Ocean Crafts and Chinese Junk: Keywords for Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas

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This reflection considers two new keywords for Asian American and Asian diasporic studies in relation to both the empirical realities of islands and oceans as well as insular and oceanic discourses. The piece was developed from a response to the panel “Island Worlds, Oceanic Diasporas, and Global Flows” at the Asian American Studies conference in 2016, in which two of this ADVA special issue’s guest co-editors, Margo Machida and Thomas Looser, also participated.

The writer and Marxist-oriented scholar Raymond Williams described keywords as “an inquiry into a vocabulary” that might help to illuminate society and culture.1 How might the “critical encounters” produced through language reveal “important social and historical processes [that] occur within language” itself?2 Williams sought through his project to mark both incipient relationships and new ways of seeing existing associations. The more recent Keywords for Asian American Studies follows Williams in constructing a lexicon to imagine interpretive possibilities; the analysis in the later text focuses on “Asian America as an imagined and experienced site” with a specific gaze towards the formation of the interdisciplinary field of inquiry.3 Neither of these volumes offers insular, maritime, nautical, or oceanic keywords, although the editors of the more recent book note that “transpacific” has come to modify categories of analysis like race, gender, and class.4

1 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (Revised Edition) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 15 (emphasis in original).
2 Ibid., 11, 22.
4 Ibid., 2. This omission is also consistent with Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler’s Keywords for American Cultural Studies (in both 2007 and 2014 editions) and even Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow’s Keywords for Environmental Studies (2016).
Rather than fault scholars who assemble keywords for their construction of an archive, I wish to use these assemblages in order to point to the ways in which Asian American studies is frequently conceived as a continental discourse, albeit one often attentive to the intimacies that link Asia to the Americas and beyond. Margo Machida has rightly challenged us to think through the work that islands do to this field of knowledge, regularly sedimented in the particularities of huge landmasses. To grapple with such a project, I offer two keywords that might push forward notions of critical insularity within Asian American and Asian diasporic studies.

The two keywords I have in mind yoke together some of the scholarly concerns covered in this issue with my own scholarship as well as some of the ways in which renewed attention to the sea and its islands might open new horizons of critical possibility for both academic and artistic projects. These keywords, “ocean crafts” and “Chinese junk,” allow certain technologies to bubble to the surface and will, I hope, elicit more in-depth analyses of objects and phenomena like seascapes (in my own case), ports, ships, and islands. Ultimately, the generation of a new constellation of keywords might guide in new directions aesthetic, economic, historical, political, and social inquiries into Asia, the Americas, and their intersecting diasporas.

Ocean Crafts

Figurations of ocean crafts take several shapes. This special issue highlights two such vessels: Michael Arcega’s playful but functional Manila Galleon and Beatrice Glow’s installation on the Lilac steamship. But I also use this term to demonstrate the material and affective connections emphasized through Laura Kina’s Uchinanchu quilts. Crafting art with Kina’s hands offers an insular textuality, through which an interweaving of different cultural influences that circulate at different scales—from the local to the global—becomes visible. The work of art is on display in piecemeal fashion; rather than labour being abstracted, the quilts remind viewers of quotidian use value as well as affective attachment. We might pull on this thread to think through the labour of creation. What does crafting an exhibition achieve? Rather than understanding islands as bounded units, the curation of biennials, film festivals, and other

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