FOREWORD

Lisa Lowe

OUT OF THE WEST

Asian Migration and Modernity

FRESH TALK / DARING GAZES COLLECTS THE WORK OF TWENTY-FOUR CONTEMPORARY

Asian American / Asian diasporic visual artists, pairing them with responses provocatively drawn from cultural critics, other artists, activists, and intellectuals. The artistic works include paintings, graphics, photography, installations, and a variety of mixed-media constructions. Their themes encompass geographical movement, the sexuality of Asian bodies, colonization, miscegenation, hybrid forms of immigrant cultures, the loss of home, war, history, and memory. The response pieces comment in ways that are alternately personal, intellectual, aesthetic, and political; written by subjects themselves often parts of African, Latin American, or Caribbean diaspora, the pieces offer diverse entries into the works from locations that may be at some distance from them. In a sense, *Fresh Talk / Daring Gazes* is a set of dialogues, simultaneously visual and textual, gathered around the representation of Asians in the West. As such, these dialogues might best be understood if situated within the modern history of Asian encounter with and migration to the West. We can also consider these artists' works in relation to the debates about the politics of representation that have been so lively in the past three decades.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Asian immigrant settlement in the United States, and in the West generally, is not a new phenomenon—we are well aware of a history dat-

ing back centuries—but since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which lifted the immigration restrictions and bars to citizenship that existed from 1850 to World War II, there has been a dramatic increase of Asian settlement in the United States. In the past half-century, too, there has been much greater Asian migration worldwide, with significant Asian settlements in the Middle East, in Latin America, in Australia. We inhabit a moment of global migrations in which the degree of contact, conflict, and mixture of Asians with the cultures of the West is unprecedented. The artists' works collected here are a part of this global moment. But of course they do not represent anything like a smooth, even development of cross-cultural mixture. Rather, these works emerge from a modern social formation we might name “geohistorical,” to borrow a term from Peter Taylor,¹ one that gives rise to artistic and cultural representations that imagine, remember, and trace the more complex, longer genealogies of colonial encounter, war, occupation, and forced displacements that are antecedents to Asian migration to the West.

In what sense is the “modern” world of which these artworks speak “geohistorical”? And how is Asian migration to the West a constitutive dimension of “modernity”?

It seems quite natural for us to call ourselves “modern.” It means following the latest fashions, possessing the newest technologies, participating in modern institutions. It is closely connected to “progress”: the idea of development in time, discovery, growth, and expansion. Understanding ourselves as modern assumes the posture of having arrived at a temporal location that permits us to look back, assess, to know differently than before. And this implies that the “modern” did not always exist; it emerged as a mode of being and understanding human community that distinguished itself from other earlier ways of life. It has a history, which is, in part, a history of the Western world and its way of knowing itself through others. Yet the “modern” has been equally made by the worlds that the West has sought to “Westernize.” The emergence of modernity is what has been formed in the long history of this encounter.

Writers, philosophers, scientists, and historians have defined the “origins” of the modern in different ways. Historians point to the French Revolution of 1789 as a key event in the shift from feudal aristocracies to democratic nation-states; philosophers herald the Enlightenment and the gradual displacement of religious explanation by secular scientific rationalism. Economists focus on the industrial revolution; sociologists attend to the birth of modern bureaucracies; and political scientists look at citizenship within the modern state. Anthropologists once studied “traditional” non-Western cultures; this assumption that the West was modern in opposition to the “primitive” or “traditional” non-West emerged during the height of European colonial expansion in Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since decolonization and the end of the cold war, most anthropologists no longer assume that “modernity” is the discrete possession of the West; some discuss instead what could be called a transnational public sphere, and study the contacts and hybridities of traditional and modern practices around the world.

Yet while the “modern” is often presumed to be a “positive” development, modern forms of human subjectivity and society have always included cautions against modernization and radical skepticism about the abstract promises of modernity. Industry, sci-

ence, and even democracy have always had their critics, particularly among artists, writers, activists, and intellectuals. These dissident voices have pointed out that although the abstract ideals of modernity have been the pursuit of universal human freedom through modernization, the processes employed in this pursuit—accelerated growth through mass production, urbanization, and colonial expansion—have themselves brought new forms of “unfreedom”: new, different forms of exploitation, disease, crime, and inhumanity. These deformations of human freedom in the pursuit of human freedom were observed both in the metropolitan West and in the worlds that the West named “developing.” The nineteenth-century discourse of Western civilization that justified European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean included a social Darwinist narrative of natural selection that argued there was an inevitable evolution of militant, primitive tribal societies into democratic rights-based ones: the modern West represented the apex of this development. By the turn of the century, and certainly by World War I, writers, intellectuals, and even statesmen warned against the “re-barbarization” of the West, the dangerous return to militant savagery. The belief that Western civilization always brought increasing reason, health, and democracy was contested by both nationalist independence movements in the colonies and by modernist visions of the breakdown of progress and rationality in the United States and Europe themselves. One way of characterizing “modernism” is to suggest that it is the aesthetic, literary, and philosophical representation of the “legitimacy crisis” of modernity.

By World War II, in a world shaken by fascism, the Holocaust, and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, discussions of the links between civilization and barbarism had articulate spokespersons among both conservative and radical critics in the West, from the poet T. S. Eliot to the Frankfurt School in Germany. On the one hand, in *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1949), Eliot lamented the decline of high culture and declared Western civilization to be at risk of encroachment from both non-Western peoples and democratic mass society. On the other, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno warned that human life would become completely degraded when all traditional activities were reduced to commodity form or to their exchange value in the marketplace, but they put the responsibility for this on modern industrial economy. For Horkheimer and Adorno, modernity had replaced the earlier barbarism of superstition with a “new” barbarism that included new forms of misery, terror, and inhumanity. This irreversible link between modern progress and new forms of terror led Walter Benjamin to declare that there is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism.²

The contemporary Asian artists in the West collected here give us particular windows onto the contradictions of modernity, the simultaneous imbrication of civilization and barbarism. Albert Chong, an immigrant from Jamaica, creates sculptures out of everyday objects and materials that allude to his African and Chinese ancestry, to slaves and indentured laborers in the Caribbean. In his series *Tales of Yellow Skin*, Long Nguyen depicts a man whose arm probes his own flayed yellow flesh. Do-Ho Suh creates installations—row after row of headless, uniformed students—that represent the surveillance and reduction of human activity within authoritarian spaces. Survivors of the Vietnam War, of colonialism

in the Philippines, or of the bombing of Hiroshima, artists like Pipo Nguyen-Duy, Carlos Villa, or Mitsuo Toshida, cast the modern predicament as layered, contradictory, unresolved. As migrants to the West, they are, as Dilip Menon nicely puts it, “hitchhikers on the grand narrative of western civilization,” or “illegal immigrants in the project of modernity.”³ All of the artists’ works collected here suggest that modernity includes *both* the promise of human freedom through modernization *and* the historical contradictions that make that human freedom irregularly and unevenly experienced across the globe. Their visions require us, I think, to reconceive our history of the modern—as the progressive achievement of human freedom—so that it includes the criticisms articulated by its contemporaries and its heirs, so that it exposes modernization as a form of Westernization. While electronic media and mass migrations within the past three decades have created an unprecedented, discernible sense of global community, it is evidently not as if the world has suddenly become “global” at the end of the twentieth century. What we have come to call the “modern” world has always been “geohistorical.” The emergence of the modern world is a complicated story that braids together promise and destruction, humanity and inhumanity, barbarism and civilization. Modernity varies in time and location, it takes place differently in rural Vietnam than it does in Tokyo or Berlin; there are multiple modern spaces related through logics at once political, economic, and cultural. Each space and temporality—from Indonesian sweatshops to the Whitney Museum—figures in the making, sustaining, and transformation of the modern. It includes the transnational businessman, the subway conductor, and the farmwoman, and is observed unevenly from the different perspectives encompassed by it. It cannot be captured simply, or totally, by a single perspective on who, what, or where is the modern, but requires more complicated reflection on how a singular vision has come to predominate, how a certain model of humanity has come to be accepted as the ideal of cultivated personhood in the modern community.

These artists’ works, and the response pieces by other “hitchhikers” and “illegal immigrants,” testify that the modern, within the longer duration of its emergence, has always been geohistorical and has been made and remade both “inside” and “outside” of the West. Depicting the processes of Asian encounter with the West, these works displace the West as the exclusive subject of the teleology of civilization, and they reveal different historical pasts with other subjects, communities, and histories. These artworks, to elaborate a concept from the English cultural critic Raymond Williams, constitute a modern “structure of feeling,” a medium that gives us a record of “the culture of a period,” a site in which a society in ferment reflects upon itself. A “structure of feeling” is not simply the affective world of a society; it is a crucial place for an epoch’s self-criticism.⁴ These artworks, as a modern structure of feeling, translate the consciousness of geohistorical modernity. They offer an alternative “map” of the modern: as global, as cosmopolitan, as unevenly yet simultaneously experienced across the globe. Yong Soon Min’s photographs of Korean women’s bodies marked as U.S. territories or Sung Ho Choi’s installation of a suitcase with kimchi jars stuffed with clippings from the *New York Times* convey the complicated legacy, for Korean Americans, of the uneven power between the United States and Korea. They call to our attention other memories obscured by the singular history ruled a uniform concept of the citizen of the U.S. nation.

Asian immigration to the United States before World War II was greatly restricted by laws that named Chinese, Japanese, South Asians, and Filipinos as “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” thereby including Asians as workers in the economic sphere yet barring them from participation in the cultural and political spheres. At the same time, Asia was a site for U.S. expansion—from the colonization of the Philippines, to the military occupation of Japan, to the wars in Korea and Vietnam. A social movement organized by Asian Americans emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the context of the civil rights movement and other ethnic studies initiatives, as a project for educational space, social transformation, and civil rights. Coming out of this social movement, Asian American studies has been concerned with bringing forward the buried history within which, prior to World War II, Asian immigrant laborers were racialized and barred from citizenship as “nonwhites” in relation to the economic need for low-wage non-citizen labor. The social movement has been concerned to extend the civil rights of Asian immigrants and political representation of Asian Americans and to work for their inclusion in all spheres of civil society. In relation to cultural and artistic representation, the movement has struggled for access to means of representation in order to create alternatives to the stereotypical or fetishistic images of Asians as barbaric, sexualized, or unassimilable foreigners.

We might say that the artists’ work collected here comes out of the cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s, by which I mean that a collection such as this precisely marks a distinct gain in access to modes of cultural and artistic representation. This access is certainly a result of the struggles of that social movement. At the same time, this collection indicates some significant departures from an earlier Asian American project—not only because the artists are not exclusively “Asian American” but are from the global Asian diaspora, but also because we can observe that the aesthetic strategies collected here diverge from that of countering negative images, something that had been named as a necessary task of the earlier historical moment. This is not to say that the need to counter anti-Asian stereotypes has disappeared, but rather that within the past three decades, the profile of Asians within the West has so greatly diversified that there has been something like a shift in the politics of representation. I am reminded of Stuart Hall’s very important essay “New Ethnicities,” in which he commented about a shift in Black cultural politics within Thatcherite Britain. Hall wrote that there is no sense in which a new phase in Black cultural politics—“a shift from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself”—could ever replace the earlier one. It is rather that “as the struggle moves forward and assumes new forms, it does to some degree displace, reorganize, and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another.”⁵ For Asian immigrants and Asian Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the critique of the politics of racial representation within a single nation-state has not disappeared, but persists simultaneously with new strategies that seek to address the changing status and diversification of Asians within the global economy.

The influx of new Asian immigrants in the past three decades has made it more or less axiomatic to state that Asian Americans and Asian immigrants are a heterogeneous group in terms of national origin, class, gender, sexuality, language, religion, and generation. This has led scholars to be critical of racial essentialism and cultural nationalist formations of

identity within the context of a single nation-state, and it has led activists to question whether ethnic identity always and in every instance leads to a progressive politics aimed at social transformation. At this point, scholars are reconceptualizing the phenomenon of Asian migration to the West in order to grasp the role of this migration in the emergence of a global or transnational economy. The object of this effort is to supplement a notion of Asian American formation within one nation-state with an understanding of the multiple contexts of colonialism and its various extensions within the uneven development of the global economy, in order to inquire into the significance of the “Asian” within local situations and material conditions—in Asia, in the Asian diaspora in the West, as well as in the Asian diaspora in the non-West. To be quite concrete: Asian migration has been closely tied to both labor and capital flows within the emergence of the transnational economy, and it is no longer possible to generalize a single profile of “the Asian American.” Whereas the U.S. economy before World War II used Asian male non-citizen labor, the United States now participates in a transnational economy that currently exploits the labor of Asian and other neocolonized immigrant women. But this transnational economy also employs Asian managers within Asian-owned factories in the Mexican export-processing zones, or *maquiladoras*; Asian capital develops the tourist industry in Hawai‘i; and middle-class Asian Americans are enfranchised and have access to higher education throughout the United States.

In the face of the radical nonidentity of Asians globally, we have developed new understandings of the role of Asians within transnational capitalism, rather than relying exclusively on earlier models of cultural or nationalist identity. This requires understanding that local specificities mediate and are indices of global conditions, and that while Asian migrancy is an index of the present social formation of transnational capitalism, it is dialectically linked with the forcible lack of migrancy of other groups in different parts of the world, whether women in Africa or Latin America or the unemployed or incarcerated Black population within the United States. That is, transnational capitalism currently links the diasporic movements of Asian labor and capital with the non-migrant women who cannot escape the patriarchal violence of an authoritarian state or the local communities that have been dislocated from indigenous forms of economy. These groups are “the other of the question of diaspora,” as Gayatri Spivak has put it; subaltern women of the South, incarcerated communities, or unemployed racialized communities are the “other” of the Asian migrant.⁶ Within a global cartography in which capital is consolidated in the North through the exploitation of the South, the Asian bourgeoisie becoming migrant in the West is now less a “minority discourse” and more part of a narrative of the consolidation of transnational capitalism. The dialogues between Asian and non-Asian artists and critics constitute a crucial resistance to this consolidation.

Thus, the works collected here—alternately beautiful, haunting, disturbing, inspiring—and the response pieces to these works together call for another understanding of history, one no longer ruled by a concept of the human whose movement and destiny conforms to that of the West. The works insist that we uncover and imagine the episodic, diverse perspectives of other humanities that lie beneath the assumption of Western personhood as the universal human. So replete is our understanding of art with assumptions about the

centrality of Western civilization that it has been difficult to imagine and visualize the history and presence of other subjects, memories, and communities. Within this context, the artists collected in *Fresh Talk / Daring Gazes* provide us with alternative visions, complicated reflections on the emergence of modernity, in which what has been previously foreclosed as invisible is forever saturating the what-can-be-seen. These artists visualize and imagine other humanities within the received tradition of the human.

FRESH TALK
DARING GAZES