# Object Theory and Asian American Literature

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## Summary and Keywords

Do considerations of Asian America as, to use Kandice Chuh's words, a "subjectless discourse" entail a turn toward objects? "Object theory" refers to a broad range of intellectual currents that take up objecthood, things, and matter as starting points for reconceptualizing identity, experience, politics, and critique. A few prominent threads of object theory include new materialism, thing theory, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology. Versions of object theory have also been developed in disability studies, critical ethnic studies, posthumanism, and multispecies studies. What spans these varied, sometimes contentious fields is an effort to displace anthropocentrism as the measure of being and knowledge. By troubling the (human) subject, the poststructural and deconstructive turns in Asian American studies have especially primed the field to more closely engage the place of objects in Asian America. While Asian American writers and critics have tirelessly explored subjectivity and its mixed fortunes—from providing access to legal rights, political representation, and social resources to facilitating the reinforcement of racial and ethnic hierarchies—they have also sought to tweak the historical relationship of Asian Americans to objects. Asian Americans have been excluded, exploited, and treated as capital because they have been more closely associated to nonhuman objects than to human subjects. Asian American literary studies develops object theories to grasp these dynamics through investigations of racial form, modes of objecthood, material things, ecology, and speculative fiction. Ultimately, object theory leads Asian American literary studies to reconsider the place of human subjectivity in politics, attend to the formation of Asian America through nonhuman matter, and develop positive visions for Asian American futures from speculative imaginations of being and reality. This article discusses the place of object theory in Asian American literature and surveys key topics, including phenomenologies of race, transvaluations of objecthood, speculative realisms, and ontologies of Asian America.

Keywords: Asian American literature, Asian American studies, new materialism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, phenomenology of race, objecthood

# Objectifying Asian America?

Object theory promises to expand and enrich Asian American literary studies, so long as it is calibrated to issues of race that it typically overlooks. “Object theory” is not a field or a canon but a placeholder for a broad range of scholarship on objecthood, things, and matter. “Objects” usually refers to specific items, nonhuman beings, or any entity subordinated to the knowing, experiencing, and presumably human subject. Object theories have come to prominence at the turn of the 21st century for numerous reasons: the global circulation of materials and commodities within a post–Cold War, neoliberalizing world; growing attention to the dire health and environmental costs of resource extraction and consumer waste; and sharp challenges to the Western humanist privileging of subjects over objects by accelerations in climate change, human population growth, and species extinctions. These social, political, and ecological predicaments have been responded to across the humanities and the natural and social sciences through greater attention to objects. What is perhaps most promising about object theories for Asian American literary studies is their joint capacity to unsettle a widespread, and typically unquestioned, anthropocentrism that underlies Asian Americanist inquiry. Objects make a difference to Asian America, and object theory may facilitate the efforts of Asian American literature to attune readers to the limits of human subjectivity and to the world-making potency of objects.

The ranginess of object theory is not unlike that of Asian American literature, which has sparked much discussion and debate over the content, parameters, and aims of the field. New materialism, thing theory, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, disability studies, critical ethnic studies, posthumanism, and multispecies studies are but a few prominent intellectual threads that have taken up objects as new starting points for ethics, politics, critique, and theory. It is unclear how object theory and Asian American literature may be put together, or even whether distinctions between them are so clear to begin with. Indeed, some works of Asian American literature, such as those of lê thi diem thúy, Franny Choi, Karen Tei Yamashita, Ruth Ozeki, and Jess X. Snow, may be read as object theory. The slipperiness of object theory and Asian American literature, problematically linked with a divisive “and,” disallows bold, definitive, comprehensive statements about the two. Nonetheless, this openness could widen the scope of Asian Americanist inquiry by not enforcing a single framework. It could make Asian American studies more speculative and experimental. Pursuing this antidisciplinary potential could make Asian American studies less dependent on the subject for its scope and methods.

# Asian American Literature and Objects

If one problem defines Asian American literary studies, it might be the difficulty, if not impossibility, of reconciling a panethnic, politicized identity with a shifting Asian American demographic.[1] As seen in roughly periodized literatures, different waves of Asians to the United States have amounted to a plurality of Asian American identities, experiences, and struggles. Some Asian American writers have described efforts to survive racist condi-

tions of exclusion, alienation, and marginalization while pursuing the promise of personhood, belonging, and citizenship. Others have reevaluated those social goods due to skepticism over subjectivity for its shaping by Western liberal humanism. These various experiences and expressions have raised questions about racial and ethnic identification. "Asian American" first emerged as an emphatically political identity within activist movements of the 1960s and 1970s and gained prominence with the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin. The US census listed "Asian" as an option in 1990 and "Asian American" as an option in 2000. Numerous scholars have pointed to the mixed fortunes of Asian American identity: on the one hand, it has provided common ground for political mobilization; on the other hand, it has obscured ethnic differences, typically by privileging the experiences and narratives of those of East Asian descent. Asian American literary studies has sought to better account for the increasing complexity of Asian America and questions of identity, kinship, language, community, and politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, criticism of Asian American literature has focused largely on human struggles, for and against subjectivity.

While Asian Americanist debates over identity and politics have been anchored in flows of people from Asia to the United States and shifts in human demographics, objects have received far less attention despite their important role in the constitution of Asian America and the racialization of Asian Americans. Imperial and colonial logics have dehumanized Asian Americans by associating them with objects. In the 19th century, Chinese and Indian laborers in the United States were held to do the work no one else wanted and, amid racist structures of labor, wavered between worker, capital, and commodity. In the 20th century, the flight of manufacturing from the United States to China raised anxieties over diminishing economic might. A 2007 panic over toys with traces of lead produced in China evoked racialized fears in the United States. In the early 21st century, concern over invasive species and viruses from Asia such as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) and avian bird flu augmented yellow peril discourses and heightened the securitization of national borders. Similar anxieties arose in the United States over the release of carbon pollutants into the atmosphere by China and India. These are but a few examples of Asian racialization through an array of objects: humans, animals, plants, viruses, chemicals, and commodities. As Mel Y. Chen has keenly observed, objects have not only been affected by racializing practices nor have they only been passive bystanders as racial difference plays out. Objects have affected the shape of Asian America and the United States more broadly.[2]

How do objects affect the shape and composition of Asian America? The historical association of Asian Americans with objects has facilitated the development of US identity and empire. In an essay on the ethnicity of things, Christopher Bush observes that US national culture at the turn of the 20th century was increasingly anxious over the trappings of consumerism, the horrors of industrial development, and an increasingly multiracial demographic. Japanese things, especially lacquer, came to be viewed as promising cures. They bore the aura of artisanal craft, recalling a noble past before mechanical reproduction. Japanese things wavered between commodity and anticommodity, exemplifying an aesthetic universal while strangely wedded to ethnic particularity. Bush finds that "things

have an ‘ethnicity’ not just because they can signify or represent their national or ethnic origin, but also in the sense that their thingliness can be constituted in ways analogous and related to structures of racialization.”[3] Far from being a mere supplement to established power relations, the Japanese thing played a vital role in reconstructing US national identity and its relations beyond the West. Asian America is composed not only by flows of people but also by the flows of things and interrelated constructions of personhood and objecthood.

Asian American literary studies has expanded its investigations of race and ethnicity by turning away from the subject. Colleen Lye’s pathbreaking work on racial form has effected a shift away from the remnants of subjectivity in Asian American studies after the poststructuralist and deconstructive turns associated with Lisa Lowe and Kandice Chuh.[4] Lye observes that the use of strategic essentialism in Asian American studies is sort of a final bargain with identity to salvage the political potential of literary texts. Responding to such instrumentalist readings that force texts to fit political prescriptions was a resurgence of formalism in the 2000s. Rather than challenging historicism, formalist analyses of race bridge the literary and the sociological. Inspired by Lye, Joseph Jeon links racial form with objecthood in an unparalleled study of Asian American avant-garde poetics through Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim, and John Yau.[5] Jeon shows that avant-garde Asian American poets foreground a physicality and visuality of things to intimately link the aesthetic to historical conditions of racialization. A turn to the form of racial things addresses the limits of identity politics by disorienting the phenomenological subject and by defamiliarizing racialized conditions of recognition and criticism. Likewise, Tina Chen has shifted vantage points from subjects to objects by developing a concept of “Asiancy” that “do[es] not attempt merely to apply liberal humanist or neoliberal ideas of agency to Asian America, but instead seek[s] to reformulate or reconfigure agency.”[6] These Asian Americanist object theories jeopardize the place of the subject in Asian American literary studies, perhaps to the breaking point. As Lye notes, the unsettling promise of racial form lies in finally untethering Asian American studies from identity. How else might Asian American studies be oriented if not toward the subject?

Though it is not usually read this way, Chuh’s groundbreaking work has primed Asian American literary studies to develop through and as object theory. Chuh’s well-known characterization of Asian American studies as a “subjectless discourse” has disinclined the field from presumptions of a common identity, origin, experience, and the liberalist equation of conferrals of subjectivity with justice.[7] Object theory could push this direction further. Might subjectless discourse entail a turn toward objects? Might objects facilitate the push toward subjectlessness? What are the objects of Asian America? What could Asian American studies become if it were oriented toward objects or away from subject-object relations?

It is difficult to issue broad claims about the relationship between object theory and Asian American literature. Object theories follow distinct genealogies, do not share positive attributes, and are at times deeply conflictual. Arguably, they have been relatively unaddressed in Asian American studies, at least compared to other critical race studies. Aside

from valuable works noted here, it is hard to find extended reflections on how object theories may complicate, enrich, and expand Asian American studies. This article slowly teases out some of the challenges and possibilities generated by object theory for Asian American literary studies through close readings of select texts. It explores distinct, though at times interwoven, threads in object theory that appear most promising for Asian American literary studies. They include phenomenologies of race, transvaluations of objecthood, speculative realisms, and ontologies of Asian America.

# Phenomenologies of Race

A focus on objects may bring Asian American literary studies into closer conversation with phenomenologies of race. Sara Ahmed explores whiteness as a background to experience that differentiates relationships between bodies, spaces, and objects. Whiteness produces and is reproduced through the "reachability" of objects, where "objects" are not only physical things but also "styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits."[8] It brings certain desirable objects closer to some bodies than to others. It entails that some bodies feel seamless with their environment while others experience the world as alienating and hostile.

Phenomenologies of race draw upon and extend efforts to theorize the materiality of race. Arun Saldanha has argued that antiessentialist critique, while useful for detaching race from a static, biological nature, has turned race into a purely social construction. What is lost is the materiality of race which, when drawing upon minor notions of life and matter, turns out to be more dynamic than depicted by biological essentialism and antiessentialist criticism. Saldanha treats race as neither a frozen essence nor the effect of social norms *alone* but as an assemblage of numerous things, including "strands of DNA, phenotypical variation, discursive practices (law, media, science), artifacts such as clothes and food, and the distribution of wealth."[9] Jasbir K. Puar also has sought to refigure race as an assemblage. Without abandoning the necessary work of intersectionality, she elaborates how race emerges through affective and material forces that do not overlap with identity, the subject, or representation.[10] Anne Cheng has redescribed the relationships between person, thing, and race through the figure of the yellow woman. "Neither mere flesh nor mere thing, the yellow woman, straddling the person-thing divide, applies tremendous pressures on politically treasured notions of agency, feminist enfleshment, and human ontology."[11] Cheng shows how the yellow woman is constructed less through biological flesh than through synthetic ornaments and develops an understanding of Asian female racialization through objects. Phenomenologies of race build upon insights into the materiality of race by emphasizing the pivotal role of objects in shaping experience, orientations, and aspirations.

lê thi diem thúy modifies phenomenologies of race in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. While Ahmed attributes the forceful attraction or repulsion of objects to whiteness, lê draws attention to the capacity of objects to exert powerful reorientations as well. What if objects issue a call, beg for fidelity, spark desire for an otherwise? What happens to racial

assemblages when Asian Americans align with those objects rather than those that anchor the nation-state and the American good life? Through *Gangster*, object theory envisions paths away from the powerful lures of subjectification defined by national belonging.

*Gangster* is rife with experiences of disorientation. It begins with the arrival of refugees from Vietnam to San Diego in 1978. The narrator (an unnamed girl), her Ba, and four uncles are taken in by the Russell family and cared for by their son Melvin. San Diego is disorienting for the refugees, but it bears the promise of an orientation toward the good life. Ba thus urges his family to be thankful for Melvin, who "opened a door for us" and keeps them from "floating back there—to those salt-filled nights" at sea.[12] This imagined transition from hapless object to opportune subject—itself a US fantasy of upward mobility and possibility—is predicated upon the figuration of Melvin as a savior from literal and metaphorical drifting. It engenders what Mimi Thi Nguyen has called "the gift of freedom," or the capture of Vietnamese refugees in a position of debt to US empire, which postures itself as a savior from the war and displacements it has caused.[13] lê bridges Nguyen and Ahmed, dramatizing the navigation of gratitude and alienation within a racist, xenophobic United States that is anchored by objects of the good life: a home in the West, national belonging, and freedom.

lê illustrates how the production of home and, by extension, national belonging is predicated upon a racial management of bodies and things. A glass cabinet in Mel's home office contains china, leather-bound books, a toy fire truck, a pipe, and roughly twenty glass animals. "We had all sensed that the things in the cabinet were valuable, not because they looked valuable to us but because they had been separated from the disorder of the rest of the room and the rest of the house."[14] The sentimental value of these objects recalls Lauren Berlant's description of objects of desire as "clusters of promises" that exert a strong, even toxic allure—not so much because of what they promise but because they ground a subject's sense of self, world, and continuity.[15] What lê emphasizes more than Berlant is how one person's objects of desire may be dead weight for others. In the novel, the organization of a home enforces a racist sensorium that delineates who may come into contact with prized objects and which bodies are kept at bay with other sources of disorder. It is an infrastructure of the good life based on the racialization of lives and things.

The narrator becomes fascinated with a butterfly encased in a glass disk atop the office desk. Puzzled by the butterfly's imprisonment, she holds the disk to her ear. "I heard a soft rustling, like wings brushing against a windowpane. The rustling was a whispered song. It was the butterfly's way of speaking, and I thought I understood it."[16] She hears a desire for escape that bridges captured animal and displaced human. She tells Ba, who responds by "tilting his head far to one side so the words could slip out like water," for the words bear an unfulfillable desire. To Ba, freedom is impossible. "But what does crying mean in this country? Your Ba cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it," says an uncle.[17] In the face of the impossibility of freedom and national belonging, the soft musical exchange between the narrator and butterfly is a moment of solidarity—sort

of a call-and-response through the barriers erected through the mutual objectification of humans and animals by US empire.

What for Melvin is a mere paperweight is a strange object for the narrator. “The color of the butterfly when I held it up to the light was like the taste of the sun on those days when I stood in the back garden sticking my tongue out.”[18] In this disorganization of the senses, when color is tantamount to taste, the butterfly shimmies between object and thing. In Bill Brown’s “thing theory,” while an object is something known by and hence subordinated to a (human) subject, a thing complicates the subject’s sensorial and perceptual apprehension.[19] This sort of “warping” occurs elsewhere in the novel: in the harsh heat of a Southern California summer and in the stillness surrounding the narrator’s brother lying lifeless on a beach in Vietnam.[20] Through this strange continuum of objects—an encased butterfly, the burning sun, a dead body—lê exhibits the capacity of a thing to bend experience and being, to warp time, to disorient.

The narrator throws the disk in an attempt to free the butterfly, and it accidentally sails into the glass cabinet with a crash. Mel kicks out the refugee family. This event is at once an ejection from the good life and a rejection of the gift of freedom. It opens a path that is at once treacherous and promising; it is based in an exploitation of precarity that follows a disturbance to the affective hold of whiteness over the good life. It is a path away from the impossible subject of US national belonging, a turn toward something unknown: the objects of a *not-that*. Secret contact with nonhumans, unspoken communication across barriers, flushes of warped sensoria: these experiences in the wake of forbidden objects may amount to disorientation and a commitment to the otherwise. Perhaps the communion of wayward bodies and things may open paths for Asian America that run on tangent from calls for subjecthood, breaking free from indebtedness to a racist society and drifting in the open sea of objects once again.

# Transvaluations of Objecthood

It is not easy to orient politics away from the attainment of subjecthood without a simultaneous reevaluation of objects. In the United States, subjecthood has been the vehicle for securing legal rights, material resources, and social recognition. The attainment of it has been largely synonymous with throwing off painful misrepresentations and defining oneself on one’s own terms. Nonetheless, key works of Marxism, poststructuralism, and black studies have generated much skepticism over the value of subjecthood, its presumptions of a true self, and its aspirations for sovereignty and invulnerability. They include Louis Althusser’s critique of the interpellative practices of ideological state apparatuses, Judith Butler’s insistence that subjectification amounts to subjection to regulatory norms, and Fred Moten’s *In the Break*, with its powerful opening line: “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”[21] Fierce drives for subjectivity may reveal less about the value of being a subject and more about the degraded status of objects. They tend to leave intact objectifications shaped by the racialized, gendered, ableist, and anthropocentric equation of incapacity, passivity, speechlessness, vulnerabili-

ty, and inertia with a lack of agency, creativity, and freedom. Proceeding from these and similar critiques, some Asian Americanists have criticized the social judgments attached to objects and developed the contributions of objecthood to politics. Eunjung Kim, for example, has called for a shift from a "mere refusal of objectification—'we are humans, not objects'" to "a refusal of the subject-object binary that denies the 'object' and the object-like state attention and presence."[22] Building upon Kim's work through a reading of the humanoid robot Kyoko in Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina* (2014), Yuhe Faye Wang has offered a "disoriented object politics" that refuses the allure of subjecthood defined by Western humanism and submits to the disorientation that follows.[23] Commitment to this politics means that one accedes to becoming an object, at least of the disorientation that precludes the capacity to establish control or even proceed intentionally.

The challenges and possibilities of a transvaluation of objecthood with respect to race and gender are conveyed in Franny Choi's poem, "To the Man Who Shouted 'I Like Pork Fried Rice' at Me on the Street." The title gives the impression of a fierce, loud response, a talking-back that throws off the white male gaze to become a strong subject. It is thus misleading. The poem proceeds in lowercase letters, each word a bite-size morsel. Yet small and soft does not mean weak. Rather than rising into upper-case declarations, Choi explores the force of the diminutive, which is undetectable by a patriarchal, orientalist sensorium. In this manner, Choi runs on tangent from what Viet Thanh Nguyen has called the "bad subject," an unruly figure championed in Asian American literary studies for piercing fantasies of the model minority and anchoring resistance to the nation-state.[24] Like the narrator in *Gangster*, Asian American bad subjects refuse the harmful promises of national belonging and chart out alternative forms of community, kinship, and care. But rather than scrambling to become a subject, good or bad, Choi lingers in the power of objecthood.

The titular racist, sexist declaration makes Choi a "flimsy white fork" that is "snap[ped] in half," a "butchered girl / chopped up & cradled / in styrofoam."[25] This painful association with styrofoam and plastic depicts Asian Americans, infantilized women in particular, as fungible, disposable, and behind modern times (maintaining the association of China and India with environmental disregard). Choi's response to the catcall is perhaps surprising: "Go & take what's yours." Against the wishes of politically minded readers, Choi chooses to be an object: broken, possessed, consumed. She provokes this disturbance not to reinforce racist and sexist norms but to attune readers to the lethal potency of objecthood. Choi does not opt out of being eaten to become a subject, which would let the Man live on to hail and consume others. Nor does she let the Man's interpellation exhaust what it means to be an object. Rather than struggling for a voice and place within a sexist, racist world, she detonates that world from within: "Revenge / squirming alive in your mouth / strangling you quiet / from the inside out." Choi assumes objecthood to accentuate the limits of becoming a subject by distancing oneself from racist, sexist representations.

By turning away from subjectivity, Choi reconfigures racialization and sexualization through objecthood. Here, resistance is not tied to features of the subject, such as the will, consciousness, and intentionality. Instead, it is located in an unruly vibrancy—"resur-

rected electric”—that may be tapped into only when resisting the drive to become a human subject. By turning to the nonhuman within and reactivating its power, Choi works to upset what Mel Y. Chen has called an “animacy hierarchy,” in which certain entities are considered to be animated, agentic, and lively while others are figured as stubborn, inert, or lifeless. She seeks to become electricity instead of a subject and thus rejects the fictive promises of psychic and social wholeness to those who come out on top of animacy hierarchies. This endeavor is not about ascending into speech but about silencing the shouter, one who would “name [himself] archaeologist”—that is, a cold examiner of lifeless objects, whether material artifacts or human remains. If the archaeologist arrogates to himself life and humanness in contrast with the objects he studies, then Choi turns to the objects of nonlife and inhumanity for paths elsewhere. Objecthood is reconfigured by tapping into one’s brokenness in order to destroy the structures of breaking. It depends upon a risky but vital affirmation of vulnerability.

Finally, it is notable that the encounter takes place on the street: a place of sexual harassment but also of public protest and celebrations of identity. Rather than commandeering the street for subject-based identity and oppositional politics, Choi falls through body parts and tracts to resituate and rescale the political. Choi recalls Rachel Lee’s provocative exploration of body parts, organs, and fluids as supra- and subhuman scales of race and gender. Lee observes that Asian American writers, artists, and performers have turned to bodies and body parts despite the anti-biological impetus of Asian American studies.[26] The body part slip-slides between person and thing and thus, Lee concludes, may serve as a portal into reimaginations of the human and the humanities without organicist presumptions about the subject. Choi’s poem is not about repairing individuals within a broken world but dismantling a world that leaves masses of people broken. Transvaluations of objecthood entail tapping into forces that do not depend upon the subject and the will, consciousness, intentionality, identity, wholeness, reason, or freedom.

# Speculative Fictions, Speculative Realisms

Object theory has raised the specters of ontology and metaphysics, sometimes cautiously, sometimes enthusiastically. The strongest calls have issued from object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new materialism. Asian American literary studies that follow these largely Western turns to ontology face numerous risks, including the sidelining of history and complicity with biological essentialism. Nonetheless, Asian American literature has in fact explored ontological and metaphysical issues, and skipping over these engagements would advance partial readings that reflect the ideological and political commitments of critics regarding their conceptions of being and reality. Explorations of ontology and metaphysics in tandem with history and politics may productively expand Asian American studies.

Some of the strongest claims of OOO may disturb Asian Americanists. Principally developed by Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton, OOO is an outgrowth of speculative realism, which emerged in the early 2000s.[27] OOO and speculative realism

strive to liberate the object from any relation to the subject. For Quentin Meillassoux, critical responses to the metaphysics of Kant have yet to address its key feature: "correlationism," or the subordination of being to thinking. Because it dismisses any access to knowledge that is not filtered through the subject, correlationism has ushered in a postmodern age wherein even religiosity enjoys the status of truth claims.[28] Meillassoux's response is a "speculative realism": it is speculative in the Kantian sense of exceeding categorical limits of thought with the impossible hope of reaching the Absolute; it is a realism in that it pronounces the necessity of contingency. In dialogue with speculative realism, object-oriented ontologists insist that objects are withdrawn from all relations (such as with the subject), thus enjoying a primary equality. This flat ontology could help to unsettle racial hierarchies while denying Asian Americans any ontological or moral superiority over nonhuman species and materials. OOO and speculative realism also may challenge Asian American studies to consider whether its methods and scope are limited by an unquestioned correlationism. They might expand Asian American studies beyond historicizations of racialized conditions of being, thinking, and acting that often leave unexamined anthropocentric presumptions. On these points, however, OOO has a lot to prove, given that similar claims have been made by multispecies studies and posthumanism, which have enriched Asian Americanist inquiry without asserting ontological claims. Applications of OOO without due attention to race might presume that inequality could be overturned by argumentative fiat, revealing a severe underestimation of the powerful, longstanding organization of being under Western humanism.

To its own detriment, OOO has also continued the longstanding neglect of turning to so-called "minority studies" for theoretical insights. For example, Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology: Or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* illustrates the shortcomings of OOO when isolated from Asian American and other critical race and ethnic studies that have long described experiences of alienation and "what it's like to be a thing." What makes Bogost's OOO distinctive, however, is a resistance to offering first principles about being. Bogost is more interested in the distortions created by objects figured as alien. He writes, "The true alien recedes interminably even as it surrounds us completely. It is not hidden in the darkness of the outer cosmos or in the deep-sea shelf but in plain sight, everywhere, in everything."[29] This description echoes anxious characterizations of Japanese and South Asians as enemy aliens in World War II and the War on Terror, respectively. OOO's claim that objects are withdrawn is not new within Asian American literatures that have encircled a gap or hole in Asian American being due to the melancholias and traumas of racism, displacement, immigration, and war. Had Bogost turned to Asian American studies for insights into alien experiences, he might have drawn a closer connection between objects and race, ontology and history, metaphysics and politics. To overlook Asian American literature when theorizing objects may be to reinforce racist and colonialist disciplinary boundaries while missing valuable contributions to metaphysics.

Perhaps more palatable to Asian Americanists are so-called "new materialisms," which are most associated with Jane Bennett but also formed by Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, William Connolly, Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, and Brian Massumi.[30] While OOO develops an antirelational account of the object, new materialisms call for sharper attention to

things within the sociopolitical as a means of retheorizing causality, agency, life, matter, and the human. Bennett's vital materialism calls attention to a vibrancy that issues from matter itself rather than from humans, gods, or other external forces. It addresses not only how things put a check on human designs but also instigate worldings of their own. While new materialisms have been vastly divergent, they most often proceed from a desire to undo anthropocentrism and to cultivate keener attunements to a more-than-human world. This important aim, however, typically begins from privileged notions of humanity, failing to account for racial and colonial histories of figuring and treating humans as objects. A transvaluation of objecthood through critiques of race would enable new materialism to become a valuable resource for Asian Americanists who wish to consider how objects reshape Asian America in unpredictable, undetermined ways.

For example, the central force of Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* is not any human character but the Tropic of Cancer. The story transits across the US-Mexico border as it leaps across a matrix of characters and days. Yamashita depicts multiracial Los Angeles and the Western hemisphere as a tense space of collisions while underscoring flows of people to the United States from war-torn regions in Southeast Asia and economically devastated areas of Latin America. What pushes these tensions to the breaking point is the Tropic of Cancer, which strangely moves northward from Mazatlán toward Los Angeles. As Aimee Bahng writes, the Tropic "causes a physical disruption of space that intensifies the ramifications of both natural and manufactured borders on peoples and nations."[31] Though the Tropic produces powerful effects, Yamashita does not figure it as a subject; it is not an entity imbued with consciousness or intentionality, nor is its power derived from humans or gods. Instead, the Tropic is a withdrawn object that can be inferred from spatiotemporal distortions, such as a shadow without a detectable source: "There were no telephone cables or electric lines above, nothing to cast such a shadow, and yet it was clearly there . . . the only possible and yet entirely impossible thing that could obstruct the intensity of the sun's light at this hour, slicing the heavy atmosphere with cruel precision."[32]

Yamashita's speculative realism rumbles between history and ontology, metaphysics and politics. It is shaped by historical forces, including conquest and settlement in the Americas, US expansion with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the intensification of US hegemony in the Western hemisphere through the passing of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). It is also shaped by strange metaphysical motions, seen for example when a kid evades a drive-by shooting, not because he dove out of the way but because "space curved."[33] Rafaela and Bobby, separated for the bulk of the novel, finally meet when the Tropic of Cancer bridges them "across an infinite and yet invisible chasm."[34] Their meeting lasts only a moment until

> imperceptibly the silken thread unfolded and tugged itself away, caught finally between their ephemeral embrace. They straddled the line—a slender endless serpent of a line—one peering into a private world of dreams and metaphysics, the other into a public place of politics and power. One peering into a magical world, the other peering into a virtual one. "Will you wait for me on the other side?" she

> whispered as the line in the dust became again as wide as an entire culture and as deep as the social and economic construct that nobody knew how to change.[35]

On one side of the line is a world made intractable by power. On the other side are dreams of what could be. By entangling the historical and the metaphysical, the Tropic of Cancer turns impossibilities into realities. Yamashita may be suggesting that when political constraints feel ironclad, a dip into the metaphysical may turn up intimate contact with an otherwise.

These potentialities can be easily neglected if Asian American literary studies avoids metaphysics and ontology. Object theory may compel Asian Americanists to be a bit like the character Manzanar Murakami, who "sees and hears things nobody else can."[36] Interned during World War II and named after a California internment camp, Manzanar is preternaturally attuned to the rhythms of Los Angeles and their metaphysical potential. He stands above a highway and conducts an orchestra of the city's myriad flows. In the aftermath of a major car crash that stalls traffic for days and turns a segment of the highway into a living space for motorists, journalists, and homeless peoples, Manzanar becomes irresistibly drawn to "an uncanny sense of the elasticity of the moment, of time and space."[37] He can sense that "the entire event was being moved, stretched."[38] Asian American literature may serve as a fold in the racial, settler ordinary, dislodging entrenched histories through strange events, or temporal and spatial distortions wherein possibilities for the otherwise arrive. Object theories may sensitize critics of Asian American literature to such metaphysical moments.

# Ontologies of Asian America

Perhaps most controversial—and hence most promising—about object theory for Asian American literary studies is its push to consider positive ontologies of Asian America. To treat Asian America as an ontological, rather than solely historical, social, political, or economic, matter is not to ground it in a common identity, experience, or narrative frame. It is to attend to the potentiality of Asian America to become otherwise—what Yamashita, in *Tropic of Orange*, describes as a "vacuum" left behind a collision from which something new may emerge: "In a manner of minutes, life filled a vacuum, reorganizing itself in predictable and unpredictable ways."[39] Neither nothing nor a full-fledged something, the being of Asian America is inexhaustible by its extant forms. It may be sought after by genealogical efforts to uncover what could have been but were in actuality denied—what Lisa Lowe has called a "past conditional temporality."[40] It may also be discernible in what Larissa Lai has called the "knock on the door," or the force of insurgent utopias in the present that makes sensible emergent futures.[41] Defined by undead pasts and futures-in-the-making, the being of Asian America shimmers in formless potentiality.

Object theory could incline Asian Americanists to creatively develop this potential by using literature as fodder for what Bennett has called "onto-stories." "To do theory by way of an onto-story," writes Bennett, "is to try to go beyond the pragma of politics while avoiding the dogma of traditional metaphysics. One presents one's onto-story in order to

give more flesh to one's positive political vision."[42] Onto-stories do not claim privileged access to being; their claims and worlds are contestable. To treat Asian American literature as narrative rather than as sources for onto-stories, however, may be to sharply delineate criticism from creation. It might tilt Asian Americanists toward reactive stances that restrict them from offering positive visions for other worlds. Speculative meditations on being and reality, when interwoven with cultural and historical specificity, may embolden Asian Americanists to undertake the always problematic yet vital work of reimagining ethics, politics, care, solidarity, action. Object theory can aid in treating Asian American literature as onto-stories.

The call of object theory to explore ontologies of Asian America might not fit all issues but seems to be most pressing in speculative fiction, in particular Asian American literature that addresses problems such as ecological crises, wherein the very being of Asian America—indeed, all human life—is put in question. Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* is one such onto-story, developing a speculative realism that reconfigures notions of life, time, and care through objects—in particular, a diary and the novel itself.[43] The novel unfolds between two characters: Ruth, a novelist residing on a small island in the Pacific Northwest; and Nao, a teenage girl living in Japan. Nao contemplates suicide but wishes to first chronicle the life of Jiko, her great-grandmother. Nao ends up writing much about her own life, using a diary made of a hollowed-out version of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Ruth stumbles upon the diary and other objects in a plastic bag washed ashore, suspecting it to be the first bits of flotsam arriving in the Western hemisphere from the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami three years earlier in 2011.

The novel foregrounds multiple, at times intersecting, spatiotemporal worlds. The chapters alternate between Ruth and Nao, displacing a god's-eye view of the stories and refusing their subsumption to a common spatial and temporal frame. It is immediately unclear whether readers are holding a novel by Ozeki; although the first chapter is a diary entry by Nao, readers actually encounter Ruth first in the form of footnotes to an epigraph by Dōgen Zenji. This detail raises questions of representation and fabulation: whose novel is this (Ozeki's? Ruth's? Ozeki's novelization of Ruth's?). Without a clear answer, the novel perhaps enacts the famous thought-experiment of quantum physicist Erwin Schrödinger, explicitly referenced by Ozeki/Ruth, in which a cat is at once alive and dead until it receives a definite state from external observation. What the experiment—and by extension the novel's form—conveys is a gray area between what Barad calls "ontological indeterminacy" and "subjective uncertainty": the matter of onto-stories.[44]

*A Tale for the Time Being* rescales Asian America through objects. The novel's thicket of spatiotemporal entanglements between Asia and America inhibits the ascription of a definite genre to the novel: is it Asian American or Transpacific literature?[45] Ozeki leaves open this question as she stretches Asian America to its spatial and temporal limits. While Asian Americanist inquiry typically attends to biographical and historical time, Ozeki integrates these with the timescales of trees, whales, ocean gyres, and the earth—to deep times before the emergence of humans and to times well after humans may go extinct. Ruth's partner Oliver (the name of Ozeki's partner), creates an art project called the

NeoEocene (the name of a project by Ozeki's partner) based on projected alterations to local ecosystems due to climate change. He plants trees that had thrived during the Eocene "as a collaboration with time and place, whose outcome neither he nor any of his contemporaries would ever live to witness, but he was okay with not knowing."[46] This practice of care is metaphysical, calling upon critics to attend to scales of time and space that are not defined by the human. By wavering in the indeterminacy of objects between Asian America and the Transpacific, *A Tale for the Time Being* nudges Asian American literary studies into a speculative mode.

Object theory might lead Asian American literary studies to engage speculative questions like: In a time of ecological devastation, what is the being of Asian America? Can there be Asian America without Asian Americans? One response to these questions may be developed by turning Jess X. Snow's poem "Queer Earth" into an onto-story. Snow's work, which spans poems, films, murals, and illustrations, explores interwoven themes of displacement, alienation, disability, racialization, queerness, domestic violence and abuse, sexual trauma, migration, and healing. If read within Snow's oeuvre, "Queer Earth" is spoken from an unnamed Asian America defined by displacement, alienation, migration, refuge, imagination, desire, and dreams. It is addressed to Western humanisms that presume authority over nature and that have forged a "white castle" from the bones of humans and nonhumans to guard against incursions of wild animality.[47] Part of that humanism is heteronormative, and part of that wildness is queerness. Snow foregrounds the queerness of nature by pointing to the same-sex practices of leopard slugs, bonobos, penguins, oysters, and dolphins. Snow connects racialized humans with nonhumans in an earthy queerness. "Is this queer ocean / not the tidal waves roaring within your bloodstream? / Is this queer Earth not the same / carbon that birthed your flesh?" Snow refuses anthropocentric, heteronormative conceits by figuring nature as inherently queer and all humans as composed of the same queer matter. She situates the historical depth of Asian America within geological time. The earthy queerness throughout nature is an "ancient persistence" that has spanned "3.6 billion springs, / summers, falls & winters." Queer earth is a precursor to the arrival of the first Asians in the Americas. It will persist long after the last Asian American vanishes from the planet. The powers that be seem meager and transient in comparison to the persistent life of earthy queerness: "Even after / your infant empire / collapses into dust, / we will still be queer." *We* are queer earth, and the poem is a reminder to Asian Americans of a powerful legacy of multiracial, multispecies, multimaterial queerness that has long endured Western imperialist violence. Snow does not offer a clear vision of the future but insists that it will be one in which queerness remains, perhaps without human referents but surely with a touch of Asian America.

Object theory encourages Asian American literary studies to broaden its concerns and approaches beyond the important work of critique. To focus on objects not only generates new targets of analysis. Nor is it to figure out how objects may be incorporated into extant theoretical frameworks. Object theory shifts Asian American literary studies by opening space for onto-stories. It calls for critique to be complemented with positive efforts to

reimagine solidarity, care, and futurity—for Asian Americanists to collaborate with literary texts and authors in imagining otherwise.

# Discussion of the Literature

Object theories have been developed in, through, and aside from Asian American literary studies. Works that have questioned the place and value of the subject have primed Asian Americanists to engage object theories developed from within and without of Asian American literary criticism. Chuh's *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* is an essential touchstone. Other important works include Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Tina Chen's "Agency/Asiancy," Lye's "Racial Form," and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*. Object theories have been developed by Asian Americanists responding to the mixed fortunes of politics based on subjecthood and desiring interpretive practices not predetermined by political prescriptions. Exemplary in this regard is Joseph Jeon's *Racial Things, Racial Form: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Poetry*.[48]

For phenomenologies of race, Asian Americanists might turn to Cheng's *Ornamentalism* and Lee's *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies*.[49] *Ornamentalism* is a compelling examination of the yellow woman as an ambiguous figure between personhood and thinghood, racialized not through bodily flesh but synthetic ornaments. *Exquisite Corpse* has loosened the "antibiological" underpinnings of Asian American studies to better critique biopolitical formations of race and imagine futurity through the elasticity of biomaterials in broader assemblages.

Key works in Asian American studies that have reevaluated objecthood include Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* and Eunjung Kim's "Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects."[50] Refusing subjecthood as an ethical or political aspiration, Chen shows how gradations of animacy shape and are shaped by the biopolitics of race, gender, sexuality, disability, species, and materiality. Kim finds that critiques of objectification depend upon the denigration of objects, and she develops an approach to objecthood that undoes its racist, sexist, and ableist framings.

Foundational Asian American studies of ecology include Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam's "Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions," Michelle Huang's "Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," and Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.[51] Cardozo and Subramaniam figure Asian America as a natureculture assemblage that situates humans in ecological relations with animals, plants, and viruses. Huang demonstrates how a focus on ecology challenges Asian American studies to develop posthumanist, rather than anthropocentric or transnational, analyses of racial form. Tsing explores worldings of matsutake mushrooms to sensitize readers to struggles and possibilities on tangent from capitalist and anticapitalist frameworks of progress and ruination.

Finally, Asian Americanists seeking to explore the metaphysical and ontological dimensions of object theory through speculative fiction might turn to Bahng's *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* and Frances Tran's "Time Traveling with Care: On Female Coolies and Archival Speculations." Bahng turns to Asian American speculative fiction for modes of futurity that are undetermined by speculative finance as predictable and hence sources of profit. Tran explores how literary figurations of time travel may inform "reparative criticism," which cultivates in readers and critics an openness to being undone and remade by sordid pasts whose figures beg for greater care.[52]

## Further Reading

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## Notes:

(1.) Some of the most influential accounts of this predicament include: Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Susan Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 315–346; and Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

(2.) Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

(3.) Christopher Bush, “The Ethnicity of Things in America’s Lacquered Age,” *Representations* 99, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 85.

(4.) Colleen Lye, “Racial Form,” *Representations* 104, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 92–101.

(5.) Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012).

(6.) Tina Chen, “Agency/Asiancy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, ed. Rachel C. Lee (New York: Routledge, 2014), 64.

(7.) Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*.

(8.) Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–168.

(9.) Arun Saldanha, “Reontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, no. 1 (2006): 19.

(10.) Jasbir K. Puar, “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49–66.

(11.) Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 14.

(12.) lê thi diem thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2004), 8.

(13.) Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

(14.) lê, *Gangster*, 23.

(15.) Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 23.

(16.) lê, *Gangster*, 25.

(17.) lê, *Gangster*, 27.

(18.) lê, *Gangster*, 31.

(19.) Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 1–22.

(20.) lê, *Gangster*, 36, 127.

(21.) Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

(22.) Eunjung Kim, "Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects," *GLQ: Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2015): 315.

(23.) Yuhe Faye Wang, "Disoriented Object Politics: Or, What Slips Away" (paper presented at Humanism and Its Prefixes conference, Berkeley, CA, October 3–4, 2015).

(24.) Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 143–171.

(25.) Franny Choi, "To the Man Who Shouted 'I Like Pork Fried Rice' at Me on the Street," Poetry Foundation, March 2014.

(26.) Rachel C. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

(27.) Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009); Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); and Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

(28.) Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

(29.) Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 34.

(30.) Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); William E. Connolly, "The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2013): 399–412; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham,

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(31.) Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 56–57.

(32.) Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), 13.

(33.) Yamashita, *Tropic*, 86.

(34.) Yamashita, *Tropic*, 253.

(35.) Yamashita, *Tropic*, 254.

(36.) Yamashita, *Tropic*, 157.

(37.) Yamashita, *Tropic*, 123.

(38.) Yamashita, *Tropic*, 123.

(39.) Yamashita, *Tropic*, 121.

(40.) Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 40–41.

(41.) Larissa Lai, "Insurgent Utopias: How to Recognize the Knock at the Door," in *Exploring the Fantastic: Genre, Ideology and Popular Culture*, ed. Ina Batzke et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), 91–116.

(42.) Jane Bennett, "The Moraline Drift," in *The Politics of Moralizing*, ed. Jane Bennett and Michael J. Shapiro (New York: Routledge, 2002), 19–20.

(43.) Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

(44.) Barad, *Meeting the Universe*.

(45.) The author thanks Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi for raising this question.

(46.) Ozeki, *Tale*, 61.

(47.) Jess X. Snow, "Queer Earth," *Nat. Brut* 8 (Spring 2017).

(48.) Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*; Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Chen, "Agency/Asiancy"; Lye, "Racial Form"; and Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*.

(49.) Cheng, *Ornamentalism*; and Lee, *Exquisite Corpse*.

(50.) Chen, *Animacies*; and Kim, "Unbecoming."

(51.) Banu Cardozo and Karen Cardozo, "Assembling Asian/American Naturecultures: Orientalism and Invited Invasions," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 16, no. 1 (February 2013): 1–23; Michelle N. Huang, "Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2017): 95–117; and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

(52.) Bahng, *Migrant Futures*; and Frances Tran, "Time Traveling with Care: On Female Coolies and Archival Speculations," *American Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (June 2018): 189–210.

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