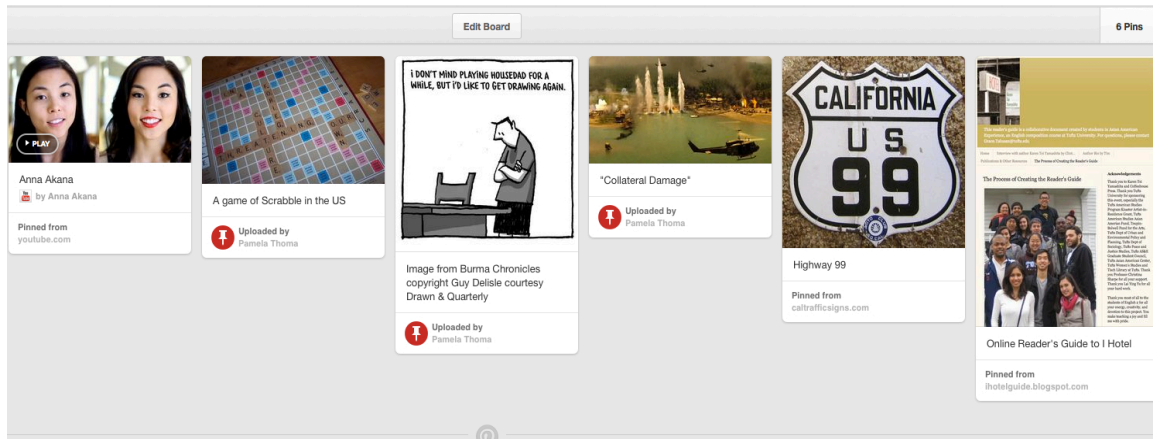


Introduction: On Contemporary Asian American Literature and Popular Visual Culture



Screen Shot, Pinterest

The images from a Pinterest board on the “cover” of this special issue of *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* (and the screen shot reprinted above) help me emphasize some key points about contemporary Asian American literature, popular visual culture, and new reading and teaching practices. First, the individual images I’ve pinned are “visual bookmarks” for the essays within the issue, and together they offer a sort of table of contents. Second, referencing a social media network on the cover of the issue stresses that the contemporary cultural landscape foregrounds screen texts, which are now just as likely to be consumed via smaller digital screens (smartphones, e-readers, tablets, laptops) as film or television screens. Third, the cover highlights, perhaps most directly through the image of the online guide to Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* (on the far right), how experiences of reading or literary culture are re-fashioned in encounters with the popular optics of new media. Given this context, the two essays that close this special issue, Lai Ying Yu’s “‘Capturing the Spirit’: Teaching Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel*” and Grace Talusan’s “Teaching with Collaborative Writing Projects: Creating an Online Reader’s Guide to Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel*,” work effectively together to provide a specific discussion of how to teach an Asian American graphic narrative and of how students experience reading it.

Whether social media networks; authors’ blogs; e-publications, including the online editions of standard bearers such as *The New York Review of Books*; or Internet projects that function across media, like *Oprah’s Book Club 2.0*, popular

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online media are the source of some of the most influential tastemakers in literary culture. Not by accident then (and as part of a bid to compete with Instagram and Snapchat for younger users), does Pinterest cameo this curatorial role in recent promotions for its direct messaging tool “Conversations.” One promotion ends with an image link to the YouTube video, *5 Best Comic Series of 2013*, in which *Wonder Woman* (2011-2014) ranks third. Readers familiar with this perennially adapted narrative (originally published in 1941) will likely know that the rebooted series has directly contributed to another revival on screen (the Greek mythology-inspired Amazonian will make reappearances in at least three action films in the next two years). Many will also know that the newest series is a collaboration between Brian Azzarello and Cliff Chiang, an Asian American writer who began his career as an assistant editor at DC Comics and then shifted to become an illustrator. If promotions for “Conversations” call attention to the various roles new media may play in contemporary literary culture, the larger point is that popular visual culture and literary culture are now inextricably intertwined; perhaps the most relevant point here is that Asian Americans, as creators, characters, and readers, figure prominently in the many dimensions and mediums of a visually expanding literary culture.

Mention the term “graphic narrative” in just about any social context, virtual or in real life, and typically one of the first titles to come up is *American Born Chinese*, the acclaimed novel by Gene Luen Yang. Such widespread recognition, as much as anything else, confirms the close relationship between Asian American literature and popular visual culture. As essays in this special issue make clear, the scholarship on Asian American comics and graphic narrative is also deeply developed and includes works by Monica Chiu, Hillary Chute, Elena Tajima Creef, Melinda de Jesús, Lan Dong, Jonathan Doughty, Jessica Knight, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Min Hyoung Song, to name only a few. Crucially, scholarship theorizes how the visual dimensions of this mode of storytelling capture the dynamic meaning of race in ways that solely verbal (print) narrative cannot.

Another point to underscore is that inasmuch as visual media re-make literature with respect to reading experience, mode of delivery, readership, and content, popular visual culture is also dependent on literature. The book, in its many permutations, remains an indispensable touchstone in popular culture, which is surely one reason why Pinterest describes the pin as a visual *bookmark*, and why the network is used for creating digital *scrapbooks* by over a fifth of the adult population in the U.S. Apparently moving away from a purely commercial association with shopping and toward the sustained discussion of images that users desire, Pinterest has overtaken Tumblr and now Twitter in popularity with adults; as per marketers, the social media network is developing tools that help users explore and understand the meanings of visual language, humor, and tropes. It is certainly worth noting that “creatives” of all sorts, including teachers, use these capacities pedagogically. In short, influence flows both ways in the relationship between popular visual culture and literature.

The recognition that young people live in an intermedial world where popular forms interact and complexly combine to create social life, that they want to understand popular visual culture, and that they need to develop their own narratives about it, is one of the insights in the interview of Elaine Kim by Karen Chow that opens this issue. Their conversation points out that students of

Asian American studies appreciate, especially in this purportedly postracial and postfeminist era, the opportunities that teachers provide when they hit the “pause” button on popular culture and open space for engaging more deeply in understanding its social meanings (as in the discussion of Anna Akana’s parody of vlogs or online makeup tutorials) and its political possibilities (as in the discussion of Suey Park’s “hashtag activism”). Caroline Kyungah Hong makes a related observation in “Disorienting the Vietnam War: GB Tran’s *Vietnamerica* as Transnational and Transhistorical Graphic Memoir.” Hong emphasizes that graphic narrative in particular, a mode in which images are indispensable, invites readers to “slow down” and consider the parameters and definitions of literary culture. In the case of Tran’s *Vietnamerica*, this consideration necessarily stretches across the various visual, spatial, and temporal dimensions of Asian American graphic memoir. These observations are not insignificant for literary studies at the current historical juncture, when students, teachers, and scholars are often asked to defend the “relevance” of literature for a marketplace driven by the hyperactive logics of spectacle.

Monica Chiu’s “Graphic Self-Consciousness, Travel Narratives, and the Asian American Studies Classroom: Delisle’s *Burma Chronicles* and Guibert, Lefèvre, and Lemerrier’s *The Photographer*” is explicitly about the ways in which graphic travel memoir, including those not authored by Asian Americans, may be dispatched in the Asian American studies classroom for an exploration of the intersections of self-other identity development and international geopolitical power relations. Pulling further away in terms of the more familiar terrain of Asian Americanist critique, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials’ “‘Finding’ Guam: Distant Epistemologies and Cartographic Pedagogies” remains committed to the ways in which poetry can help us understand and provide a counterpoint to the often disturbing nationalist stories and amnesiac images of popular narrative film. In returning to the big screen, which is often closely associated with literary culture because of Hollywood’s reliance on filmic adaptations, Schlund-Vials suggests that we reconsider close reading practices and then demonstrates how we might learn differently from “surfaced approaches” about all that haunts U.S. imperialism as it persists and escalates.

I hope readers will find this special issue useful in thinking about new reading and teaching practices; each essay makes a valuable contribution to the field of Asian American literary studies and together they have much to say about the relationship between contemporary Asian American literature—whether memoir, poetry, or fiction—and popular visual culture. I thank AALDP editors Noelle Brada-Williams, Karen Chow, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Eileen Fung for inviting me to guest edit, the referees for their excellent guidance, and the readers for their support and interest in Asian American literature and teaching. Most of all, I thank the authors for contributing their scholarship.

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