

Demographics, Geographies, Institutions

The Changing Intellectual Landscape of Asian American Studies

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AS WE MOVE TOWARD FIVE DECADES of the founding of Asian American Studies (AAS) on the West and East Coasts, 1969 and 1970 respectively, I consider how the field has changed. Then, as now, student demands are crucial for securing, continuing, and expanding AAS programs.

A few Asian American Studies powerhouses have emerged with sizeable faculty and endowments, especially in California. There have also been modest gains in AAS, notably in the Midwest, South, and Southwest, that reflect the increased presence of Asian Americans nationally. Still, there is uncertainty on some campuses, despite the tenacity of AAS faculty and students. The authors in Chapter Two of *Asian American Matters: A New York Anthology* share their hopes and frustrations in advancing AAS and the needs and interests of Asian American students on the East Coast. Some propose fresh thinking and practices to better situate AAS in current racial, political, and community spaces.

The world today in which AAS operates is different from fifty years ago. I use the term “intellectual landscape” to assess briefly the situation of AAS since its formation and give attention to three elements—demographics, geographies, and institutions.

Demographics

Who could have foreseen that post-1965 U.S. immigration policies and international events, such as U.S. wars in Asia, civil strife in the region, and globalization would transform Asian America from a population primarily from East Asia and the Philippines, to including major groups from South and Southeast Asia. Concomitantly, Asian Americans are no longer mainly native-born, but mostly foreign-born (66 percent in 2014), and comprise diverse ethnic groups of all ages and backgrounds. They are immigrants and refugees, with some being undocumented.¹ There are also nonimmigrant visa holders, like H-1B workers who may remain, and adoptees.

Asian American Studies has incorporated these and other demographic changes, and this is evident in its student body and faculty, courses, publications, and conference panels. Over the decades, the Asian American landscape of intellectual work has been flexible, fluid, and expansive in opening up to new groups and including their experiences and communities in teaching and scholarly endeavors.

Geographies

The initial years of Asian American Studies were understandably U.S. focused in its geography, even California-centric. Today, studies of the Asian American experience frequently encompass the perspectives of transnational, diasporic, and global studies.² AAS extends beyond the United States to include the geographies of Asian homelands, the Americas, and comparative studies with Asian communities elsewhere.

Asian American geographies are also being reconsidered from regional and local standpoints. Studies of Asian Americans in the U.S. South and Midwest provide distinctive findings from those on the East and West Coasts.³ Border crossings may include rural, urban, suburban, as well as island, territorial,

and mainland movements that traverse nations and states. Nor are the locations, places, and spaces of being Asian in one's declared homeland or abroad fixed; they may be temporary or continuing, but certainly evolving.

Geographies are integral to the landscape of AAS intellectual work. Locations and transitions, at times acutely disruptive, and other times deliberately chosen, have implications for how Asian Americans create new lives, seek to retain old lives, form identities, develop communities, and other adaptations.

Institutions

Asian American Studies resides within higher education institutions, another element of its intellectual landscape. AAS was established as an interdisciplinary field, a new way to organize knowledge and people. In its early years, AAS benefited from a strong U.S. economy that enabled institutions to expand, and a political climate of support for campus diversity. Recently, many campuses have faced fiscal and political challenges, resulting in serious implications for AAS.

Fiscally, with fewer resources, institutions generally provide less support for diversity matters, academic programs, and personnel. Politically, some programs are viewed as more important than others because they are revenue enhancers, and in terms of academic status, students' employment prospects, and national wellbeing. Student enrollment in classes matter more today than ever. Furthermore, Asian American concerns are often treated as less vital given the persistent belief in the model minority stereotype.

Consequently, AAS programs may not receive new faculty lines. Tenure-track positions and tenure may be elusive in institutional climates that set higher bars for Asian American faculty to succeed, and the retirement (or death) of Asian American scholars does not guarantee that their faculty lines will be replaced. AAS programs can be at risk because of changes in campus leadership, personnel, and priorities. Ironically though, campuses are now seeking to offset their reduced budgets by recruiting international students, mostly from Asia, who pay higher rates of tuition and fees.



Students advocate for support of Asian American Studies major at Hunter College/CUNY (April 2, 2017)
Photo by Amy Zheng

Higher education institutions are slow to change, but change is present. Given that institutional homes and support are essential for AAS, with programs organized largely as teaching units, how can the field position itself for the next fifty years? In my view, to grow and remain relevant, AAS needs to adapt, innovate continuously, and be proactive. Which undergraduate courses will be taught, how, and for whom (e.g., as a major, double major, minor, general education, service learning)? Not everyone seeks a graduate degree and career in AAS, but many aim to use their Asian American perspectives, knowledge base,

and social justice advocacy in other fields. Students seek out skills and credentials for an ever-changing workplace and to contribute to their communities and society at large. One proposal, based on my own experiences and those of others, is to expand the field's interdisciplinarity to include disciplines and sectors of the campus, such as professional programs, that connect students and courses with practice and Asian American communities. Pathways can be developed, for example, with education, urban planning, social welfare, public health, law, and environmental studies.⁴

I also conjecture where AAS might reside in the next fifty years. The intellectual landscape of the field need not be confined to U.S. institutions. As part of global competition, Asia is developing its own higher education institutions through the benefit of its rising economies. Might Asian American Studies be taught in China, India, or other Asian countries as part of transnational, diasporic, and global studies; or perhaps as examples of majority/minority relations in other countries, as well as within American Studies—which is popular there, especially Asian American literature? Will some faculty take positions at Asian institutions in the humanities and social sciences, and teach AAS, as other faculty do now in science, engineering, and technology fields?

In closing, I have identified three elements—demographics, geographies, and institutions—that inform the intellectual landscape of Asian American Studies. My analyses here seeks to encourage new generations of scholars to be proactive and innovative in advancing AAS today and in coming decades.

Notes

- 1 The refugee population largely from Southeast Asia previously, now includes those from Burma/Myanmar and Bhutan. In 2011, Asians comprised one in nine unauthorized persons in the U.S., or 12 percent of the total Asian immigrant population. See Karthick Ramakrishnan and Farah Z. Ahmad, *State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Series: A Multifaceted Portrait of a Growing Population* (Center for American Progress, September 2014): 30–31, www.americanprogress.org.
- 2 For an early example of the international dimension of Asian American Studies, see “Asians in the Americas,” *Amerasia Journal* 15:2 (UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1989). Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015) provides a new global synthesis of Asian American history.
- 3 Recent anthologies reevaluating Asians in the U.S. South include: Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi, eds., *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Raymond A. Mohl, John E. Van Sant, and Chizuru Saeki, eds., *Far East, Down South: Asians in the American South*. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2016). On Asians in the Midwest, see Sook Wilkinson and Victor Jew, eds., *Asian Americans in Michigan: Voices from the Midwest* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015).
- 4 Đào, Kiang, Nguyễn, and Tang (*Asian American Matters: A New York Anthology*, 2017), describe the links between AAS at UMass Boston and an elementary school, and how they strengthened the schooling of Southeast Asian students, community ties, AAS course and faculty development, community-based research, and publications. Through integrating Asian American topics into law programs at CUNY, and engaging students of all backgrounds using community-oriented pedagogy, Phil Tajitsu Nash (*Asian American Matters: A New York Anthology*, 2017) transformed students' understandings and relationships with Asian Americans, other immigrant groups, and their own families. My own experiences include teaching courses that were partly or exclusively about Asian Americans to largely non-Asian practitioners in master's programs in Social Welfare, Education, and Urban Planning at Hunter College/CUNY, UCLA, and the University of Washington. Designed to better prepare students for working with diverse communities, these courses also attracted Asian American students in other fields, with some going on to earn doctorates in Asian American topics.

Author

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