself as a national organization with significant participation from the East Coast, Midwest, West Coast and Hawai’i. The conference theme of “Comparative and Global Perspectives of the Asian Diaspora,” was prescient in broadening the context of Asian American Studies, from a largely U.S.-based focus, to one that acknowledged more fully the transnational landscape of its ethnic groups and locations, concepts that are now well represented in the field. And so, here just two examples that demonstrate the East Coast’s exceptional role in developing AAS and strengthening the Association for Asian American Studies’ credibility.

Consequently, the Asian American experience is multivariable, similar, yet different. Asian American Studies on the East Coast reflects these and other challenges in making its mark in the academy, and in being relevant to and an advocate for its communities.

Notes
3 Lee C. Lee, ed. “Asian American Studies: Contemporary Issues,” East Coast Asian American Scholars Conference Proceedings (Cornell University, 1987). About fifty scholars and students from private and public institutions (almost exclusively from the region) met to strengthen ties in developing AAS, given their relatively small numbers on any campus.
4 I was present at the first East of California Initiative meeting as a faculty member from Hunter College/CUNY. At the time of the Association of Asian American Studies conference at Hunter College, which was supported by the Asian/American Center at Queens College/CUNY and City College of New York/CUNY, I was President of AAAS and Chair of the Hunter College Conference Committee. Several contributors to Asian American Matters: A New York Anthology (AAARI-CUNY, 2017) were also present at both events. Margaret M. Chin who served as Conference Coordinator, later attended graduate school, and is presently an Associate Professor of Sociology at Hunter College. There are many examples of transnational understandings of AAS in this anthology.

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