

Introduction

Institutionalization and the Crisis of Representation

The development of Asian American studies as an academic field offers an intriguing case study in the history of the American university over the last three decades of the twentieth century. Emerging from the mass movements of the 1960s, Asian American studies has undergone major transformations over its rather brief time span. The first Asian American studies programs were established at San Francisco State College (now University) and the University of California at Berkeley in 1969, as a result of the Third World Strike, a boycott of classes by a multiracial and cross-class coalition of students, activists, and labor and community members. After protracted struggles to consolidate its presence in the university throughout the 1970s, new graduate students entered the field, and new programs began to appear at schools in places outside the West Coast in the 1980s. But then during the 1990s, tensions began to develop in the field, tensions between theory and practice, between political work and intellectual work, and between the community and the academy.¹ They finally erupted in 1998 with the conflicts over the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) fiction award given to Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Blu's Hanging*.

Although the protests over the fiction award nearly led to the dissolution of the association itself, this event has already begun to be forgotten.² The award was featured in several books and articles published shortly afterward, but scholarly commentary on both the event and Yamanaka's novel has been notably sparse to date, now almost a decade later. This forgetting clearly has something to do with the traumatic nature of the conflicts, as well as with the uncertainty of what they signaled or what lessons might be drawn from them. The controversy was, in a sense, both too obvious and not obvious enough. That is, the debates over the fiction

award before it was revoked raised issues such as cultural nationalism, the politics of representation, internal conflicts in the panethnic Asian American coalition, and the nature of the aesthetic and of literary value. In the wake of these events, however, it is not readily apparent what the controversy means or even why it is important to the history of the field or of Asian American politics in general. This book seeks to rectify that neglect on both counts, by arguing that the episode was significant not only as an instance of popular struggles over cultural politics, but that it also reveals certain basic lacunae in the theory and methods of Asian American studies. These absences call for a reflexive analysis of the political-intellectual project of the field, and, more specifically, for a concrete assessment of its location in the academic field and the university.

I use the historical context of the crisis around *Blu's Hanging* as a point of entry into the larger project of my book, an analysis of the development of Asian American studies as a field. This book seeks to produce a genealogy of Asian American studies from its origins in the Third World Strike of 1968 to the events surrounding the AAAS fiction award in 1998, particularly with regard to the role of culture and cultural studies in the development of the field. My intention is not to produce an intellectual history or even an institutional history, although the book encompasses aspects of both; rather, it is an excavation of certain fundamental dynamics that have driven the field's institutionalization over its brief, though eventful, life span. To that end, I am guided by two questions. First, what is the relation between the academic work of producing conceptual or theoretical representations and the political project of representing particular individuals or groups? And second, how should we understand the politics of academic work in the university if we take seriously the contention that one of its primary functions is the (re)production of cultural capital? Whereas the first question speaks to the purpose of establishing ethnic studies as a project of institutional transformation, the second addresses the ways in which this project had to acquire institutional legitimacy in order to survive.

In my investigation, I hope to provide a more detailed analysis of "institutionalization" and the ways that ethnic studies and the university have transformed each other. What happens when the radical politics of a mass movement enter the university and become institutionalized as a field of study? What does it mean to engage in political struggle within the university? This book explores the history and evolution of what is understood as politics in the field of Asian American studies, and it argues that

the politics of the field needs to be understood in the context of struggles over the particular forms of capital that circulate both inside and outside the academy. Higher education has always been an object of political struggles in American society, but the student strikes of the 1960s and the demand for black studies and other ethnic studies marked a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of the university. For the first time in the history of American higher education, students sought to intervene in processes of university governance that had previously been closed off to them, and in doing so, they came to challenge the foundations of the university itself.

The *Blu's Hanging* controversy was widely regarded as a manifestation of the “crisis of representation” that engulfed many parts of the university, but the nature of the crisis and how it was related to representation were not as clear. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, by Viet Nguyen, and *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, by Kandice Chuh, two books published after the event, feature the crisis as a central part of their theoretical arguments. Both books agree that the crux of the event was the lack of correspondence between the representations and the objects they were intended to represent. In this case, it was the discrepancy between the AAAS’s claim to represent Asian Americans and the complaint of some Asian Americans that the organization was not in fact properly representing them. Both also assert their critiques of (mis)representation in the name of the represented. Apart from this, however, the two books’ arguments proceed in different (if not opposed) directions. Nguyen, for example, attributes the discrepancy to the representatives’ interests, which he sees as distorting their perception of those whom they claimed to represent. In contrast, Chuh calls into question representation as such by arguing that any act of representation inevitably neglects and thus suppresses differences in the group being represented.

Although both these accounts offer important insights into the controversies over Yamanaka’s novel, I find it striking that they proceed as if on parallel tracks with almost no points of intersection between them, especially since both sets of questions had already circulated in debates around the controversy. Besides construing the source of the conflicts in dramatically different fashion, these accounts also imply different solutions, essentially either greater accountability or no representation at all. This dichotomy, however, only replicates the “paradox” of representation identified by Hannah Pitkin, which is that representation is often gauged in relation to two ideals, those of perfect instruction—in which

the representative acts only in accordance with the directives of the represented—or complete independence—in which the representative pursues the best interests of the represented, irregardless of what their actual wishes might be. As Pitkin argues, neither of these two ideals can be said to constitute political representation at all. If representation proper operates only between those two poles, however, the *Blu's Hanging* episode marks an instance in which there was apparently no possibility of reconciling them.

Given the immense conflicts that surfaced over the book, perhaps it is neither surprising nor coincidental that the two main responses to the “crisis of representation” would bifurcate along exactly this division. The mutually exclusive relation of the two books reveals the gulf between the opposing sides in the revocation of the fiction award, a gap that persists and that underlies, I argue, this episode’s resistance to analysis. In focusing on the actions of the representatives, Nguyen implicitly adopts the perspective of the protesters, whereas Chuh, by calling for the rejection of representation and essentially severing any relation of obligation between Asian American studies practitioners and the Asian American population, opposes those who would make political claims on academic institutions. Although correlating the two accounts in this way may help illuminate the opposing sides of this conflict, unless we can bridge the gap between them, we will not understand the issues any better. Instead, we must seek to recombine the two theoretical models and restore to each what has been excluded. In particular, I argue that the *Blu's Hanging* episode raises questions regarding how judgments about the best interests of those they represent might have been affected by representatives’ own unacknowledged interests, unacknowledged because they are not personal but collective interests, that is, the interests of those in the university.

To supply the missing link between the two theoretical models, we must confront one of the most persistent and vexing questions in Asian American studies, that of institutionalization, or what it means for the field to become an integral part of the very institution that it initially opposed and sought to transform. Even though this issue is hardly unique to Asian American studies, I contend that an investigation of the *Blu's Hanging* incident can help illuminate this problematic in ways that lead to new conceptual frameworks for the field. Indeed, institutionalization is intractable because it is almost always comprehended only in terms of contradiction, partly because of the way that ethnic studies originally conceived of itself as being opposed to the university. Once ethnic studies entered

the university, this self-conception could be maintained only by regarding itself as a site of extraterritoriality, somehow figuratively outside of the institution despite being literally inside. This was, to say the least, not only an inadequate model of institutionalization, but it was also predicated on a monolithic and reductive account of the university and how it functions. My intention is not to examine the institution in all its manifold complexity, but to concentrate on one aspect that is salient to the questions raised here, the structures that produce and sustain the autonomy of the university.

For example, after President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq, several petitions and resolutions began to circulate on the Internet. Most were calls for faculty to take action against the war, but one was addressed to members of the AAAS, calling on the association to “form a task force to produce and disseminate educational resources as an alternative to the propaganda of U.S. multinational, corporate media” as well as to “build alliances with other academic, legal, policy and community-based organizations to protect civil liberties and human rights, and fight for social justice.” What caught my attention was not these two injunctions but the one that preceded them in the list, which urged the AAAS “to defend the academic freedom of its members’ research, teaching and professional services in challenging this imperial ‘War on Terror.’” Clearly, the authors of this resolution viewed academic freedom as a prerequisite to taking political action, but for those who were not academics, the defense of academic freedom might have seemed, at best, like a rather indirect response to military conflict. Although freedom of speech is certainly at stake here, couching the matter as academic freedom slants it more toward faculty autonomy rather than the First Amendment. To push the issue a bit further, we might ask how the defense of faculty autonomy would respond to the political exigencies of war.

What makes this document even more interesting is that it was proposed by the Critical Filipino Studies Collective, a group that grew out of (and several of whose members were involved in) the Filipino American Studies Caucus, which played a central role in the call to rescind Yamataka’s fiction award. As chapter 5 of my book demonstrates, autonomy became one of the central issues in the debate because the AAAS’s board refused to interfere in the decision by the three-person award committee in the name of academic freedom. The question, then, is how we conceive of autonomy in relation to the political aims of Asian American studies as an academic field. While the institutional structures that produce the

autonomy of the university arguably are the main obstacles to any political movements that seek to transform it, once that movement gains entry to the university, autonomy apparently becomes something it can use to its own advantage. Does this mean that autonomy is simply a neutral bureaucratic apparatus that can be manipulated for radically different political purposes and hence something to be conquered and seized? Or is autonomy itself integral to the institution's ideological or political functions? Put more succinctly, is the defense of academic freedom and faculty autonomy a precondition for effective opposition to domination, or does it in fact indirectly sustain domination? Although that is one of this book's central questions, it cannot be answered easily. Rather, I contend that the question of autonomy must be raised in order for Asian American studies to have any coherent political agenda at all, whether inside or outside the academy.

The term *Asian American* was formulated by activists in the 1960s to denote a new identity for Asians in the United States, one that insisted on "claiming America." The emphasis on a national identity and belonging, however, was soon challenged by developments occurring simultaneously with the Asian American movement. Major changes in U.S. immigration law in the 1960s and the rise of Japan and the Four Tigers (Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia) as sites of capital accumulation in the global economy significantly transformed the Asian American population. Before the 1960s, the main factor in the demographics of Asian American communities was the series of immigration laws, beginning with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, that restricted the entry of almost all Asian immigrants to the United States. It was only with the Immigration Act of 1965 that the United States finally equalized the quotas for all nations, thereby ending almost eighty years of legal exclusion. One impetus for immigration reform at this time was government reports forecasting a shortage of skilled and technical labor in the U.S. economy. Even though the 1965 Immigration Act expressed a preference for immigrants with these skills, legislators thought that this preference would be filled by European immigrants. As a result of certain transformations in the international division of labor, however, it was largely Asians who met this preference.³

These changes had three major consequences for Asian American communities. The first was a dramatic rise in the number of first-generation Asian immigrants, so that they now outnumber the second generation and later, who had previously constituted the majority of the

Asian American population during the exclusion era. The second was the enormous expansion of new ethnic groups, so that the Asian American population has changed from being mostly Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino, to being a heterogeneous grouping of East Asians, South Asians, and Southeast Asians, with Pacific Islanders and West Asians (or those from the Middle East) as the most recent and controversial inclusions.⁴ Finally, both the immigration preferences and the gains of the civil rights movement have created a new Asian American middle class, contributing to a widening class division in Asian American communities. It has thus become increasingly difficult not only to say who Asian Americans are in any singular way, but to locate them either geographically or politically.

These dramatic demographic changes are generally agreed to be the underlying factors of the recent crisis in the field, which has been described by a number of scholars as a crisis of representation. Whom or what does Asian American studies represent, and how does it represent them? This is, above all, a question regarding the field's political aims, and it also speaks to the assumptions that guide its intellectual and scholarly work. One of the field's primary imperatives, for example, was to "serve the community." After the 1965 Immigration Act, though, Asian American diversity increased to an extent that it now is nearly impossible to say who or what the "community" is. The crisis of representation also has produced a crisis of identity. What does it mean to engage in Asian American literary criticism or Asian American studies in general? If it is no longer possible to know the community, then what principles or politics can give the field of Asian American studies some kind of coherence? To pose the question in these terms already indicates the divergence of Asian American studies (or any minority studies in general) from the "traditional" academic disciplines. If there is a crisis of literary studies, for example, it is not because English departments have lost a sense of whom they represent.⁵

This book offers a critical analysis of Asian American studies as one particular case that illuminates the situation of the American academy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My analysis is based on the problematic of representation, a term that is used in many ways but raises a number of issues confronting ethnic studies, literary studies, and the academy in general. More specifically, the book examines the development of Asian American studies in its social, historical, and institutional contexts by focusing on Asian American literary and cultural studies as the nexus of the crisis of Asian American studies, on the one hand, and

the crisis of literature (or the “canon”), on the other. While the former is seen as a crisis of representation, the latter is generally understood as a crisis of value. Asian American literary studies is one node where these two crises intersect. The relation between them, I believe, offers an intriguing map of the current state of literary studies, insofar as the two oppose each other in many respects despite deriving from the same social and historical matrix.

Historically, representation has been conceived in two main senses, political and aesthetic. The question is whether these two are related and, if so, how. In liberal political philosophy, culture is construed as a domain separate from politics and economics; hence the two meanings of representation are seen as distinct. Others scholars see them as being connected in various ways, as, for example, in the wide-ranging debates over the relation of culture to politics. If one position is that political and aesthetic representation are fundamentally different, the other extreme holds that they are simply the same or that all aesthetic representations reflect a particular structure of political representation. Debates in Asian American literary studies have tended to mirror these larger disagreements, from those who argue that Asian American cultural production must serve primarily a political function to those who seek to defend the autonomy of the aesthetic. This book proposes an alternative understanding of the relation between political and aesthetic representation that seeks to preserve the relative autonomy of the field of cultural production even as it explicates the complex articulation that nevertheless links it to the political field. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, I argue that the connection between the two forms of representation must be understood as the relation between political capital and cultural capital. In other words, both political and aesthetic representation operate in distinct ways in more or less discrete spaces, but the effectiveness of both fundamentally depend on forms of capital. It is only in elaborating this linkage that we can begin articulating the connection between Asian American studies as a project within the university and the Asian American movement in the political field.

The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies argues that among the key features of the modern research university are the structures of autonomy that produce a relation of representation between the academy and the world—a relation that we might refer to as simply the ideology of “research.” This institutional structure becomes evident in the history of Asian American studies at San Francisco State College, since the necessary condition for incorporating the program in the university was

eliminating community control in order to establish a representative relation to the community. The most radical aspect of Asian American studies at SF State, as chapter 2 shows, was that it based the governance of the program on the principle of “community autonomy.” What was not sufficiently recognized was that *community* autonomy was directly opposed to the principle of the research university, which is *faculty* autonomy. Subsequently, as the field’s institutional situation has evolved, those changes have been reflected in myriad ways in its intellectual work, perhaps most strikingly in the “cultural turn” that took place during the 1980s. Initially, Asian American studies was largely concentrated in history and the social sciences, but during the 1980s, those core disciplines began to be displaced by a new surge of interest in literary studies, and in literary and cultural theory in particular. The question of theory has become one of the central issues in the field, but the debate over theory has tended to focus on the political implications of different theoretical paradigms. I offer instead a historical and institutional account of this disciplinary reconfiguration of the field.

In this book, I contend that one of the features distinguishing Asian American studies (and other branches of “minority” studies) from the “traditional” disciplines is its claim to a kind of political representation that contrasts in many ways with the forms of theoretical or descriptive representation seen as legitimate in the academy. The problem of reconciling these two antagonistic modes of representation motivates much of the theoretical work in what I call *Asian American cultural studies*. The broader argument of my book is that shifting the theoretical focus of Asian American literary and cultural studies from the thematics of identity to those of representation can dispel certain persistent theoretical quandaries and, more important, can lead to new political-theoretical questions. To that end, the book develops a theory of representation using Pierre Bourdieu’s elaborations of cultural and symbolic capital, since the credibility and verisimilitude of any representation are functions of the capital that they mobilize. In particular, I argue that Asian American literary and cultural studies are sites in the academy for the conversion of political and cultural capital and that the interplay between these two forms of capital reveals how the field is shaped by its relations to the Asian American political field, on the one hand, and the university, on the other.

Although the impact of theory may simply appear to reflect the rise of literary theory in the American academy in general during the 1980s and 1990s, its impact on the various forms of “minority studies” takes a

specific trajectory that must be understood in relation to their political dynamics, which are distinct from those of the “traditional” disciplines. Responses to theory in Asian American studies have largely been divided between those who remain committed to identity politics and the proponents of difference, but I propose that this dichotomy is itself a product of the relations of representation that structure the university. While the main thrust of theory in Asian American studies has been the political critique of identity and essentialism, I contend that the importation of literary and cultural theory into the field has also brought with it political agendas derived from other institutional conflicts. As the theoretical critique of identity expanded, it began to call into question the basis of the Asian American category itself. Theories of difference, for example, propose that as an identity category, Asian American necessarily subsumes heterogeneity and so perpetuates domination and inequality. It is, moreover, a category of the state and thus is implicated in the reproduction of hegemony. I contend that the history and subsequent development of Asian American studies as an academic field cannot be fully grasped in terms of identity or its theoretical critique. Rather, in order to advance beyond some of the theoretical cul-de-sacs to which the anti-identitarian critique has led, political work in Asian American studies (as well as in other fields) needs to investigate the conceptual and institutional structures of representation constituting one of the links between the academic field and the political field in liberal democracy.

I argue that it is possible to resolve many of the difficulties currently plaguing efforts to produce a nonrestrictive and nonessentialist account of the group when we recognize that the object of such efforts is not a community or a people but, first, a *category* and, second and more important, a *field*, in Bourdieu’s conception of the term. As I discuss in chapter 1, to conceive of the Asian American category as a field eliminates at one stroke many of the theoretical difficulties leading to the necessity of pronouncements such as the imperative to redefine Asian American studies as a “subjectless discourse.” This and other similar theoretical formulations are drawn from the political-intellectual project of reconciling identity with difference, but I suggest that the apparent conflict between these two terms has more to do with a logical than a political contradiction. The logical contradiction arises in part from a conceptualization of difference that dictates the refusal of representation as an essential component of the mechanism of identity. But this necessarily gives rise to a situation

in which theorists seek simultaneously to resolve the antinomy of identity and difference even as they reject representation.

The first point to be made about such arguments is that there is no possibility of refusing representation per se because that would result in a purely idealist discourse. Given that we are talking about the study of *Asian Americans*, we would have to say that something is being represented. The question that we must ask, then, is what kind of representation is being refused and what kind of representation is being retained. Clearly, it is *political* representation that is being rejected in favor of a purely theoretical or conceptual representation. These terms are somewhat misleading, however, because I am not implying that the representations produced in academic work are not political but that they are political in a way that is different from the kind of representation operating in the political field. This difference can be understood according to the disparate principles of legitimacy of the academic and political fields; that is, political representation bases its legitimacy (at least in theory) on consent, whereas conceptual representations are assessed according to the standards and methods of academic work. In other words, the difference is one between *accountability* and *autonomy*. Political representations are accountable to those they represent, whereas academic work is accountable only to the academy.

The disparity in these rationales was one of the sources of the conflicts between ethnic studies at its origins and the university. In addition, this disparity also lies at the root of the tension between Asian American studies and Asian and area studies. If a rapprochement between those two fields now seems possible, it is largely because Asian studies has come increasingly to assume a political stance as speaking for—rather than simply studying—Asians. In contrast, Asian American studies has become increasingly distant from the constituencies that it was originally created to serve. How and why that distance was created are questions central to this study. My argument is that the attempt to reconcile identity with difference can be read as the theoretical work to produce a rationale for the field capable of reconciling community autonomy with faculty autonomy, or at least of making them appear continuous rather than antithetical. Theorizations of difference, then, are impelled by various institutional as well as political agendas, and the effort to bring incompatible and conflicting impulses more or less into alignment has produced the particular theoretical device that I call *nonrepresentative representation*.

In its most elementary form, nonrepresentative representation simply hypostatizes contradiction, as exemplified in theoretical constructions of subjectlessness, difference, catachresis, or what is arguably the ur-trope of these formulations, strategic essentialism.⁶ My discussions of these “concept-metaphors” (Gayatri Spivak’s term) is not intended to dismiss or disprove them. Rather, it seems to me that they are overdetermined and thus revelatory of the extraordinarily complex entanglements of political-institutional agendas and interests that lie at the core of the academic field. Indeed, the AAAS fiction award and the controversy it provoked can be regarded as a sort of empirical test of the theoretical claims made for the politics of difference or strategic essentialism. As I elaborate in chapter 5, the fiction award became a point of articulation between the academic and political fields, but one whose functioning depended on certain kinds of obfuscation. For example, one question repeatedly asked during the episode was why the AAAS handed out literature awards in the first place, since they seemed anomalous given the association’s academic constituency. If the fiction award was intended to link Asian American studies to Asian American politics or communities, it did so only by displacing political representation into cultural representation, in that it fostered the *political* representation of Asian American *culture* rather than *people*. Once the protests exerted pressure on this rather fragile conceptual apparatus—one motivated as much by the exchange of capital as by political advocacy—it quickly began to break apart.

Indeed, the controversy over the fiction award was an especially good reason to investigate the problematic of representation in the Asian American category, because it shows that whom or what the award is supposed to represent cannot be divorced from the value that it is meant to either recognize or bestow. What is missing from this argument that the “Asian American” rubric contains normative and exclusionary criteria is the distinction between intellectual categories and political categories. That is, the former refers to Asian Americans as a nominal class, or a purely theoretical classification, whereas the latter denotes the realized class, or the group mobilized for political purposes. Asian American politics, we might say, is the effort to join these two categories. But while the first concerns definitions of identity, the second, I believe, depends on identification. To conceive of the Asian American category as a field requires shifting our investigation from the former to the latter because belonging in a field is defined by investments, not boundaries. Thus, rather than constructing a purely theoretical unity, I suggest that disparate individuals and groups

are held together under the Asian American designation only by an interest. This interest, however, is not a “common” one insofar as that implies a unitary and homogeneous subject. Instead, it is a *competitive* interest signifying both acting *against* but also *with* others in the pursuit of some object or end, which in this instance is the specific capital of the Asian American field, or what I call the *political capital of representation*.

Although the term *Asian American* has been sanctioned as official state terminology for three decades now, studies have repeatedly shown that only a relatively small minority of Asians in the United States would identify themselves first and foremost as “Asian American.”⁷ Of course, the exact percentage is difficult to quantify, given the ways that identity can shift depending on context and circumstance. Nevertheless, most nominal Asian Americans identify themselves primarily in terms of their nationality or ethnicity. The Asian American category, then, is a spectrum extending from those who identify as Asian American to those who do not, with most falling somewhere in between. Why this is the case is a matter of some debate, but the important point here is that Asian American identity remains largely unnaturalized, meaning that unlike “primordial” ethnic identities—the fiction of consent notwithstanding—one must more or less consciously *choose* to become an Asian American via an act of identification. Therefore, it seems to me that the question is *not* why so few “Asian Americans” identify as such, but why anyone would choose to do so at all.

One of the main objectives of the Asian American political movement was the production of Asian American subjects by means of politicization or, to use the original term, *consciousness raising*. The primary motivation for identifying with the movement was largely understood to be the struggle against racial inequality and exclusion from full status as American citizens, but racism proved to be less than a completely unifying force, as it affected various Asian Americans in sometimes dramatically different ways. Moreover, besides the differential impact of race, major disagreements arose over how best to oppose racial oppression. Theories of difference respond to a historical context in which a monolithic racism no longer provides a foundation for “the” Asian American subject, but they do so in ways that tend to obscure even further the question of why someone might choose to become Asian American.

I argue that to identify oneself as Asian American is to stake a claim of belonging in the Asian American field or—what is essentially the same thing—to stake a claim to the capital of the field as one who has the ability

to represent or to speak for Asian Americans as a group. What, after all, is politicization if not an investment—of belief and of interest—in Asian American politics? This investment, or identification, is motivated by an interest in the accumulated capital of the field, which is the material or economic capital possessed by all those in the field and, more important, the symbolic capital into which it can be transformed. It is part of the un-naturalized condition of Asian American identity—or, put another way, the weakly institutionalized status of the Asian American field—that there are almost no mechanisms for the popular selection of legitimate representatives, which means that one can become a representative simply by identifying oneself as Asian American and that representatives select one another by mutual recognition. Understanding constructions of Asian American identity as strategies of capital accumulation offers a different gloss on the notion of “strategic essentialism.” At the same time, the concept of the Asian American field reinserts academic work into the larger social and political fields by showing that academic theorization about identity also engages in struggles over the political capital of representation, albeit in collective rather than individual ways.

In order to situate Asian American studies in the Asian American field as a whole, the book does not debate its theories or methods but investigates the sources of its academic legitimacy or capital. Asian American studies as an academic enterprise does not derive its intellectual capital solely from the traditional disciplines. Ethnic studies, for example, began as a challenge to what activists perceived as the educational institution’s lack of representation and accountability. Thus the initial capital for Asian American studies came from the political mobilization of the mass movement. This “primitive accumulation” was the basis of the political capital of representation, or the specific capital of the Asian American field. The strictures enforcing the disinterestedness of academic work, though, preclude the direct accumulation of political capital in the academic field, which means that one of the primary tasks of ethnic studies has been to produce the theoretical mechanisms for converting political capital into cultural and academic capital. Ultimately, I argue that the problematic of representation in Asian American studies needs to be understood in terms of strategies of capital accumulation and field formation and that these concepts provide the basis for a revisionary account of the trajectory of the field that also helps illuminate the history of the modern research university.

Because I have devoted a great deal of attention to the study of narrative, I am sensitive to the ways in which readers may unwittingly impose conventional or formulaic narratives on sequences of events, thereby transforming them into chains of causation. One narrative that this book seems readily to conjure up is the narrative of decline and fall. This is a narrative that I have sought rather strenuously to avoid in writing this book. It is not that I necessarily disagree with this interpretation, but I wanted to pose the questions in this book as openly as possible, especially since they are among the most politically divisive and contentious issues in the field. Other narratives that may be evoked are those of “selling out,” “the return to origins,” “betrayal of the community,” and “seduction by capital.” As dramatic as they may be, these are not the stories this book intends to tell. I am skeptical of any return to the past in a context of radically changed historical circumstances. Rather, one of the aspirations of this book is to revisit the questions originally posed by the Asian American movement in order to see what kinds of answers we might arrive at in the present.

Some readers have urged me to state more clearly my own position on these conflicts or to assess the interests and investments that led to this book. Others may want me to take a more polemical position or adopt a programmatic agenda regarding future directions in the field. Certainly this is a polemical book: raising the question of interest in the academic field is always somewhat threatening, since it requires confronting the various denials, prohibitions, and other forms of censorship that maintain its objectivity and disinterestedness. Those immersed in postmodern and poststructuralist forms of skepticism may take this statement as confirming the ideological and thus illusory quality of those values, but that is not the point. Instead, I follow Bourdieu in maintaining that only by recognizing and accounting for those denials can we even begin to analyze objectively the structure of relations in fields constituted by symbolic capital, which is “symbolic” only in that it is economic capital denied. Indeed, I regard the central insight of Bourdieu’s work, which inaugurates his entire analysis of symbolic capital, as the realization that denial is a mechanism that does not simply negate or suppress but is transformative and might be said to produce the social as such.⁸

The issue of the self-interestedness of academic work is hardly new; in some branches of literary theory, disclosing one’s privilege or “positionality” was, at a certain point, a prerequisite. One of the major deficiencies of such forms of reflexivity, though, was their circumscription by the limits

of the personal and the individual, at times making it seem to be almost a kind of confession or *mea culpa*. As I have argued, interest in academic work cannot be grasped in terms of the personal, but only at the level of the academic field as a whole, which also requires situating it within the larger social field. The interests driving academic work are not personal. This is not to say, however, that there are not personal motivations—for recognition, prestige, reward—but that these are subject to the strictures of the academic field, which means that they can be pursued only through indirect strategies. Academic work in general encodes multiple levels of legitimacy, from that of the educational system as a whole through particular institutions, to college-level transdisciplinary formations (liberal arts, sciences, engineering, the professions, and so on), to the disciplines, and to subdisciplinary specializations. It is only by identifying with the collective interests of the field (either implicitly or explicitly) at each of these larger social and institutional levels that it is possible to accrue *individual* capital.

The foregoing may help explain why this book aims at a certain impersonality and why I resist calls to position myself more explicitly in relation to the issues that I examine.⁹ The reason is not simply the protocols of academic discourse but also the awareness that the basic form of capital in the academic field is the taking of positions. Because the central issue in this book is the difficulty of separating interest from disinterest in academic work, it seemed advisable to refrain as much as possible from commingling analysis with any attempt to advance a political agenda. Indeed, this is, as I argue, where John Guillory runs into problems. Since all work in the academy must engage in capital accumulation, any academic work that reflects on those processes must confront the ways in which its own strategies of accumulation may distort its analyses, a problematic to which Bourdieu was always acutely attuned. To restate the question, this book asks what it means when academic work that strives to be political instead becomes cultural capital. We could say that this is simply an inevitable condition of academic work, but that does not mean it should not be subjected to analysis and reflection. Indeed, without a thorough investigation, how can we know whether it is inevitable? This is the question that my book addresses.

How are the Asian American political field and the academic field of Asian American studies connected? Chapter 1, “From Cultural Politics to Cultural Capital,” proposes that whatever the ideological relation is between

them, the two fields are united by a circuit of capital and that Asian American literature is one node of exchange between them. In this chapter I ask what value Asian American literature might have in the academy and how it is related to the “crisis of literature” that forms the primary context of John Guillory’s monumental *Cultural Capital*. Although Guillory’s analysis is important and provocative, I take issue with his critique of minority literature in relation to the “canon wars” of the 1980s. His argument derives from what he perceives as the contradiction between integrationist and separatist constructions of minority literature, in which that literature is construed simultaneously as both canonical and non- or anticanonical. What Guillory fails to consider is whether the “noncanonical” in fact names a different kind of value, which I argue is the political capital of representation. The academic field of Asian American studies, then, is structured by the ratios and mechanisms of exchange between the political capital of the Asian American field as a whole and the cultural or academic capital of the university.

The second part of this chapter contrasts articulations of difference in Asian American cultural studies with the model of relational analysis at the heart of Bourdieu’s ideas of field and capital. Although both conceive of social relations as operating in a dynamic system of negative differences, they are opposed in that the former is committed to an anti-realist and antirepresentational epistemology whereas the latter seeks to decipher the inequalities of a social order constituted by the structure of distribution of capital. I argue that one detrimental consequence of Asian American cultural studies’ rejection of the abjected troika of identity-essentialism-representation is that it obscures the relations of capital linking the university to the polity by attempting to (re)construct that relation as one of *nonrepresentation*. As a conceptual device, nonrepresentation (in its various permutations) offers a means of resolving the numerous contradictions of institutionalization, but it does so, of course, only in theory.

Chapter 2, “Contradictions in the Emergence of Ethnic Studies,” returns to the birth of Asian American studies at San Francisco State College. Emerging from the Third World Strike, the most radical aspect of the SF State program was an institutional structure predicated on the slogan of “community autonomy,” which meant that Asian American communities should control the programs that were intended to serve their needs. Community control, however, is necessarily antithetical to the principle of the modern research university, which is faculty control. In order to establish itself in the university, therefore, the program had to eliminate

community control in favor of academic autonomy. This transformation was made at a practical rather than a theoretical level, though, since the question of program governance was never subjected to critical examination. As this chapter demonstrates, the question of autonomy was fundamental to the formation of black studies in particular, since that was the paradigmatic model on which the other ethnic studies programs were based. One of the principal demands of the Black Students Union (BSU) at SF State was autonomy for the black studies department, but as statements by various BSU members and other students illustrate, that autonomy could be and was conceived in entirely opposing ways.

This chapter then situates the emergence of the Asian American identity within a historical trajectory of capital accumulation in order to introduce new perspectives on the political history of resistance to racial oppression. I propose that to revise our understanding of the Asian American movement as engaged in constructing a field may enable us to displace the dual motifs of resistance, on the one hand, and “claiming America,” on the other, in favor of an active agency that cannot be inscribed in the nationalist dichotomies of resistance or accommodation. For example, I suggest that one project of Asian American studies in the university was converting the political capital of the Asian American field into a form of cultural capital whose value could be institutionally guaranteed. Indeed, given the obstacles Asian Americans confronted in the political sphere, the conversion of political capital into cultural capital in the university was quite likely the most efficient means of conserving that capital. This helps explain why university and college campuses were central focal points of the Asian American movement and why they were among the main sites of political struggle.

Chapter 3, “Disciplinary and the Political Identity of Asian American Studies,” defines the institutional location of Asian American studies as both an academic and a political project by asking why ethnic studies has historically defined itself as an interdisciplinary field rather than establishing a disciplinary status for itself. In this chapter I examine the debates over the impact of postmodern and poststructuralist theory in Asian American studies in a special issue of the journal *Amerasia* entitled *Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies*. One of the most salient aspects of these debates was the way in which the division over theory fell largely along disciplinary lines, with literary and cultural studies being opposed to history and social sciences. The other major aspect of the debates was that even though they concerned theoretical paradigms and methods, the

essays in the issue, whether pro or con, justified their positions based less on intellectual or academic criteria than on *political* criteria. In this way, the debate over theory was overdetermined by two somewhat different sets of dynamics: political struggles in the Asian American field and academic struggles in the university. My argument is not that theory marks the site where these two fields converge but that Asian American studies as a whole is constituted by that convergence and that its constitution as a “permanent interdisciplinary” allowed the field to contain these multiple, overlapping political and intellectual antagonisms.

This chapter extends an analysis of the space of Asian American studies as an interdisciplinary field by examining the interface between two closely related disciplines, literature and history. Despite the long history of traffic across this border, I find that work in Asian American cultural studies that aspires to historicist modes of cultural analysis must continually confront the antithetical epistemological and methodological assumptions of the two academic disciplines of literary studies and history, assumptions derived directly from how each field defines the terms of its academic legitimacy. Finally, I return to the pivotal moment in Asian American literary history of the critical reevaluation of Theresa Cha’s *Dictée*. Although the explicit political rationale for this revisionary reading was the demographic transformations of the Asian American population following the immigration reforms of the 1960s, I advance an alternative argument. That is, I locate the primary impetus for this critical intervention in the field of Asian American studies by arguing that *Dictée* facilitated a reconfiguration of the Asian American literary field in order to enable new modes of capital accumulation.

Chapter 4, “The Political Economy of Minority Literature,” revisits the origins of the Asian American literary field in the writings of two of its most influential figures, Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston. Although the polemics of Chin and the other editors of *Aiiiiiii!* are now identified with the formation of Asian American literature, some serious misconceptions have become sedimented in the critical responses to them and have been compounded by the ways in which cultural nationalism is construed in critiques of identity politics. At the most general level, for example, it is almost axiomatic that cultural nationalism in *Aiiiiiii!* sought to subordinate art to politics, and the editors’ own self-representation as the “radical” pole of Asian American cultural production is often simply accepted at face value. In contrast, I argue that the *Aiiiiiii!* editors actually tried to articulate a political rationale justifying why art needed to be

free from politics. In this way, they attempted to extract some of the political capital of the mass movement in order to construct an autonomous Asian American literary field.

Chapter 4 then juxtaposes this analysis with a rereading of *The Woman Warrior*, arguing that the dilemma motivating the narrative is not the anxiety of influence, as in the dominant literary tradition, but the anxiety of representation. In other words, only within and against the writer's relation of representation to the community can she become a representative, or an author. In this chapter I demonstrate in an extended reading of *The Woman Warrior* how the political problematics of representation become sublimated in and reworked through the formal structures of Kingston's narratives. In particular, I argue that the problem of political representation in the book (that is, its relation to Chinese Americans) is divided across two opposing modes of aesthetic representation, which are, roughly speaking, form and content, or fiction and nonfiction. Although the book tries to liberate the former from the latter, thus pitting them against each other, it states over and over again their interdependence. Ultimately, I contend, the book's pervasive motif of "translation" must be read as a trope for the conversion or exchange of capital.

Chapter 5, "Asian American Cultural Capital and the Crisis of Legitimation," describes the events regarding Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Blu's Hanging*. These conflicts encapsulate most of the issues covered in this book. Although the debates over the award encompassed a number of theoretical and material issues regarding the field, these issues were tied to questions regarding what constituted a legitimate interpretation. Rather than rehearsing those debates, my analysis focuses on the main charge directed against the book itself, that it replicated stereotypical and racist depictions of Filipinos, especially given the location of Yamanaka's narrative in Hawai'i. Literary and cultural studies, however, have almost entirely abandoned stereotype analysis because of a number of conceptual difficulties, perhaps chief among them being the impossibility of deciding what is or is not a stereotype. Consequently, in regard to *Blu's Hanging*, it became impossible to refute the charge of stereotyping because there was no way to define what is *not* a stereotype. I propose an alternative approach to this problem by asking who perceived the book as stereotypical and who did not, but these perceptions were linked to divergent constructions of Asian American identity, or political capital. Ultimately, I argue, one of the main underlying factors in the conflict, which contributed substantially to its intractability, was that it opposed those who possessed

Asian American cultural capital (the book's defenders) against those who did not (the protesters).

The second part of the chapter offers an extended reading of *Blu's Hanging* that reconstructs it as a response to the protests against Yamanaka's earlier work. One of the factors that may lead to an impression of stereotypicality is the somewhat mysterious antagonism between the protagonist, Ivah Ogata, and her Filipino neighbors, the Reyes family, and especially their cousin, Uncle Paulo. I contend that this antagonism serves as the displaced staging of the conflict between Yamanaka and the protesters and that the narrative responds to the complaints of the protesters through a series of events revolving around the central issue of whether Ivah can be considered a legitimate representative of the local community. One of Yamanaka's primary aims in the narrative is defining this legitimacy not in political but in cultural terms. In this respect, the pervasive violence in the narrative expresses the anxieties of representation that permeate the book, so that the degraded figure of Uncle Paulo reflects those in the community who resist Ivah's representation as well as the underlying violence of that representation.

Blu's Hanging and the controversies surrounding it exemplify the questions that this book raises because they dramatize the tensions and complications of the Asian American field, which is structured by the polarities of autonomy and representation. To return to the specific locus of the university, I ask again, what function does the system of higher education play in reproducing structures of social inequality? More specifically, what relation does academic autonomy have to the expansion of democratic participation? Is autonomy necessarily tied to the concentration of cultural capital, and if so, can that capital be used for radical social transformation, or is it an obstacle to such transformation? What are the interests of a field like Asian American studies in this context, and what role can or does it play in those processes? These are the questions that animate every part of this study and that it hopes to illuminate in some small way.