

Re/Visioning Asian American Literacy Narratives through the DALN



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When I began my work on theorizing literacy narratives in the 1990s as a graduate student, one of my goals was to build on the generic features described by Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen in their influential article, “Reading Literacy Narratives,” and to consider how these generic features were both taken up and disrupted by subjects who had often been constructed as on the margins of literacy. One of my central arguments was that subjects in marginalized positions use literacy narratives to re/vision their relationship to literacy, examine the promise and peril of literacy, and to narrate a life that is in constant negotiation with their position in culture. Focusing specifically on Asian American literacy narratives, I wanted to understand how these narratives functioned as a rhetoric of citizenship, that is, as a way of belonging, whether through imagined but meaningful forms of cultural citizenship or official but often regulatory forms of legal citizenship in a nation-state. In some cases, this meant affirming a belief in citizenship, to connect the promise of literacy with the promise of America. In other cases, this meant challenging citizenship, to reveal literacy as a myth that often reinforced structural inequality and resulted in material consequences for people marked by race, gender, national origin, language, or other signs of difference.

The work of *Minor Re/Visions*, then, was to theorize a method for examining representations of literacy in Asian American narratives. I wanted to be able to understand how the trope of literacy functioned across genre (whether in memoir, fiction, poetry, or some other form), across time (from early 20th C. immigration narratives or labor narratives of Californian farm workers to life in late 20th C. America), and across space (in places shaped by culture such as Chinatowns or plantations in Hawai‘i). But I also wanted to reframe these narratives as a specific type of public writing that functioned not simply as identity narratives but as complex presentations of the relationship between identity and literacy within larger socio-historical-cultural contexts. These narratives—*America Is in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan, *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, and *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* by Lois-Ann Yamanaka—revealed histories of language discrimination, social attitudes that inextricably linked race and literacy, and schooling that disciplined children for not meeting the contours of citizenship. That is, these narratives served as a type of public rhetoric to unpack and interrogate histories that were often hidden and bigotry that was often naturalized.

This brings me to the work of the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), a digital space that functions to make the work of literacy narratives public and to both reveal and challenge complex practices and histories of literacy. In the context of my own work, what I have found fascinating (and gratifying) in the DALN is the range of Asian and Asian American literacy narratives that document the experiences of people who engage critically with questions of language, literacy, and culture. Below are some thoughts on the significance of the DALN in re/visioning Asian American literacy narratives.

Asian/Asian American Archive

Perhaps the most important contribution of the DALN is its function as an archive, as a place where stories about language and literacy and their impact in the lives of people may be collected, shared, and studied. A simple keyword search for “Asian” returns about 200 entries, ranging from conventional literacy narrative assignments from a first-year writing course, to video interviews of scholar-teachers describing their own trajectory of coming to literacy and then coming to study and teach literacy in a variety of contexts, to the reflections of community members looking back on a life filled with books and writing. What this archive of Asian and Asian American narratives provides is a way to study the generic features of literacy narratives and how this form is taken up by writers of Asian descent for their own purposes.

For example, in “Growing Language,” Nikki Nguyen describes a journey away from a home culture as she negotiated between Chinese and English, learning to love books in her Honors English class only to lose that passion as it became “work” but finding it again as she reread Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. We see a slightly different narrative in “Differences as an Asian American,” where Jessica Wang examines the literacy event of bedtime stories and considers whether the absence of stories in her life reflected a cultural difference and what the literacy implications of this might be. In “Found in Translation: Communicating with my Mother,” Hannah Lee recounts her experience as a language “mediator” in her family, translating English language materials into Korean for her mother. However, her narrative takes an interesting turn as she describes a transformation in this role as she had to now accommodate her mother’s hearing loss, working across English, Korean, and an informal language of gestures created among her family. In these three examples but also in the many stories across the archive we see how conventional stories of literacy may be textured and complicated by complex family histories, a range of language situations, and the presence of culture.

Narrating Transnational Literacy

What the DALN also provides is a place where people may narrate their transnational literacy experiences, providing rich stories of reading and writing across national borders but often also across languages. In particular, one of the exciting features of the DALN is the interviews with emerging scholars who often bring a critical theoretical lens to their literacy experiences but are also able to maintain the intimacy of memory. When Yuehai Xiao describes his development of English literacy in China he is able to bring a teacher’s view to understanding the language learning process of students (whether in China or the US). His teaching is shaped by empathy and a desire to foster meaning through communication across languages, noting that his use of both Chinese and English have improved his literacy overall.

Similarly, Data Tolentino-Canlas recounts her learning of English while growing up in the Philippines in a home filled with books where her parents taught her to read and write in English before she learned in a Filipino language. She acquired an early awareness of the way images and words work together and now in her graduate studies is examining language through a range of theoretical frameworks, especially phenomenology. In particular, she is interested in exploring the postcolonial experiences of Filipino immigrants to the US, their interactions in everyday life, and the role of media in shaping identity. When asked for some final thoughts in her interview, Tolentino-Canlas offers:

“Embrace all the tensions that you come ..., you come to in your ..., in your experiences and relationships with literacy and the materials that you use to learn and teach. There are a lot of those, especially in postcolonial contexts, former colonies of the United States. There’s a lot of that struggle to come to terms with not with just one identity but multiple identities and the desire to embrace all of those.”

In these narratives, we see people engaging with literacy across borders and languages but often in unexpected ways. For both Xiao and Tolentino-Canlas, their narratives about literacy allowed them to think about their subject positions in different locations, to think about how their literacy in English traveled with them from home to the US and allowed them to reflect back on what literacy at home meant for them.

Narratives Across Modalities

Finally, the DALN provides an opportunity to compose and engage narratives across modalities. Whether we are reading conventional text, listening to or viewing interviews, or watching digital texts that employ images, sounds, and other design elements. For example, Viral Patel creates a “Literacy Soundtrack” to accompany his literacy narrative that creates a particular sensory experience—a smooth groove and unexpected rap—to enliven what is a fairly conventional text-based narrative that might even come across as flat and under-developed. In contrast, Sky Wang begins his digital visual narrative in dramatic fashion, employing the *Star Wars* opening text crawl to introduce his story. Through a mix of images, audio, and graphics, Wang is able to chart the development of his English literacy as he traveled from China to the United Kingdom to the US to Canada and finally back to the US. His visual map of these travels enhanced by narrative interludes of funny anecdotes provides a rich story of one student’s journey to literacy. In these two multimodal compositions we see writers bringing together a range of elements that indicate a facility with technology (even if a rudimentary knowledge of software and tools) to create narratives that engage audiences across senses.

I want to close my discussion of re/visioning Asian American literacy narratives with “The Language of Love: Literacy

in Hawaii” by Yvonne Siu-Runyon. While this narrative does not utilize different modes, as do the pieces by Patel and Wang, I find this video interview to capture an experience of literacy that brings together memory, reflection, and joy all happening in the moment as we see Siu-Runyon react to the interview questions with excitement. As the video interview continues she then moves to an artifact that for her captures the power of language. She reads an email from a family member written in Hawai’i Pidgin and in her voice you can hear the history and culture of a place that has continued to shape her sense of identity. For her, this is the “language of love,” a sound and rhythm in combination with a distinct vocabulary that reminds and reinforces a sense of belonging through language.

The DALN provides its users—those who contribute and those who read, watch, and listen—with an archive to document and understand the role literacy has played in the lives of everyday people. And, in the case of Asian and Asian American literacy narratives, this is an opportunity to make public those stories of literacy that include and move beyond learning another language, make visible the pain of discrimination because of language, national origin, or race and ethnicity; and remind us that there is value in all of the narratives told here.

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“Re/Visioning Asian American Literacy Narratives” from *Composition Forum* 36 (Summer 2017)

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