Foreword:

The Ethics of Writing, Reading, and Othering

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Through the last decades of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, “political correctness” was one of the worst slurs hefted against scholars working in the fields of Ethnic, Women’s, Postcolonial, and other emergent minority studies areas.¹ The term stung. After all, much of the intellectual energy driving the projects that distinguish these studies was and is related to activist commitments to communal and collective identities. These projects have made visible the radical difference between how “knowledge” is formed in the empirical sciences (through “objective” research) and how it is generated in the social sciences and humanities (allegedly as more “subjective” research). Indeed, inasmuch as science-based methodologies are commonly valorized, so have humanistic ways of knowing become undervalued.

Ironically, however, today, even as the ethical consciousness that characterizes so much of ethnic literature and criticism has been viewed negatively, sometimes as mere “identity politics,” conservative bases are attempting to regulate knowledge-formation in the sciences through particular belief-system-grids. That is, while conservative voices criticize the inclusion of social and political values into what is presented as a literary domain that should remain purely aesthetical and beyond the shading of any ethnic-moral critique, many of these same conservatives

¹ According to Marlia E. Banning, “References to political correctness (PC) are so common that it is difficult to get through a day without hearing or reading the term. It is typically used without elaboration and with a familiarity implying that it refers to something that the speaker and listeners already know well—it inhabits the space of common sense. . . . The mere utterance of the term . . . announces closure and may, in fact, halt further analysis and discussion” (191). Banning cites Richard Ohmann, who noted that “Those who identify with leftist politics . . . say they ‘object to PC because it is often a self-indulgent substitute for politics, a holier-than-thou moralism of the good, a politics of surface and gestures’” (qtd. in Banning 194). According to Banning, “in this usage, political correctness has come to be seen by those sympathetic to progressive political activity as empty speech acts linked to a misplaced emphasis on language and not action” (194-95).
insist on the primacy of religious belief over scientific knowledge.\(^2\) Science should be supervised by religious belief, while ethnic literary studies should reside in the asocial, a-historical, “objective,” and universalistic domain of aesthetics.\(^3\)

Obviously, this special issue of *Concentric* focuses on the contrary: studies of the relationship between ethnicity and ethics deliberately foreground readings that investigate politics, history, social values, dominance and subordination, sameness and difference, class, nation, race, gender, and all kinds of multiplicity inscribed in ethnic- and nation-bound cultural productions, differences that have been deployed for human evils and that give rise to human distinction and value. Rey Chow, in *Ethics after Idealism* (1998), argues that the problem of “idealism”-driven (multi)cultural studies that underwrite theories of resistance and that lead to over-determined, even fascist, positions requires, as a corrective, “an interpretive politics that speak to non-Western cultural forms” (Parikh 319), what Chow herself calls a practice of “a supplementing imperative” (xxii). Chow's reminder—of knowledge of different historical, social and cultural forms as a significant and necessary first condition to counter tendencies to a totalizing rhetoric in some difference-“idealized” studies—shares similar concerns with the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas’ earlier formulation, on the ethics of the Other. For Lévinas, the Other is unknowable and so cannot be made into or commodified as an object to be taken in by the self. Ethics, therefore, in the presence of the Other, exists outside of the subject. The relation between subject and Other signifies that “ethical responsibility” is inherent in the subject; that is, “an ethics of responsibility” is prior to any “objective searching after truth.” Chow pushes further Lévinas’ thesis on the “ethics of responsibility,” rising out of the recognition of the obdurate existence of unknowable Others, to the determination, nonetheless, for a practice of interpretation that is informed by close studies of other cultures.

This is what all the essays included in this special issue set out to do. A distinct ethical consciousness, unabashedly and without apologies, characterizes the eight articles included in this special issue. These essays and the texts they examine, in which are explicitly inscribed particular moral and ethical concerns, exhibit forms of ethical consciousness; both signal a departure from notions of traditional

\(^2\) Banning observes that “While the discourse of political correctness is popular across the United States, it is exceedingly so among the predominantly conservative, white, and working-class students . . . . It is used frequently to frame and contain a wide range of classroom conversations and debates, to disqualify challenges to the status quo, and to stifle critical questioning, including any questioning of the discourse itself” (199).

\(^3\) See essays for and against the purely aesthetical position in Elliott, Caton, and Rhyne. Also see Lim.
aesthetic sensibilities to focus concretely on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. If aesthetics is defined as “A doctrine whereby art and artists are held to have no obligation or responsibility other than that of striving for beauty” (“Aesthetics”), arguably then, ethics lies outside the traditional and conservative canonical understandings of aestheticism in relation to artistic production. “Art for art’s sake” would be the mantra held by conservative or hegemonic ideologies intent on expunging “political” contaminations from the “purity” of the literary text. Yet, for ethnic literatures, especially those coming out of the United States, aestheticism is often linked to activism in a dynamic relation that can be termed as “aesthetic activism,” employed to disrupt master narratives of oppression. It cannot be otherwise, since these nascent U.S. literatures have been the offspring, the progeny, of intense and explosive civil rights political movements beginning in the 1950s.

The essays here fall generally into three bands. The first, as befitting a journal based in Taiwan, covers three essays that examine forms of Chineseness other than the highly charged, strictly nationalistic-bounded, state-regulated (what can properly be denoted by that over-used descriptor, “hegemonic”) discourse that rules within the PRC borders. Haiyan Lee in her article “The Other Chinese” explores alternative “faces” of Chineseness in the May Fourth native soil fiction, wherein nationalist strivings for nation-building construct fictive characters as “affective moral agents.” In reading this opening essay, Benedict Anderson's “imagined communities” come to mind for these “affective moral agents” are posited as necessary for the political construction of the nation.

Likewise, moral issues permeate the critical analysis in Jonathan Benda’s article “Empathy and Its Others: The Voice of Asia, A Pail of Oysters, and the Empathetic Writing of Formosa.” Benda’s article focuses on the moral authority granted to “Americans as both listeners and writers” in James Michener's and Vern Sneider's books as they relate to “the voice(s) of Asia.” The essay argues that political vectors, not necessarily aesthetic ones, influence the investigations of Taiwanese identities and “Formosan”-historicized modes of knowing in the Cold-War era.

The third article in this group, Akiko Mizoguchi’s “Monkey Unbound? Dambudzo Marechera, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Journey to the West,” explores the ways in which even acknowledged classical Chinese texts, such as the figure of the trickster monkey in Journey to the West, cross nation-culture civilizations to become an Other in Zimbabwean and Asian American texts like The House of Hunger and Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book. Mizoguchi’s reading accordingly
underscores how political identities and socio-cultural imaginations shape-shift, migrate, transmute, and are transformed even as they transform contemporary realities.

The second band of essays focuses on Korea/Korean American history, texts, and social phenomena. The three studies move the special issue toward a broader embrace of East Asia, in which Asian women's bodies, set in the crises of colonial wars, serve to “comfort”/discomfort imperial militaristic ideologies. In these essays, Nora Okja Keller's novels, *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl*, draw together scholars who view her texts as cultural mediations and also as exemplars to the question: how is the troubling phenomenon of ethnic-gendered narratives that perform a spectacle close to spectatorship or voyeurism to be conceived of as “ethical”? A preoccupation with ethics and moral issues thus distinguishes these three essays on the subject of “comfort women.” Deborah Madsen in “Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and the Ethics of Literary Trauma” focuses on the representation of other people's trauma in literary production, particularly on how this strategy has become a controversial subject in Asian American literary culture. This question is further explored in Celina Tze-hui Hung’s “Feeling for ‘Comfort Women’: Performing Human Rights Discourse in Asian/America,” in which she critiques Asian/ American involvements in the “comfort women” human-rights debate as self-interested cultural translations of the racial and gendered other. Stella Oh in “From America Town to America: *Fox Girl* and the Ethics of Interracial Relations in South Korea’s Camptowns” reads the bodies of *kijich’on* women as representative of the ethical problem at the heart of race relations in South Korea.

The last two essays demonstrate the global reach of *Concentric* as the foremost cultural studies journal in Taiwan. Carl Gutiérrez-Jones’ article "Paranoid Designs," offers a close reading of Toni Cade Bambara's docu-novel, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, as illustrative of the relation between structural textualities and African American historically-based psychodynamics. Gutiérrez-Jones focuses on the African American experience in the Deep South in Atlanta, Georgia, to explore ethical issues raised in Bambara's work. Specific ethical and moral concerns are related to the “immoral” manner by which city government, i.e. police and government officials, as well as the media, conspires to isolate and marginalize the surrounding African American community with regard to the abductions and murders of local black children. Bambara’s novel juxtaposes a critique of hegemonic institutions—their neglect of African American neighborhoods and their galling cynicism as displayed in the conventional thinking of “black kids dying in the South is old news and terror is something that happens overseas”—with the
African American community's attempt to strategize and act to empower itself and to turn away from paranoia rising out of isolation and fear.

The last essay, Rob Wilson’s “‘World Gone Wrong’: Thomas Friedman’s World Gone Flat and Pascale Casanova’s World Republic against the Multitudes of Ocenia,” returns us to the opening of this introduction. Openly resistant, deploying unashamedly a rhetoric of critique to engage with a globalization discourse of ethical irresponsibility in which local and particular interests, histories, and identities are flattened, Wilson’s commentary performs/plays with tone, voice, and irrepresible subject-location to foreground ethics in the readings of ethnicity. It redirects our gaze toward a global economy of letters in which, arguably, cultural studies is deployed in the service of an unethical and aggressive Anglo-American and French “literary domination.” This “domination,” the essay notes, is being actively contested in the emergence of Asian/Pacific literary productions that recalibrate and offer counter perspectives. This final essay moves beyond East Asia to conclude with a sharp commentary of where U.S.-oriented notions of the global, particularly where these notions elide the cultures of Pacific Islanders, have “gone wrong.”

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Works Cited


About the Guest Editors
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, author of two novels, a memoir, three collections of short stories, six books of poetry, and two critical studies, received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980, and won the American Book Award twice, in 1989 and 1997. She is also the editor/co-editor of numerous anthologies and volumes of criticism, including the recent critical study, Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits (Temple University Press 2006). She was Chair Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong and has taught at the National University of Singapore and at MIT. She is currently Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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