Shanshan Lan

I was born by the side of the Yellow River in China. I went to college by the side of the Yangtze River and went to graduate school by the side of the Pearl River. I came to the United States in 2000 as a graduate student in East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). During my first semester at UIUC, I had the good luck of meeting two wonderful professors in Anthropology. Professor Matti Bunzl’s “Introduction to the History of Anthropology” ignited all my passion for that discipline which I knew little of until then. Professor Nancy Abelmann, who later became my advisor, happened to be teaching the first-year graduate seminar in East Asian Languages and Cultures. Upon the encouragement of both professors, I decided to switch my major to anthropology and I was admitted to the Ph. D. program in Cultural Anthropology in 2001.

The first book I read that had anything to do with Asian American Studies was Aihwa Ong’s Flexible Citizenship. I was fascinated by her study of wealthy Hong Kong business men and women who fly all over the world with their transnational practices and cosmopolitan dreams. I longed for doing a project like that in the future. Professor Martin Manalansan played a key role in introducing me to the area of Asian American Studies and his edited volume Cultural Compass became my guide book in ethnographies of Asian America.

In summer 2003, I received a NSF Summer Fieldwork Training Fellowship. This is a grant for graduate students in Cultural Anthropology to learn about fieldwork techniques by working closely with a faculty mentor in a proposed field site relevant either to the student’s or the faculty member’s research. Upon consultation with Professor Manalansan, I decided to do some preliminary field research in Chicago’s Chinatown. My original plan was to treat the Chinatown community as an experiment site to continue all my passion for that discipline which I knew little of until then. Professor Nancy Abelmann, who later became my advisor, happened to be teaching the first-year graduate seminar in East Asian Languages and Cultures. Upon the encouragement of both professors, I decided to switch my major to anthropology and I was admitted to the Ph. D. program in Cultural Anthropology in 2001.

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Eric Byler and Shawn Wong — Americanese

Eric Byler and Shawn Wong came to speak at Northwestern in 2006 about the film Americanese, based on Wong’s novel American Knees, which was showing at the time at the Chicago Asian American Film Festival. This highly popular event drew a large crowd to engage Byler and Wong in Q&A, enjoy Thai food, and purchase signed copies of American Knees and Byler’s previous feature, Charlotte Sometimes. The latest news is that Americanese will be released early in 2008 by Cinema Libre and IFC films, along with another feature film, Tre, that Byler recently made. Americanese won the Audience Award and the American Knees and Byler’s previous feature, Charlotte Sometimes.

Diasporic Counterpoint: Africans, Asians and the Americas

a symposium — Convened at Northwestern University April 20—21, 2007

The members of the Diasporic Counterpoint symposium held at Northwestern University April 20—21, 2007. The presentation was followed by lively and at times contentious discussion and debate: “Why aren’t students more active around issues such as this?”, “Did the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements of the 60s/70s win anything?”, “Why is this still happening TODAY in 2007?” Towards the end of the program, students wanted to discuss how to respond to the “We All Live in Jena” — Call for a National Walkout to Support the Jena 6 on October 1st that was initiated by Artist/Activist Mos Def along with M1, Talib Kweli, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Sankofa Community Empowerment, Change the Game, National Hip Hop Political Convention, Hip Hop Association, and student leaders from 50 campuses.

News Update: On Monday October 1, the Rock was painted black with “Jena 6” spray-painted on it. The rally at Northwestern to support the Jena 6 made the front page of the Daily Northwestern on October 2.

For more information or to explore a diverse range of topics that are relevant to the American Studies Program “Coffee/Tea Series” is held regularly throughout the regular school year. The series offers both students and faculty the opportunity to explore a diverse range of topics that are relevant to the program in an informal setting. The events are publicised on “Planet Purple” and through the AASP Listserv. Contact us at asianamerican@northwestern.edu for more information or to schedule a topic. Write: “Coffee/Tea” in the subject line.
Core Faculty

Carolyn Chen is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Asian American Studies. She teaches classes in immigration, religion, and family. Her book, “Getting Saved in America: Taiwaneses and Religious Experience,” is coming out in February with Princeton University Press.

Shanthi Shankar is a sociocultural and linguistics anthropologist whose central concerns include race and ethnicity, class, globalization and diaspora, Asian American youth culture, multiculturality and multiculturalism, consumption and media. Shankar’s forthcoming monograph, entitled Desi Land: Teen Culture, Class and Success in Silicon Valley (Duke U Press, Fall 2008) focuses on Desi (South Asian American) youth in socioculturally diverse high schools and analyzes how their everyday cultural and linguistic practices intersect with their immigration history and class status to position them in school, as well as impact their educational and career paths. Her publications and presentations focus on how Asian American youth mediate racial hierarchies, create identities through material culture, media, and language use, and strive to find a place for themselves in competitive urban and suburban settings.

Nithasha Tamar Sharma, Assistant Professor of African American Studies and Asian American Studies (Ph.D., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004) is trained formally as an anthropologist, but does interdisciplinary work centering on the experiences of second generation South Asian Americans with a focus on ethnic studies and cultural studies. Her ethnographic study of South Asian American hip hop artists analyzes how they use black popular culture to create and express identities with Blacks as people of color. Dr. Sharma’s publications include, “Down by Law: the effects and Responses of Copy-Right Restrictions on Sampling in Rap” (Journal of Political and Legal Anthropology, May 1998), and “Rotten Coconuts and Other Strange Fruit: A Slice of Hip Hop from the West Coast” (South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection, November 2001). Her book on desi hip hop culture is forthcoming. During the summer of 2005, Professor Sharma conducted preliminary fieldwork in Trinidad on douglas — people of African and Indian descent — who identify themselves as desi. A book on this Trinidad-based desi community is in process. During the winter 2008 she will be teaching “Imagining Chitowntown: Race, Community Building and the Construction of Differences.”

Faculty

Neeraja Kasini Aravamudan, adjunct faculty member with the Asian American Studies Program. Neeraja enjoys the opportunity to interact with NU undergrads, something she doesn’t get to do often in her full-time position as the Director at the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence. Since 1999, she has helped graduate students prepare for TAing and teaching at NU, first focusing on international TAs but eventually expanding to all graduate students across the university. In addition to overseeing graduate student development for the University, she serves as a Peer Advisor for the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence.

John Cheng is a lecturer in the Asian American Studies Program. He received his Ph.D. in history from the University of California, Berkeley. His research interests include popular culture, race and ethnicity, including “Hapa Issues: Mixed Race Asian Americans,” “Cracking the Color Lines: Black and Asian Relations in the U.S.” and classes on Asian American film and hip hop culture.

On November 4, Prof. Sharma will be the keynote speaker at the Midwest Asian American Students’ Union Conference at Denison University in Ohio.

People

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People
Shanshan Lan continued from front page

learn how to conduct ethnographic research, yet my experiences in Chicago that summer proved to be both devastating and rewarding, far beyond what I could have imagined. It helped me find my dissertation topic.

When I came to Chicago in summer 2003, I had no car and no cell phone. So I walked around the neighborhood a lot, trying to talk to all kinds of people and get to know the neighborhood’s infrastructure. One afternoon when I was on my way back from an interview, I was harassed by some white teenagers on the street. They yelled racial slurs at me and threatened to beat me up. It was the first time I experienced racial discrimination so vividly at a personal level that my heart was consumed by anger, humiliation and helplessness. Fortunately, people in the Chinese American community comforted me. They shared with me their personal stories of being harassed in the neighborhood, teaching me about the various hidden racial boundaries in the city’s geography. That was how I discovered Bridgeport, a historically white working class neighborhood adjacent to Chinatown, which is quickly turning multiracial due to the influx of new immigrants from Asia and Latin America. As I talked to more and more people, my own little episode of “traumatic experience” faded away in comparison to Chinese immigrants’ daily struggles of coping with interracial harassment and hate crime in Bridgeport. Nevertheless, that incident served as a breakthrough moment when I was truly initiated into the immigrants’ world and started being accepted by them as a member of the community.

So my dissertation project started with a highly personal and emotionally charged ethnographic vignette. I was motivated by a strong conviction that I was doing something important—trying to tell the stories of Chinese immigrant workers who were deprived of the ability to fight against everyday racism due to their limited English language skills and their under-privileged social economic status. Looking back, I now realized that my dissertation project is both very different from the Aihwa Ong project and closely related to it. It complements Ong’s research by telling the Chinese immigrant story from another angle. During my formal one year fieldwork in Bridgeport in 2005 I found out that far from being merely victims of the American system, Chinese immigrant workers, like the affluent Hong Kong businessmen portrayed by Aihwa Ong, are active social agents who have developed their own ways of navigating the racialized landscape of multiracial Bridgeport. The fact that Chinese immigrant workers have limited access to social cultural capital in the United States does not make their quest for U.S. citizenship and the security of a permanent home less legitimate or dignified. In addition, due to their exposure to the multiracial city environment, Chinese immigrant workers have a more flexible understanding of race relations in the United States and their friendly relationship with Mexican immigrants has the potential for interethnic coalition building in the future.

I came to Asian American Studies through Anthropology and my feelings towards Asian American Studies is rather complex. On the one hand, Asian American Studies gives me a sense of belonging, making me realize that what I’ve been doing is important and can make a contribution to the society. On the other hand, I am also aware of the segregation of different disciplines in ethnic studies. When I was a graduate student at UIUC, I took a class in African American Studies called “Basketball and Black Masculinity.” I was surprised to find that all my classmates were Black and I was the only Asian there. Later when I worked as a graduate instructor for the Asian American Studies Program at UIUC, 99% of my students are Asian Americans. I kept thinking about the question: is it only Asian American students who take courses in Asian American Studies? How much of our daily life and our learning experiences has to be structured by racial and ethnic categorizations? While it is important to remember the legacies of Asian American movements that called ethnic studies programs into being on different campuses, we also need to be aware of the fact that Asian American identities are constantly being defined and redefined by interactions with other race and ethnic groups within an increasingly multiracial United States. Somehow we need a delicate balance between repositioning the Asian American experience at the heart of the formation of the U.S. nation-state, and forging coalitions with other underprivileged groups under rubrics such as race, ethnicity, immigration, class, gender, sexuality and so on. We need to cultivate among students an awareness to critically reflect upon and even to break lose the constraints of various ethnic labels. In this vein, maybe the best way for Asian American Studies to grow is to go beyond the confines of Asian American Studies and to strategically engage in dialogues with other disciplines, such as Anthropology, African American Studies, Latino studies and so forth.

Jinah Kim continued from front page

Davis Woman, Race, Class became my bibles. They made me want to unearth other histories and make more connections between people of color that will continue to advance our cause for racial justice. Works like Edward Said’s Orientalism helped me make the connections between race, colonialism, and literature, buoying my intent to continue to study literature as my part in the continued fight for Ethnic Studies. Studying feminist history showed me that the fight for education is a struggle that has brought together white women and people of color and continues to inspire my belief in coalitions and alliances across differences.

When I finished my undergraduate career, I worked with several women who broadened my understanding of the meanings of scholar, woman, and mentor. Maida Rosenstein led Local 2110 for more than a decade, forging difficult paths and fighting for the dignity of workers at New York City’s largest institutional employers. I joined Maida’s staff as a UAW organizer. With her help, I coordinated and led a four month strike at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in NYC. The MoMA strike was a unique experience for me, in that the workers were mostly well educated white women in professional jobs, but were being paid less than other mostly male workers at MoMA. As a young woman organizing, listening to, and supporting the collective action of older and more experienced women who through their own choice, yet unexpectedly, were out on strike, I strove to learn to lead. In that struggle we all found new strength and determination to rupture the boundaries we had always imagined constrained us.

My current research draws on my experiences in the University and the workplace. It explores tropes of desire and intimacy to connect global movements of Third World women with common ground for Gender Studies, Latino Studies, Asian American Studies, and Literary and Film Studies. Mapping global relations through the culture of intimate and quotidian interaction recentralizes elided subjects and describes complex systems of power in ways specific and unique to their time and place. My research and writing investigate constructions of U.S. modernity through an expertise in and analyses of immigrant cultural production in the Americas, contributing to the broadening of Asian American Studies to make powerful connections between gendered division of labor and immigrant articulations.

My combined experiences have matured my concept of knowledge and ways of knowing. I saw that new sites of discipline emerge as society changes, and they manifest themselves in unexpected ways. Intellectual rigor and passionate inquiry can build the critiques that name problems and map analytics for change. I made the choice to leave a rewarding career at the UAW to enter the University community because of my desire to engage new ideas and my dedication to working with bright young adults.