Foreword:

Speaking Existence

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This special topic is not about phantoms; it is about concrete existence. To make its idea clear, I want to start with a story, or, to be more specific, a history. According to a report in the Dutch Flat Enquirer, in the winter of 1866 the Chinese encampments along the western end of America’s transcontinental railroad were engulfed by huge snowstorms. Normally, railroad workers should have been withdrawn. However, these Chinese laborers were forced by the railroad company to keep working through the winter. During Christmas, the snow fell so heavily that one whole camp was covered over.¹ Not until spring when the snow had melted were most of the missing bodies found, “still upright, their cold hands gripping shovels and picks and their mouths twisted in frozen terror” (Takaki 86).

These twisted mouths might be mute, but they are not silent. Instead, they are bespeaking a history of Asian America striving for survival but muffled by racial exploitation. This special topic of Concentric hopes then to bring to the surface these long-buried people and events, this Asian-American flow of life that has been relegated to hidden, marginal, spectral zones. Its task is to further examine the making and meaning of Asian America.

Begoña Simal-González’s “Judging the Book by Its Cover: Phantom Asian America in Monique Truong’s Bitter in the Mouth” looks at how adoptee characters are treated by Vietnamese-American author Truong as the phantasmatic Other of “true” Asian Americans, analyzes the deficiencies in essentialist arguments about Asian-American identity and instead places the kinship crisis that is central to the constitution of Asian America in a synaesthetic context. Hsiu-chuan Lee’s “‘Trafficking in Seeds’: War Bride, Biopolitics, and Asian American Spectrality in Ruth Ozeki’s All Over Creation” explores the representation of Japanese war brides as either “ghostly figures” or “random seedlings.” By conceiving of a life-begetting

¹ Reprinted in the Sacramento Union, December 28, 1866; qtd. in Alexander Saxton, The Indispensable Enemy 64.
Asian American ethno-politics that operates via the linkage of biodiversity and ethno-diversity, this essay shows how in Ozeki’s biopolitics Asian America will become less a category of hereditary permanence than the process through which one generates and becomes others. Donna Tong’s “Troubling English: Reading Li-Young Lee’s *Rose* as Minor Literature” probes into the linguistic and cultural constituents of English in Lee’s poetry, and explicates how the senses of alienation and exile revealed through this poet’s defamiliarization of English could shed light on the underlying hybridity of Asian Americans.

In addition to these three essays, this issue also includes a plenary talk by Donald Goellnicht, “Outside the U.S. Frame: Asian Canadian Perspectives,” given at “The Summer Institute in Asian American Studies” held at the Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan, on August 3, 2013. Responses by Guy Beauregard and Kate Chiwen Liu immediately follow the talk. The central issue of this August forum was the current status of Asian Canadian studies in relation to that of the much older and more fully established field of Asian American studies, the identity and difference of these two continually-developing academic domains and the degree to which both may be subsumed within the more encompassing domain of Asian North American Studies, more generally the need to expand the scope—linguistically, ethnically, racially, geographically, culturally—of Asian America, and the crucial problem of connection and/or disconnection between academic discussion and socio-political action within these fields. These three essays based on the August forum are followed by a reflection by Gayle K. Sato, “Post-Redress Memory: A Personal Reflection on Manzanar Murakami.” Having finished twelve papers/presentations on Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, Sato views each of these twelve works as a piece of the jigsaw puzzle of Japanese internment history that she should understand.

This Asian-American issue of *Concentric* is then in effect calling for deeper reflection on the question or problem of Asian American individual, ethnic and cultural identity, and on the need for greater trans-ethnic, trans-national, cross-cultural communication, empathy and understanding. Asian America may by definition have an indefinable, hybrid and “phantasmatic” aspect but it is also something real and phantastic.

I will end by bringing up another story, i.e., another history. On May 10, 1869, when the gold spike was finally hammered into place to signify the completion of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point, Utah, celebrations were held at many construction sites. In spite of the fact that nine-tenths of the several thousand laborers working on the railroad had been Chinese, their contribution to the railway
was not acknowledged. In a lecture in San Francisco in honor of the manufacture of this great achievement, Judge Nathaniel Bennett said: “In the veins of our people flows the commingled blood of the four greatest nationalities of modern days. The impetuous daring and dash of the French, the philosophical spirit of the German, the unflinching solidity of the English, and the light-hearted impetuosity of the Irish, have all contributed each of its appropriate share.” In the railroad workers’ group photograph, only whites appeared. The Chinese were actually present and did pose themselves for the photo, but their images were deliberately erased, by such a bad skill that traces of shadowy Chinese in working hats could still be detected on the picture, side by side with the whites holding a toasting glass. As David Eng comments: “The China Men function as body doubles—performing hard work—only to be replaced by universalizing whiteness” (65). The Chinese did not thereafter disappear from American society. Refused passes to ride the railroads they had built, they loitered about near the railway, and were often seen at night stealing railroad spikes with which to build a cooking fire. These Chinese doppelgangers are not spectral but corporeal, actually existing there for us to exhume from historical amnesia and literary neglect.

**Works Cited**


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2 See San Francisco *Bulletin*, May 8, 1869; qtd. in Alexander Saxton 152.