Some Notes:
“Lessons in Learning and Teaching Asian American Studies at UCSD”
Josen Masangkay Diaz, Ph.D.

Undergraduate Experiences Learning Asian American Studies
The major in Literatures in English requires that students take one course in U.S. Multiethnic Literature. As a third year Literature major, I enrolled in Introduction to Asian American Literature (LTEN 28) with Professor Lisa Lowe because it spoke most closely to myself. I could not have known that the course (and my experience taking the course) would drastically shape the direction of my undergraduate studies. Here, for the first time, I read literature written by Filipino Americans in the work of Carlos Bulosan and Jessica Hagedorn. It made me realize that people who looked like me could narrate their own stories. But I also discovered that there were arcs, threads, and connections between Filipino Americans and other Asian American (and non-Asian American) communities. As I learned about Asian American history in a broad sense, I discovered that it helped me make sense of issues that I was tackling in my other courses. In particular, my comprehension of course material in my political science courses was both complemented and complicated by literary and cultural studies understandings of immigration, historical and cultural memory, and structural and systematic racism. Near the end of the course, I developed my own research project under Professor Lowe’s direction. The course not only facilitated my burgeoning research interests but also activated a desire to work in/social justice spaces on campus (particularly at OASIS through the Summer Bridge Program).

Graduate Experiences Teaching Asian American Studies
I decided to return to UCSD Literature for graduate studies precisely because of its strength in engaging cultural studies approaches to Asian American Studies and studies of the Asia/Pacific. Working under the guidance of professors Lisa Lowe, John Blanco, Rosemary George, and Lisa Yoneyama was formative. Watching both professors Lowe and Yoneyama leave UCSD was a strange realization for me and for other students who have been greatly influenced by their work. They were such a vital force in establishing critical inquiries into Asian American and Asian Studies, and I think that their moves represented, in some ways, a university-level disregard for the crucial importance of Asian American Studies as a discourse.

I began teaching Asian American Studies course through the Muir College Writing Program around this time. I adopted a syllabus that another colleague had successfully taught for a few years. Our classes were consistently waitlisted; I always viewed this as a testament to the interest that students – of all majors – had in taking courses that grappled with issues of Asian American representation in popular media, that attempted to offer a language around the complexity of students’ experiences. At the same time, I was also offering as much guidance as I could to students who were interested in Asian American Studies but who could not find the available resources on campus to fully develop these interests.

Necessity of Asian American Studies at UCSD
Identity exploration may be one of the main entryways for students wishing to take Asian American Studies courses. And while a better sense of self might not be my ultimate goal as a teacher, I think that forgetting this key motive misses a crucial avenue through which to facilitate students’ connection and engagement with the broader stakes of Asian American studies.
I have heard rhetoric that describes the futility of Asian American Studies at a place like UCSD because of the larger Asian and Asian American population on campus – an idea that makes me believe that many people are gravely misunderstood about the content and praxis of Asian American Studies. Rather than think of “Asian American” as an already predetermined racial category, scholars who engage in Asian American Studies at UCSD have been adamant about studying the social formation as a response to transnational economic and political systems of migration, labor, and exchange that often benefit powerful governing institutions and bodies. This is to say that Asian American Studies emerged, in many ways, as a response to power. It is a critical engagement with the production of knowledge and an imperative call to ask how it is that we know what we know.