Introduction: *Aiiieeeee!* and the Phantom Trope

The award controversy over *Blu's Hanging*, a novel by Lois-Ann Yamanaka, remains one of the most significant and painful debates over the nature of literature in recent memory. In 1998 the Association for Asian American Studies, the professional organization for scholars of Asian American studies, held its annual conference in Honolulu, where it awarded and then rescinded a fiction prize to the novel. In the upheaval that followed, it appeared to some that the future of the organization itself was in jeopardy. Supporters of the award charged its detractors with censorship and denounced them for failing to grasp literary complexity. Critics of the award, on the other hand, protested the novel's portrayal of Filipinos as sexual predators, recurring figures in Yamanaka's work. In the context of Hawaii, where the novel is set, Filipino marginalization is part of a political and economic structure dominated by whites and local Japanese. Stereotypes of Filipinos as sexually deviant thus articulate, in sexualized form, the economic threat of Filipino workers during the plantation era. Given Yamanaka's background as a Hawaiian author of Japanese descent, critics of the award questioned the conspicuous absence of Native Hawaiians in her work and

worried that her writing reinforces local Japanese hegemony. Even now, at a distance of some fifteen years, scholars of Asian American literature continue to ponder the award controversy and the issues it raised regarding literature, its status, and its relationship to politics. In hindsight, of course, both sides of the debate found themselves taking up all too familiar positions on either side of the traditional divide between aesthetics and politics. Recent movements in literary studies have challenged the separation of aesthetics from politics by reviving the ideological entanglements of aesthetics and renewing the sociopolitical and historical engagements of form. Returning to the question of reading Asian American literature furthers these discussions.

For political and disciplinary reasons, the scholarly approach to Asian American literature tends to bind the literary tradition quite tightly to the identity formation. Such is the prevalence of this critical tendency that Viet T. Nguyen begins his book on Asian American literature by declaring, "For better or worse, Asian American literary critics have generally approached Asian American literature as being symptomatic of ongoing historical concerns for Asian Americans—to read the literature, then, enables the critic to form political theses about the state of Asian America."[1] Nguyen is describing practices of referential reading that have been essential to constructing an Asian American literary tradition but have been less helpful in clarifying its distinctiveness as literature. The broad sweep of these reading practices tends to obscure how individual literary texts may hint at a different set of concerns or even unsettle their identity to Asian America altogether. For example, the narrative of *Blu's Hanging* seems to confirm the charges of Filipino stereotyping, but a closer look at the novel's figurative activity reveals instead a trenchant critique of those same stereotypes. Referential reading practices have yet another troubling effect. In expecting that Asian American literature is necessarily "about" Asian America—in assuming, that is, that racial signs correspond reliably to racial meanings—do we not reproduce the very racial logic that we contest elsewhere? If we cannot make room for Asian

American literature to mean other than Asian America, do we not acquiesce to the further marginalization of this literature by restricting its scope and reducing its complexity?

The past decade has witnessed a resurgence of scholarly interest in form and aesthetics, which Marjorie Levinson has termed a "new formalism." What differentiates this formalism from previous versions is its commitment to yoking the study of form to history and politics. As Levinson sees it, the new formalism is too heterogeneous to be considered a theory, but two strands may be discerned: an "activist" version, reintroducing questions of form to historical reading, and a "normative" version, returning to Kant to emphasize the disinterested and pleasurable aspects of form (the latter also considered sociopolitical as it involves "norm-setting").[2] Levinson's account does not seek to delineate aesthetic inquiry from varieties of formalism, but for different reasons these approaches and their various commitments sit uneasily with the Asian American texts under consideration here. The new formalism engages predominantly with the early modern and Romantic periods, and such scholarship tends to lack the formidable resources for theorizing race and racial formation that have defined Asian American studies and its sister disciplines. From a slightly different direction, sundry efforts have been made to reclaim the aesthetic, but getting away from its traditional investment in universal categories of value, taste, judgment, truth, and beauty remains difficult. Moreover its reliance on the "disinterested" subject, a vestige of its Enlightenment heritage, cannot help us elucidate the persistent problem of race in Asian American literature. In discussing the "dual quests for freedom and for beauty" in African American literature, Cheryl Wall explains that the pursuit of form in ethnic literatures must be distinguished from the return to the aesthetic in the study of canonical literature. Referring to these mainstream debates, she argues, "Their situation is an inversion of that facing critics of African American literature. From its beginnings in the United States, black writing has been defined as having *only* an ideological importance."[3] Wall's caution is

timely, but if African American literature, by her reckoning, has been a forerunner in articulating the study of race with aesthetic or formalist inquiry, such is not the case with Asian American literary criticism, which is a field of more recent vintage.

It is undeniable that a second wave of Asian American literary criticism is making tremendous strides in this direction, but what requires more theorizing is the manner in which some of these studies must perforce resurrect the race-identified author in their investigations of literary behavior. Introducing a recent and influential anthology on Asian American form, Xiaojing Zhou asks us to pay attention to "the ways in which Asian American authors have resisted, subverted, and reshaped hegemonic European American literary genres, as well as the ways in which such interventions demonstrate a much more dynamic and complex relationship between Asian American and traditional European American literature."[4] To be sure, the emphasis on the race-identified author is a means of getting at the formal agency of the literature. Zhou explains, for example, that "a particular literary form . . . is a mode of subject positioning, a means of articulating the writer's resistance or affiliations within the field of literature and in the social spaces."[5] Inadvertently, however, the assertion of formal agency seems to go hand in hand with restoring the race-identified author as the source of literary behavior. There are two important reasons this book takes figurative activity rather than aesthetics or form as its primary point of departure. The first is that these canonical texts upset the typical route to Asian America because they tend to feature authors who insist on their absence from the Asian American text, as Kingston does with *China Men*, or have little relationship to Asian America in the first place—like Yamanaka, who identifies principally as a local Hawaiian author. The second and more compelling reason for the focus on figurative activity is that several of these texts do not conform to the fundamental criterion of the aesthetic because they are far from beautiful. How, for instance, are we to approach a text like John Okada's *No-No Boy* or the infamous preface to the landmark *Aiiieeeee!*

An Anthology of Asian American Writers? Critics have had trouble getting around the "crude realism" of the former and the "vociferousness of the polemic" of the latter.[6] Since these texts are at once aesthetically impoverished and yet intensely rhetorical, since they feature authors who are dead or missing, neither aesthetics nor formalism as presently configured can help us clarify the peculiarly fraught nature of these Asian American texts.[7] It is thus to the classical rhetorical tropes that we must turn to understand the unquiet nature of this literature.

Unquiet Tropes argues for reconceptualizing Asian American literature as a set of rhetorical tropes taking shape around highly specific historical problematics. My five case studies are canonical texts, each of which has been instrumental in representing Asian America: *Aiiieeeee!*, *No-No Boy*, *China Men*, *Blu's Hanging*, and *Native Speaker*. Yet, at the same time, these texts call on ancient rhetorical tropes—antanaclasis, rhetorical question, apophasis, catachresis, and allegory—to work out their concerns with race. In the process they renew and redefine the purview of this older rhetorical language. I call these tropes unquiet for several reasons. These are tropes that call attention to themselves *as* tropes, as turns or deviations from proper meaning or normative usage. They therefore exceed notions of language as referential by flaunting their various affinities for deceit, for error, and for other-speaking. Their rhetorical nature, however, is equally marked by a proclivity for referentiality: antanaclasis, the repetition of a word in a different sense, depends on a clear and obvious reference to the word it seeks to repeat; apophasis, the figure of negation, makes reference to something by telling us what it is not. These tropes are thus defined by a formal tension between their rhetorical inclination toward deviation and their simultaneous insistence on some form of referentiality. Finally these tropes are unquiet because they are not, in the most basic sense, Asian American. Not only are we dealing with linguistic patterns that come from elsewhere, but the historical periods in which the study of rhetoric flourished are thoroughly alien to the concerns of Asian America. That these recognizably rhetorical

figures nevertheless appear in Asian American literature indicates a vast and common linguistic heritage, one that far exceeds the parameters of both Asian America and the historical cultures of rhetoric. Far from being timeless or transcendental, though, these tropes figure a specific set of problematics firmly rooted in Asian American history, and because these precipitating historical conditions are *figured*—transformed into figurative language—they are, in the end, indirect and unverifiable.

In alluding to the literariness of these texts, I fall back on an old-fashioned definition of the literary: the surplus of meaning and reference generated by language when it exceeds or deviates from proper usage. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sums up this traditional notion when she calls literature "an indefinite structure of possibilities" and directs our attention to the "singular unverifiability of the literary." Against the rational demand of the global marketplace for the other to be verifiable, to be comprehensible to the dominant, she exhorts us to "let literature teach us that there are no certainties, that the process is open, and that it may be altogether salutary that it is so." For Spivak—and Shelley and Sidney, upon whose defense of poetry she draws—literature is that most apt of training grounds for the imagination, the "great inbuilt instrument of othering" that enables the ethical relationship to the other without guarantees.[8] When we close down the possibility for Asian American literature to be anything more than the representation of racial identity, we cannot learn what it can teach us about figuration, about the literary potential for aberration and for multiple or unexpected trajectories. In this book I use *literary* in two senses: in a general fashion, to indicate the qualities of unverifiability associated with the literary, and in a more restricted sense, to designate the formal specificity of literature. I use *figurative* to refer to the special effects—opacity, excess, and errancy—created by language in the context of the literary text; these may include but are not limited to devices, rhetorical figures, patterning, and sequence.

This heightened sensitivity to language has gone by many names, among them, poetics, form, aesthetics, rhetoric, and

close reading. In our time the attention to figurative language is typically associated with literary training, but the rhetoricity of language is by no means restricted to literature, which is itself a recent invention. Indeed, rhetoricity is intrinsic to language itself. Paul de Man, for instance, has demonstrated in reading after meticulous reading that philosophical and political treatises are as thoroughly immersed in rhetorical behavior as texts openly acknowledged as literary. While de Man does not hesitate to associate the "rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself," he does offer a more general definition of the rhetorical when he suggests that "rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."[9] With regard to Asian American literature, a racialized literary tradition that continues to exert profound material force on race and racialization, awareness of "referential aberration" becomes all the more important because it invites us to envision alternative trajectories for the racialized sign, trajectories that might bend or swerve, tangle or overlap, or even veer entirely off course. And though I will be arguing for the literariness of Asian American literature, sensitivity to referential aberration does not in any way respect a literary pedigree as scholars of race, gender, and sexuality have long demonstrated similar sensibilities. Robyn Wiegman, for example, begins her genealogy of race and modern vision by asking us to consider race as a set of "corporeal signs that *do not* appear." She would have us understand how the biological definition of race in the nineteenth century gives rise to a curious paradox: "This sphere produced not simply the constancy of race as an unchanging, biological feature, but an inherent and incontrovertible difference of which skin was only the most visible indication."[10] Skin color, then, is the "visible indication" of an interiority that cannot be seen. In another example of referential incongruity, Judith Butler asks us to conceive of gender as corporeal discontinuity: "The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex,

and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another."[11] In other words, though they may not present themselves as such, theories of race, gender, and sexuality—poststructuralist or not—have suggested a "rhetoricity" to the body-as-sign, and it is this understanding that grants to the sign a potential for new meanings. It is indeed a grim future for Asian American literature if the only path that we can imagine for the sign is an inevitably racialized one, a trajectory that always hits its mark, whose arc is never to be refracted into the "heterogeneity, hybridity, or multiplicity" with which Lisa Lowe has characterized Asian America.

Metaphor for Asian America

It is now a critical commonplace to rehearse the failures of the term *Asian American*. Coined by activists in the 1960s, the term replaced the pejorative *Oriental* to designate a platform for political consciousness and mobilization by calling on the shared history of racialization. Like all identities "Asian American" is a catachresis, a misuse of language, and so, despite persistent attempts to revise, expand, or reformulate it, Asian American scholars have conceded that it is a term we cannot do without.[12] Kandice Chuh thus calls on us to reconceptualize Asian American identity as "a term *in difference from itself*," as "itself deconstruction," and to understand Asian American studies as a "subjectless discourse."[13] Chuh's alignment of Asian American subjectivity with deconstruction is a generative one, but what I find most compelling is an easily overlooked association she makes between Asian America and the rhetorical tradition. The term *Asian American*, she argues, should not be understood as transparent, as simply denoting knowledge about Asian America. Instead, approaching it in Saussurean terms, Chuh wants us to grasp the relationship between the term and what it designates as arbitrary, as consolidated by social systems and relations of power. In her words, the term "*transfers* the properties

of the racialized and gendered nation onto bodies—of people, of literatures, of fields of study."[14] As she puts it, "'Asian American' is in this sense a *metaphor* for resistance and racism."[15] Chuh herself does not pursue the bridge between the rhetorical tradition and Asian America, but she does insist on a "literariness" to *Asian American* because the term reflects on, theorizes its own conditions of representation. Following Chuh, I want to pause here at the crossroads of metaphor and race to suggest that there is already a precedent in our field, albeit one not recognized as such, for thinking the literary as figuring and therefore pulling away from identity.

If *Asian American* is a metaphor for Asian American history, what does it mean that an ancient rhetorical trope has such a central relationship to Asian America? Metaphor compares two things, but unlike its kindred term *simile* it insists on more than mere likeness by creating an identity, a resemblance, where none exists, and its work, we might say, involves effacing its own figurative operation. This is why, in part, deconstructive readings of metaphor have assiduously tried to expose what metaphor would have us forget: that its claims to truth, to transcendental meaning, to the unity between language and object are based, as rhetorician Richard Lanham observes, on "changing a word from its literal meaning to one not properly applicable."[16] According to Lanham, *metaphor* means "transference" in the original Greek, and Chuh's language hints at this etymology when she asserts that *Asian American* involves a "transfer" of racial meaning onto bodies and subjects; that is, in assigning race, *Asian American* requires a change in meaning from proper to improper. Chuh's invitation to consider *Asian American* as a metaphor is thus invigorating and disquieting. On the one hand, it reminds us that the relationship between "Asian American" and Asian America is merely rhetorical; this identity is the effect of a figure whose task it is to produce the illusion of identity. On the other hand, if "Asian American" is to succeed as a figure of identity, it must present itself as a "name" for Asian America, that is, as a motivated and natural identity that we must persistently undo

to avoid essentializing it. Chuh's handling of metaphor suggests that something changes—enlarges or deviates—in the rhetorical tradition itself when it encounters these Asian American particularities. By designating *Asian American* "a *metaphor* for resistance and racism," her formulation insists that metaphor's emergence in an Asian American context forces it to depart from its customary duties. Now, in the place of identity, it indexes difference (racism), and instead of unity it registers contention and potential deviation (resistance).

Metaphor is a trope from antiquity. It comes to Asian American literature by way of a rhetorical tradition first codified around 500 BCE in Greece. That we find metaphor, and other classical tropes like apophasis and allegory, in Asian American literature suggests at the very least some linguistic and rhetorical basis for multiplying the references for Asian American literature beyond or other than Asian America. These rhetorical figures also remind us of the complicated legacy of Asian America itself, which is an appellation that comes from elsewhere. We know from Edward Said that the "Orient" is an idea invented by the West, a self-consolidating discourse that allowed Europe to rule, know, administer, and represent its colonial other. In the American context the racialized category of "Asian" is superficially imposed on a diverse and heterogeneous group of people whose entry into the United States is precipitated by the European search for Asia. As historian Gary Y. Okihiro avers, "Asians, it must be remembered, did not come to America; Americans went to Asia. . . . And the matter of the 'when and where' of Asian American history is located therein, in Europe's eastward and westward thrusts, engendered, transformative, expansive."[17] If Okihiro is right to posit the historical emergence of Asian America in and through Europe, he gives us warrant to explore, as scholars are doing in new ways today, the vexed and uneven entanglements of these traditions. Josephine Park, for example, demonstrate a direct line of descent between contemporary Asian American writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and poets like Myung Mi Kim and the American Orientalism

of Pound and his cohort. Park's book begins by inviting us to "reopen our understanding of the formation of Asian American literature by considering a presently disavowed past. To return to Orientalist literature as an instigator for Asian American literature is to examine anew a political and aesthetic response—one which has long been deemed a case of simple rejection—as a crucial point of contact which defined a literary movement."[18]

In organizing this study of Asian American literature around a set of classical rhetoric tropes, I do not seek a return to historical origins. I observe, as John Bender and David Wellbery have previously, that modern rhetorical inquiry is a different beast altogether from its classical, medieval, and Renaissance predecessors. In its heyday rhetoric was much more than the means by which young men were taught to argue persuasively. As Jenny C. Mann describes it, rhetoric was "the gateway to learning in the postmedieval world, the method through which all other subjects were apprehended."[19] Its demise, according to Bender and Wellbery, was brought about by material shifts accompanying modernization: the new discourse of science arising in the Enlightenment, that period's elevation of an objective language defined by transparency, the onset of print culture, and eventually the Romantic valorization of individual creativity and genius. The past few decades have witnessed a "rebirth" of rhetoric, but Bender and Wellbery encourage us to conceive of its modern reincarnation as a "general rhetoricality," wherein rhetoric no longer designates a special use of language but more fundamental processes of meaning making and subjectivity.[20] In this book I treat the rhetorical figures and their venerable critical resources as shortcuts to understanding certain types of linguistic patterns and devices.[21] I use the term *rhetorical* in a very technical sense to refer to the behavior of these tropes, wherever they are found. In the new formalism of the 2000s, as Levinson indicates, there is exciting Renaissance scholarship adumbrating how "rhetoric speaks culture,"[22] but in historicizing the appearance of these figures to the particularities of Renaissance culture, such studies offer little help in explaining

the hows or whys of these figures as they present themselves in Asian American literature. Indeed, I want to suggest that what we have yet to see in the new rhetorical inquiry is a sustained engagement with race, especially as it pertains to whiteness or what passes for it at different historical junctures. Individual critics, of course, have made important interventions—Henry Louis Gates Jr. comes to mind—but if we are to assert, as many scholars do, that Europe's awareness of race begins in earnest with the discovery of the New World, how might rhetorical study benefit from an extended inquiry into race and racialization?[23]

In placing figurative activity at the center of Asian American literature, we can begin to grasp how cautiously, and sometimes suspiciously, these texts view their connection to Asian America. If Asian America has, from the start, been an identity in perpetual danger of unraveling, the existence of Asian American literature is even more precarious because, as Colleen Lye notes, "the problem is that 'Asian American literature' exists largely at the level of the course syllabus, scholarly research monographs, or publishers' catalogues, rather than at the level of an individual text."[24] In other words, the constellation of texts assembled and collated as "Asian American" may speak more to institutional or pedagogical demands than to any natural or intrinsic cohesion among the texts themselves. To provide coherence to individual texts that are often at odds with each other, we have relied on the race-identified author as a way to organize diverse textual material, but this too has problems of its own—for example, the maintenance measures that are periodically undertaken to expand the range of Asian American identity. This is where a recourse to the established patterns of figurative language might prove useful. Jeanne Fahnestock notes that the rhetorical tradition is "remarkably enduring and *trans*lingual" because "devices identified in the Latin *Rhetorica ad Herennium* of 80 BCE can easily be identified in contemporary discourse."[25] From the literary side G. N. Leech observes that "'figures,' in the sense of deviant or foregrounded features of literary language, are observable and classifiable features of texts."[26] Since these figures describe

a discrete and long codified set of behaviors, they might be said to constitute concrete examples of Asian American literature as well as instances of rhetorical language being reworked by race.

The historical person of the author has never been a particularly reliable barometer for explaining the operations of the literary text. As Robert Dale Parker remarks of Native American literature, the "noisy inefficiency of language and representation" means that "we may lament the way white writers can botch the representation of Indian characters, but it doesn't therefore follow that Indian writers necessarily get it right, or that we can always predict what it might mean to get it right, or that any writer can stick to portraying that writer's own race, gender, sexuality, class, region, cultural disposition, and so on through the curlicue of identities that mean so much to us."[27] There is a place for authorial intention, which shows itself in the "deliberate choices in form, genres, traditions, and conventions" that Sue-Im Lee identifies as evidence of aesthetic activity.[28] When speaking of figurative activity, though, the person or figure of the author is too frail a vehicle for containing the vastness of language and its iterations across the reach of millennia. That these classical rhetorical tropes resurface in Asian American literature suggests that such linguistic patterns do not belong to any single author or individual; they are part of a linguistic inheritance dwarfing any individual's claim to own or originate it. These rhetorical structures may very well be unintended; they are, in this sense, part of the unanticipated and compelling effects of figuration that illuminate the power of the literary text to exceed its historical usage. To give up the person or figure of the author, however, is not to give up the pressing issue of race, as race remains quite forcefully evident not only in the titles of the texts being studied—*Aiiieeeee!*, *China Men*, *No-No Boy*—but in the historical problematics with which these texts wrestle.

Where classical rhetoric differs from its modern descendant, Fahnestock remarks, is that the ancients "did not consider the language a code nor themselves decoders." The purpose of rhetorical instruction lay in passing down a set of practices and

techniques, and so "commenting on how others used language effectively or ineffectively was only a means to that end."[29] The opposite must obtain in the study of Asian American literature. Treating these texts as figurative, as requiring a special kind of attention, is urgent because they continue to exert material force on how race is imagined, thought, and lived out. Were we able to approach this literature as highly figured language with unpredictable effects, we might better grasp racialization itself as an ongoing process in which racial meaning is assigned, contested, taken up, and on occasion can stray from its original intent. In tracking this figurative activity we start to glimpse just how deconstructive an attitude these Asian American texts have toward racial interpellation. Each of these canonical texts insists that race may very well miss its mark, stutter, or fail to execute. By staging the gaps, the tensions, and the unverifiable effects of figurative activity, these texts suggest as well that figurative activity, in the service of figuring race, might limn out an unanticipated referentiality. If figurative activity teaches us how literary forms distort their precipitating conditions by twisting or turning them into tropes and figures, perhaps we could learn to think along these lines about race itself.

The referential paradigm has been a powerful way to get at the pernicious effects of race on the subject and on the literary imagination. For one influential model, Rey Chow's "coercive mimeticism," ethnicity functions as what she calls a captivity narrative, "a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected . . . to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them." Chow's particular concern is that the self-referentiality so typical of ethnic representation is far from liberating; such gestures, she argues, are equivalent to accepting one's "otherness," which, more often than not, leads to "the profound sense of self-hatred and impotence among ethnics."[30] The relentless referentiality to which the Asian American subject must answer means not only that she participates unwittingly in her own subjection but that in doing

so she cannot be anything other than Asian, reduced to a phenotype. Referential reading practices operate in much the same way; they reduce the distortion effect of literary activity, which may subvert the relation of the text to Asian America or Asian American identity. Chow's general insights notwithstanding, her model founders curiously at the juncture of rhetoricity and Asian America.[31] As she understands it, ethnic studies in the United States "is no longer entirely or at all grounded in language pedagogy," and the Asian American subject is a case in point: "Because so many of them no longer have the claim to ethnic authority through the possession of ethnic languages, Asian Americans are perhaps the paradigmatic case of a coercive mimeticism that physically keeps them in their place . . . in their *genre* of speaking/writing as nothing but *generic* Asian Americans."[32] Chow is too canny not to problematize this presumed linguistic authority, but her preference for the term *ethnicity* (it "avoids replicating the residual biologism that is inerasably embedded in the term 'race'") seems to miss the institutionalized nature of *Asian American* as premised precisely on racial and not ethnic difference.[33] As Lowe observes, "The history of the legislation of the Asian as *alien* and the administration of the Asian American as *citizen* is . . . the genealogy of a distinct 'racial formation' for Asian Americans, defined not primarily in terms of biological racialism but in terms of institutionalized, legal definitions of race and national origin."[34]

In other words, because *Asian American* is so patently an institutionalized discontinuity, because it indexes precisely what Chow is troubled by—the referential aberration of an "Asian" body without a corresponding linguistic authority—the term refuses the illusion of a more "natural" relationship between the body and its interiority. If one of Chow's worries is that the Asian American subject participates unwittingly in her own subjection, Chuh's rhetorical intervention suggests an alternative to this mimetic logic. As a metaphor, *Asian American* involves a transfer of meaning that produces the very relationship in question, but because this transfer is figurative, accomplished by means of

a rhetorical figure, it makes room for potential referential aberrations. In fact by referring to metaphor (from *meta*, "beyond, over," and *pherein*, "to carry") as the "figure of transport," one rhetorical treatise recognizes the risks and hazards inherent in the ferrying across of meaning from one term to another.[35] This is why the Asian American texts considered here are so extraordinary. The rhetorical tropes at work offer a way out of Chow's bleak mimeticism by presenting a trajectory that insists on reference and yet somehow skews (or bends) the path between sign and meaning. This figurative activity thus invites us to entertain a model of referentiality that is inconsistent—behaving erratically, with results or effects that we cannot anticipate—without derailing altogether.

For an early if unacknowledged example of this sensibility in Asian American literary criticism, I turn to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature*, a groundbreaking thematic study with a surprising awareness of referential subversion. Her introduction warns us that her "chosen terms of analysis, because of their bias toward 'content,' do not leave much room for investigating *possible tensions* between the thematic import and the stylistic inflections of a work."[36] The notion that "possible tensions" might arise between form and content is not itself new or unusual, but Wong borrows terms from Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* to cast this tension in distinctly Asian American terms: "Certainly a lesson in Extravagance might be subverted by an austere manner of presentation, or a plea for Necessity might be couched in such an Extravagant form that its persuasiveness becomes questionable." According to Wong, Extravagance and Necessity designate Asian American "modes of existence and operation": the former indicates the impulse toward play, freedom, excess; the latter, the pressure of constraint, demand, and conservation.[37] Even as she seeks to construct a coherent Asian American tradition, Wong is acutely aware that the potential tensions at work in the literature present other possibilities for reading, ones in which the text breaks free of its Asian American moorings. By deriving her terms of

analysis from a literary text, her project already gestures toward reconceptualizing Asian American literature as a group of texts whose relationship to their originary historical context is no longer easily identifiable, as that relationship has been reworked, *figured*, by literature. I have been suggesting that there is a precedent, if not an outright inclination, for deconstruction already at work in Asian American literature. Wong and Chuh register this tendency; the former by stressing the "possible tensions" between what is said and how it is said and the latter by emphasizing the "literariness" inherent in the term *Asian American*. Taken together they offer powerful inducements to rereading Asian American literature.

For all these reasons I have concentrated on the linguistic patterns found in these texts. If Asian American literature can be imagined as a set of figurative activities that do not ignore or dismiss the question of race, then it suggests a role for Asian American literature in the new formalism. In refusing to deracinate their figurative activity, these Asian American texts demonstrate how modern versions of figurative language are inextricably entangled with claims for racial identity. What we want is a general formalism more persistently attentive to questions of gender, class, sexuality, *and* race, most especially when the occlusion of race has resulted in the invisibility of whiteness. "Theoretically," Hazel Carby reminds us, "we should be arguing that everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialized subject. In this sense, it is important to think about the invention of the category of whiteness as well as of blackness and, consequently, to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: specifically the white point in space from which we tend to identify difference."[38] As a persistently racialized category of American literature, Asian American literature can potentially disturb the normative assumptions operating in the deracinated studies of form, rhetoric, and figurative activity by refusing to drop the question of race, even when it appears—in the case of whiteness—not to be there at all.