

RE • COLLECTING
EARLY ASIAN
AMERICA

ESSAYS IN CULTURAL HISTORY



EDITED BY

JOSEPHINE LEE • IMOGENE L. LIM • YUKO MATSUKAWA

Re/collecting Early Asian America

Essays in Cultural History

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Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and
Yuko Matsukawa



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One of our contributors, Amy Ling, passed away in 1999, before the final publication of this volume. The essay she wrote for us on Yan Phou Lee was part of her ongoing project of recollecting early Asian American writers. Indeed, it was through Amy's consistent efforts that early Asian American women writers such as Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna now receive critical attention, so it is no surprise that here she directed her scholar's eye to an even earlier writer to reconsider the origins of Asian American writing. Her tireless efforts in uncovering, teaching, researching, chronicling, and promoting the work of Asian American artists have resulted in the wider recognition of Asian Americans writers past and present. With her death, we have lost not only a courageous pioneer in Asian American studies but also a kind and generous mentor and colleague. Those of us who recollect early Asian America are deeply indebted to her scholarship and advocacy. We are honored to be able to include her essay in this collection and dedicate this volume to her.

Finally, here's to family, friends, and friends who have become family.

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I Introduction

collect (kə-lěkt') *v.* -lect-ed, lect-ing, lects. —*tr.* 1. To bring together in a group; gather; assemble. 2. To accumulate as a hobby or for study: *collect stamps*. 3. To call for and obtain payment of: *collect taxes*. 4. To recover control of: *collect one's emotions*. —*intr.* 1. To gather together; congregate; accumulate. 2. To take in payments or donations: *collecting for charity*. —*adj.* With payment to be made by the receiver: *a collect phone call*. —*adv.* So that the receiver is charged: *send a telegram collect*. [ME *collecten* from Lat. *colligere*: *com-*, together + *legere*, to gather.] —col-lect'i-ble, col-lect'a-ble *adj.*

recollect (rěk'ə-lěkt') *v.* -lect-ed, lect-ing, -lects. —*tr.* To recall to mind. —*intr.* To have a recollection. [Med. Lat. *recolligere*, recollect, from Lat., to gather up: *re-*, again + *colligere*, to collect. —see COLLECT.] —rec'ol-lec'tive *adj.* —rec'ol-lec'tive-ly *adv.*

—*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2d College Ed.

The deliberate slash in our title, *Re/collecting Early Asian America*, reminds us that the word “recollect” has two related but somewhat discrete meanings: to remember and to collect again. The derivation of “recollecting” carries the same kind of double meaning as words such as “represent” and “remember.” In each of these cases, the prefix “re-” suggests a simple act of repetition, a return to a previous moment. However, in the case of Asian America, the “re” in “re/collecting” is particularly important. To recollect “early Asian America,” for instance, implies a forestalling of forgetfulness and a prevention of collective amnesia: a bringing back into focus that which has deliberately or unconsciously been overlooked.

The many meanings of “collecting” also suggest active and self-conscious practices of gathering, accumulating, accounting, and recovering. Most importantly for us as editors of this volume, “collecting” has as one of its primary definitions “to bring together in a group.” If many instances of recollecting are profoundly private—poring over objects acquired, conjuring up memories, pulling oneself together—others define themselves through their collaborations, relying on their active and present relationships with

others to exist and be viable. The essays included here join a growing body of scholarship that explores the manifold history and cultural practices of early Asian America. As our volume's title suggests, each essay concerns itself with a specific instance of collecting, remembering, interpreting, and writing the past; taken together, they become a cooperative exercise in recovery and discovery.

The sometimes-contested term "Asian American," used to describe the experiences, identities, and cultures of peoples of Asian descent in North America, suggests an act of correction. It replaces now-suspect terms such as "Oriental," "Asiatic," and "Mongolian." Any re/collecting of early Asian America, then, must be a revisionist project, addressing the conspicuous absence of Asian Americans in "official" histories and correcting stereotypes, myths, and false assumptions. This historical reconstruction necessarily carries with it political and social consequences that can substantively change the lives of individuals and communities.

Defining "Early Asian America"

Re/collecting early Asian America means not only uncovering, describing, and examining the cultures of the past, but also recognizing the political stakes of this undertaking. For our purposes in this anthology, "early Asian America" dates from the beginnings of Asian migration to the Americas in the 1800s to the eve of North American policy changes in the mid-1960s. We chose to consider many and diverse events and experiences under this rubric because they simultaneously establish and challenge what we have learned to articulate in the last four decades as Asian American.

The social, political, legal, and artistic changes set in motion in the 1960s redefined the experiences and identities of those of Asian descent in the United States and Canada. A key change in U.S. immigration law and policy occurred with the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, although policy changes had begun with the 1943 repeal of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, which allowed all immigrants to apply for citizenship. By abolishing the quota system, the Hart-Celler Act accelerated immigration from Asia, which increased from 16,000 in 1965, to more than 100,000 by 1972, to more than a quarter million in 1989. According to recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau, in March 1999 the Asian and Pacific Islander population in the United States numbered 10.9 million, constituting 4 percent of the total population (Humes and McKinnon 2000, 1).

Canada also launched major immigration policy changes in this period. Before 1961, only 1.9 percent of Canadians were of Asian ancestry (Badets and Chui 1994, 20), identified primarily as Chinese, Japanese, and South Asians. After 1962, "country of origin" was no longer a criterion for admission, and in 1967 a point system, free of racial considerations, was established as a means of regulating entry. Since the liberalization of these policies, the face of Asian Canada has changed dramatically. By 1996, Asian Canadians represented 7.25 percent of the total population; Census Canada identified Filipinos, Southeast Asians, and Koreans among the major Asian ethnicities, in addition to the early pioneer groups (CSC 1998, 8).

Thus 1965 ushered in a period of new diversity in Asian American communities in terms of origin, generation, socioeconomic background, education, and experience. Beyond demographic change, this period also marks "Asian America" as a political and cultural entity: the emergence of Asian American activism, the flourishing of Asian American arts and culture, and the establishment of Asian American studies as a viable academic field.

In the forward momentum that has accompanied these social and political changes, the events that preceded the 1960s have not been forgotten. Asian American history has come to occupy significant space in the more recent cultural and political imagination. As David Palumbo-Liu notes, "Asian American subjectivities are not simply the effects of the contemporary; . . . the contemporary holds in it the effects of the historical past" (1995, 60). History has always held a privileged place in both the activism of the Asian American movement and the academic field of Asian American studies. Those engaged in constructing this history have often faced considerable scholarly challenges, as well as institutional pressures; Asian American histories register the marginality and disenfranchisement of individuals and communities through both what is recorded and what is not. Records show the denial of the right to enter the country, to own land, to become a citizen, to vote, to receive an education, to intermarry; the lack of records points to how Asian Americans and other racial minorities were often considered subjects not worthy of recording. Groups of people were reduced to nothing more than numbers—on plantations, workers wore "bangos . . . small brass disks with their identification numbers stamped on them. In the old country, they had names and their names told them who they were, connecting them to family and community" (Takaki 1989, 136). Rarely did anything more than a brief note in a diary or journal document their presence. Such was the case when Captain John Meares and his crew, including seventy Chinese laborers, landed in 1788 on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the first instance of Chinese in western North America documented in the English language (Wright 1988, 2, 15).

History has a constitutive relation to the symbolic formation of Asian America, a pan-ethnic racial category. As Lisa Lowe has suggested, Asian American culture "re-members" the past, not only embodying experiences of the past but also creating a present community of bodies (1996, 29). Despite great differences in the actual conditions of immigration and settlement, such a "racial" history strategically emphasizes the commonality of shared experience in patterns of legal and institutional exclusion and oppression, in acts of racism, and in stereotyping. The emphasis on a shared history, on common experiences, and on collective symbols countenances the necessary emphasis on political alliances and coalitions that extend beyond obvious divisions and differences of culture, generation, class, gender, and sexuality.

And yet there can be no single definition of "Asian American experience." Location, time, generation, citizenship, language, and relation necessarily change this designation. Scholars have rightly questioned the move to define "Asian America" in narrow ways. Sau-Ling Wong, for instance, has pointed out the problems inherent in authenticating the contemporary identities of Asian Americans as American by emphasizing a long-term presence in the United States, English as the language of expression, or the disavowal of

what is “Asian” in favor of what is “Asian American” (1995, 3–4). On the one hand, the long-term presence of those of Asian origin in the Americas is of great significance in any retelling of American history. Asian Americans were at the forefront of broadening the civil liberties for all Americans; when Wong Kim Ark petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court on his eligibility for citizenship, the 1898 decision provided the guarantee of citizenship to all who are born within the United States. As Gary Okihiro suggests, by seeking inclusion and equality, Asian Americans “helped to preserve and advance the very privileges that were denied to them” (1994, 151). On the other hand, scholars also must work to present a more varied picture of history, to avoid the valorization or idealization of only certain working-class, native-born, and English-speaking communities.

As Patricia Limerick notes, the history of the American West is for many synonymous with European settlers’ westward movement from the East Coast (1995, 89). However, it is insufficient to revise such a model with alternative paradigms that reimagine immigration and settlement simply by replacing Europe with Asia or westward expansion with eastward movement. The early history of Asian immigration was indeed tied to other points of emigration, many of them in the Pacific Islands, as well as other points along the North American continent. For example, as early as 1763, Filipino “Manilamen” settled in Louisiana; the names of their communities (Leon Rojas, Bayou Cholas, Bassa Bassa) resonate with the images of their former homeland. These men were members of the Spanish galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco. Their descendants occupy an “Asian American” space that is greatly different from, say, the Chinatowns of the West Coast (Okihiro 1994, 38).

Thus many concerns arise in trying to realize “early Asian America” anew. For instance, a continued emphasis on Chinese American and Japanese American history and a paucity of other ethnic histories—which unfortunately characterizes this as well as other volumes of research—becomes even more problematic given our contemporary awareness that new patterns of immigration, such as the increasing numbers of arrivals from Southeast Asia, will change the nature of Asian American communities. Representing a truly panethnic Asian American history is but one of many challenges for today’s scholars. As the multitudinous and varied histories of Asian Americans confirm, such a past cannot be imagined only in terms of one kind of emblematic immigrant journey from “Asia” to “America” and the subsequent generations thus engendered; the path to Asian America was neither unilinear nor unidirectional.

Those who write Asian American histories are still inspired by the common ground of fighting Eurocentrism and drawing attention to racism. But many are also aware of the pressures that such charges place upon the method and manner of collecting and writing history. Many Asian American studies scholars have long been aware of the larger patterns of narrative action—and their accompanying political uses—that underlie the writing of history, through both the “constructive imagination” of the historian and the different modes of “emplotment” used in both “official” and unofficial histories (Collingwood 1946; White 1987). To understand something of the varied racial, ethnic, national, gender, and cultural identities and experiences of Asian Americans demands an ever more flexible framework. In *Asian Americans: An Interpretive His-*

tory, Sucheng Chan suggests that “no work of synthesis on the history of Asian Americans can be definitive” (1991, 188); her disclaimer presents both a warning and an opportunity to reflect upon the continuing challenge of resurrecting “Asian America” in its myriad incarnations.

Reading Cultural Histories

The essays in this book bear this heterogeneity in mind. All take part in the ongoing reassessment of how the past events of North American history might be exhumed, resurrected, and redressed in light of present formations of “Asian American” identity, politics, and scholarship. But that these essays work collaboratively here does not mean that they are uniform in argument, topic, or method. This volume draws upon a number of different disciplines, scholarly perspectives, approaches, and methodologies—from academic fields as different as history, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, geography, literary studies, women’s studies, theater arts, film and visual studies, and ethnic studies. Its essays range from models of primary research to extended considerations of larger theoretical paradigms; they incorporate a diverse selection of written and printed documents, material objects, photographs, oral histories, films, and play scripts. While each displays a different way of unearthing, analyzing, and reframing past events, experiences, and artifacts, these essays all focus on particular aspects of early Asian America and reveal particular strategies for writing its cultural history. In bringing them together, we hope to provide both a range of perspectives and an opportunity for comparing and querying modes of analysis. We present these essays not as comprehensive overviews or as models of scholarship but rather as different templates or case studies that might be of interest not only to scholars of Asian American studies but also to other readers.

In selecting essays, we have tried to emphasize how one might rethink the “why” and “how” as well as the “what” of writing Asian American cultural histories. Many of our essays reference tropes that have already been used to conceptualize Asian American histories. These encompass the imagined, physical, and political formation of communities (both as “ethnic enclaves” and as places where American legal, juridical, and economic institutions and cultural roles are constantly in negotiation); narratives of movement (immigration, settlement, and/or relationship between North America and Asia); and the identification of both what is “Asian in America” (including stereotypical representations) and what is “Asian American” (including artistic expression). With these tropes in mind, our volume does not group its essays by chronology, ethnic group, or subject matter. Rather, it uses four headings: “Locations and Relocations,” “Crossings,” “Objects,” and “Recollections.”

These headings are intended not to limit or “package” the essays, but rather to suggest conceptual affinities and dissonances among their various areas of concern. These four rubrics might of course be read as exemplifying a well-known trajectory: the pattern of immigration, settlement, objectification, and self-expression that is frequently evoked in models of “minority” or “immigrant” culture in the Americas. However, as

our essays illustrate, there is a danger in assuming that Asian American experience always follows this tidy model. Asian American experiences both diverge and converge around these terms. Each of the essays presents a unique instance of current scholarship in recollecting Asian American cultural history; collectively, they testify that there is no unifying vision of “early Asian America,” that this is as dynamic, fluid, and highly contested a terrain as the Asian America of the present.

Locations and Relocations

James Clifford urges scholars to think in terms of locations rather than fixed places; according to Clifford, the term “locations” is more apt because it does not assume an inherently natural set of fixed geographies. After all, “everyone’s on the move and has been for centuries” (1997, 2). His distinction suggests that “locations” are geographical, psychological, and political markers that indicate a tentative ongoing inquiry pertaining to a particular spot. Once such markers become more stable and significant, they lose their status as “locations” and become “sites” or “places.” Because of its ephemeral nature, a location needs to be acknowledged and named before such a transformation can be effected; this naming is essential to how a location acquires the legitimacy of an identity and a readable history.

David Palumbo-Liu reminds us that “the history of Asian America is indeed legible in a history of spatialization and respatialization, of different deterritorializations and reterritorializations, disenfranchisements, reclamations, and (re)constructions” (1999, 7). Locating early Asian America is indeed a challenging task, one that involves not only unearthing evidence and drawing increasingly accurate maps, but also considering how such details are made legible and meaningful. In this spirit, each of the essays not only describes certain historic locations and relocations, but also discusses the particular challenges of recovering artifacts and narratives, draws attention to the often problematic nature of sources, and/or looks at the stakes of historical reconstruction.

This section of the book opens with “Pacific Entry, Pacific Century: Chinatowns and Chinese Canadian History,” in which Imogene L. Lim describes her role during the summer of 1996 in the first archaeological investigation of Vancouver’s Chinatown. Lim’s essay conveys the immediacy and excitement of participating in a hands-on reconstruction involving archaeological excavation and oral history as well as written sources. It also makes a direct appeal for continuing to collect different forms of data from the past in order to counter myths, misunderstandings, and racist stereotypes. A concern with what is still missing in accounts of Asian American history—places as well as people who have been overlooked—carries over into Randall Rohe’s “Chinese Camps and Chinatowns: Chinese Mining Settlements in the North American West,” which focuses on mid-1800s Chinese camps and Chinatowns built during the boom of the mining frontier. These essays by Lim and Rohe demonstrate the immense importance of different modes of discovery, documentation, interpretation, and preservation of material objects, printed texts, and oral histories in providing a legible account of the past. Emma J. Teng’s “Artifacts of a Lost City: Arnold Genthe’s *Pictures of Old Chinatown* and Its Inter-